

# Thirsty for Knowledge

A Case Study of Women's Empowerment and  
Social Capital through a Development Assistance Program

Rasht, Tajikistan



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*Prepared by Amy Spindler*



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– Amy Spindler



Be the change

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**“Even when we had eyes, we were blind.  
Even when we were dressed, we were naked.  
Even when we were alive, we had one foot in the grave.  
This poem is our slogan now...since participating in the DAP.”**

— Recited with smiles by two women in a focus group discussion

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The goal of this field study is to explore the unanticipated impacts of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) and Mercy Corps' Development Assistance Program (DAP) on women's lives in the remote Rasht Valley of Tajikistan. This study frames "unintended impacts" as changes in women's empowerment and social capital as a result of processes or elements of the DAP; these were not specific objectives of the program. Empowerment is defined as utilizing or increasing different types of power in one's life, while social capital is the connections, loyalties, investments and mutual obligations that develop among people. This field study builds on anecdotal evidence over four years of program implementation and data collected for the DAP final evaluation, conducted in June and July 2008, in which women reported that the program impacted their lives beyond its intended objectives. This study provides insights for planning and implementing rural development programs in Tajikistan or other countries with similar gender and economic factors, particularly in traditional or Islamic regions.

Through interviews and focus groups, the study investigated the following issues as they relate to women's participation in the DAP: Reasons women participate in the DAP; family and community reaction; social ties among women in their communities; women's roles, relationships and status in the household; why and how often women leave the home or meet with other women; the process of making decisions on family healthcare; and attitudes and behaviors toward women in the household and in the community.

With the primary goal to reduce household food insecurity and vulnerability in Tajikistan, USAID and Mercy Corps have implemented the DAP in Rasht district since 2005. The program targets pregnant women and mothers with children aged 24 months and younger as its direct beneficiaries. Mercy Corps operates the program as a member of the Food Aid Consortium for Tajikistan (FACT) in the mountainous northeastern Rasht district. It covers nearly 100 villages in the six *jamoats* (counties) of Kalai Surgh, Askalon, Hoit, Boqi Rahimzoda, Obi Mehnat, and Yasman. The program focuses on two strategic objectives. The first objective is to increase utilization of food through the adoption of key health and nutrition practices and use of services. The second objective is to improve the availability of nutritious foods in communities. To meet these two objectives, the DAP combines biannual food distribution with educational seminars that focus on improved health and agriculture practices. Beneficiaries agree to attend weekly educational seminars in exchange for flour, oil and lentils.<sup>1</sup>

Mercy Corps volunteers conducted nearly 11,500 seminars on health- and agricultural-related topics. The program utilized 297 volunteers, half of whom were female, to conduct the weekly seminars. To meet the first objective, Mercy Corps volunteers taught topics such as collection and use of clean water; basic nutrition; preparation of oral rehydration salts (ORS); and when to see a doctor during



pregnancy. To meet the second objective, volunteers taught topics such as how to construct and use greenhouses; how to utilize compost piles; and how to safely preserve fruits and vegetables. Since 2006, nearly 6,000 direct beneficiaries have participated in the DAP, which facilitated women's empowerment and social capital.

## Methodology

This study employed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups limited to three informants. The research team conducted 36 interviews and focus groups for a total number of 68 people interviewed, including beneficiaries (mothers), husbands of beneficiaries, mothers-in-law of beneficiaries, Mercy Corps volunteers and community leaders including mullahs and those in government. The research team conducted interviews and focus groups in two villages in each of the six jamoats where the DAP operates, maximizing variation in terms of population, elevation, and access to medical facilities, roads, schools and markets because these factors hugely shape informants' lives. Open coding was applied to identify themes in the raw data and then create categories for the observed phenomena. These descriptive categories created a framework for analysis.

## Key Findings

The data are presented within four major themes, detailed in the Findings section on page 13.

- 1. Women have been empowered by access to education.** Participants and their families view the DAP seminars as a significant opportunity for women to get an education; it is often their only access to education.
- 2. Women have more freedom to leave the home.** The actual process of going to the DAP seminars has been a catalyst for change because it encourages women back into the public sphere in a culturally accepted way.
- 3. The seminars have improved social capital among women,** which has been used to produce other forms of capital. All of the women interviewed spend time before or after the seminars exchanging information, moral support and, in some cases, goods.
- 4. Women enjoy more respect from family members and influence** as a result of both the seminars, which have had a direct impact on their family's health, and the food distribution, which has improved their family's food security. This newfound respect for women has improved relationships between beneficiaries and their husbands and in-laws.

## Program Success Factors and Recommendations

The following factors contributed to the DAP's success and sustainability and in overcoming some initial opposition that existed:

- Effective dissemination of information about the DAP was key to its success. To lay the groundwork for the program, Mercy Corps staff first collaborated with local governments and village leaders, and then identified volunteers who were well known and trusted in their villages. With these leaders and volunteers, Mercy Corps conducted community-wide meetings about the DAP in public spaces that involved all stakeholders.
- Biannual food distribution supported program success beyond the obvious benefit of providing nutritional support for families. Food distribution advanced community-wide support for the DAP; motivated families to participate in the seminars; and empowered women as they contributed income to the household.
- Seminar location and use of local residents to teach was instrumental in high attendance at the trainings. Every informant reported that women attend the weekly seminars in all but very important circumstances — such as when they must attend a wedding or funeral. Informants said it was important that seminars were conducted close to their homes. Securing transportation and fuel, traveling without a male companion, and being more than a few kilometers from home would make it impractical and nearly impossible for women to attend seminars. Knowing the volunteers who taught the seminars built trust in the content and the process.
- And, every informant praised the seminar topics as useful and providing life-skills to women. The seminar topics were culturally appropriate, reinforcing and supporting a woman's traditional role in the home. This was fundamental to family support for participation, and thus the program's success.

## Conclusion

In sum, this study indicates that both program content and structure have and will continue to have unanticipated social outcomes among participants. Thus, it is crucial to consider the interplay of cultural factors when designing and implementing similar development programs in the future. The DAP seminar content and food distribution increased women's influence and improved their relationships at home. Its structure empowered women by targeting those of childbearing age, who generally do not hold much power or influence in Tajik society, and by including on-going educational seminars outside of the home. The findings indicate that this was possible because Mercy Corps cultivated a strong network of local volunteers and community leaders who acted as the backbone of the program. They disseminated information about the DAP throughout their communities, taught weekly seminars and nurtured trust among community members. A key contribution of this study shows that a volunteer network combined with incentives, such as food distribution, can create culturally appropriate change that improves livelihoods and spearheads positive social change. Programming should empower women in their current roles, seek to empower them in new roles, and attend to community dynamics that can make these other goals possible.

## STUDY BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

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The goal of this field study is to explore the unintended impacts of the USAID's and Mercy Corps' Development Assistance Program (DAP) on women's lives in Tajikistan. This study found "unintended impacts" from processes or elements of the DAP that facilitated women's empowerment and social capital. It investigates how the DAP activities nurtured women's social ties among each other; gave women more freedom to leave the home; provided women their only access to education; and garnered women more influence on decision-making and respect within the family and community. None of these outcomes were specific or identified goals of the DAP. This study seeks to further illuminate and build on anecdotal information and data collected during the final evaluation of the DAP, conducted in June and July 2008, in which women mentioned that they enjoy more freedom as a result of the program. This study documents reported changes and the processes behind those changes.

## TAJIKISTAN: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Nestled among the tangled borders of Central Asia, Tajikistan is one of the smallest and poorest countries among the Commonwealth of Independent States. Its rugged 20,000-foot peaks define the country, with 50% of the land sitting at or above 10,000 feet and just seven percent arable. Following its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, regional conflicts and struggles for political power quickly escalated into a civil war. The war continued until 1997, when the Tajik government and United Tajik Opposition negotiated a power-sharing peace accord that was implemented in 2000.<sup>2</sup> While Tajikistan is largely calm today, entrenched poverty, corruption and volatile weather undermine families' livelihoods throughout the country.

The few data that are available suggest a decline in household food security following independence. Food security exists when all individuals at all times have sufficient physical and economic access to meet their dietary needs in order to lead a healthy and productive life.<sup>3</sup> The year of this study saw especially acute food needs among the Tajiks. The United Nations (UN) appealed for US\$25 million in food aid for more than 250,000 Tajiks in need of immediate food assistance during the winter of 2007/2008, one of the most severe on record. According to UN reports, this most recent crisis is one of many that Tajikistan has experienced since the end of its civil war. In 2006, hailstorms and drought led to scant agricultural harvests, especially in mountainous areas with limited or no irrigation systems. In 2007, rising fuel costs, a drought, and a locust invasion weakened food security of rural populations.

Independence has also seen a renewal of Tajiks' traditional cultural and social values, including a revival of Islamic practices. One result is the withdrawal of women from public life and a more intense focus on women's domestic responsibilities. Another indication of a value system in transition is the practice of polygamy. Although illegal, there is a growing acceptance of the practice as an informal coping strategy for women as the civil war and emigration to Russia for employment has left Tajikistan with a significantly reduced adult male population. Marriage, even as a second wife, offers more safety and financial stability than a woman can achieve on her own due to the revival of traditional gender roles and high unemployment. In sum, Tajikistan's political and economic transitions have left families vulnerable and increased gender inequality in the political, economic, and social spheres.<sup>4</sup>

*Tajikistan's independence has seen a renewal of Tajiks' traditional cultural and social values, including a revival of Islamic practices.*

## MERCY CORPS' DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (DAP) IN TAJIKISTAN

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With the primary goal to reduce household food insecurity and vulnerability in Tajikistan, Mercy Corps has implemented the DAP since 2005. The program targets pregnant women and mothers with children aged 24 months and younger as its direct beneficiaries. The DAP is operated by Mercy Corps as a member of the Food Aid Consortium for Tajikistan (FACT), which also includes lead agency CARE International and Save the Children US. The program is funded through the USAID's Food for Peace Office, under P. L. 480 Title II. Mercy Corps implements DAP activities in the mountainous northeastern Rasht district, covering nearly 100 villages in the six jamoats (counties) of Kalai Surgh, Askalon, Hoit, Boqi Rahimzoda, Obi Mehnat, and Yasman.

To improve household food security in Rasht, the DAP focuses on two strategic objectives. The first objective is to increase the utilization of food through the adoption of key health and nutrition practices and use of services. Utilization refers to appropriate knowledge and means for a sufficient diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met.<sup>5</sup> The second objective is to improve the availability of nutritious foods in communities.

To meet these two objectives, the DAP combines biannual food distribution<sup>6</sup> with educational seminars that focus on improved health and agriculture practices. Pregnant women and mothers with children aged 24 months and younger agree to attend weekly educational seminars in exchange for flour, oil and lentils. Volunteers conducted nearly 11,500 seminars and discussions for beneficiaries and their family members on health- and agricultural-related topics. Since 2006, nearly 6,000 direct beneficiaries have received food and participated in educational seminars. Mercy Corps estimates that each beneficiary utilized their rations for an average of six members within their household; reaching more than 35,000 people—89% of the population in the program's operational area. Additionally, the 297 volunteers also receive food distribution in exchange for their time as volunteers.

Using approximately 75 staff members, Mercy Corps has worked closely with local *hukumats* (government bodies) and community members to advance its goals of reducing chronic food

insecurity in the DAP's operational region. With the assistance of 14 staff field coordinators, the program educated nearly 300 volunteers across all six *jamoats* of the Rasht district on current health topics and agricultural practices, as well as effective training and teaching techniques. The volunteers are trusted community members who conducted weekly seminars primarily for pregnant women and mothers with children under 24 months old in their villages and surrounding villages.

This rich network of volunteers, cultivated by the DAP, taught improved health practices through seminars, competitions and theatrical role-playing and have been key to the program's success. To meet the DAP's first objective of improved health and nutrition practices, volunteers educated beneficiaries on themes such as safe food storage; collection



*A beneficiary signs her name in order to receive the DAP's biannual food distribution. Some women are learning the basics of reading and writing, an unanticipated impact of the program. Photo by Janice Setser.*



and use of clean water; hand washing; basic nutrition; preparation of oral rehydration salts (ORS) to treat diarrhea; healthy and safe pregnancy; and when to see a doctor during pregnancy. To meet the second objective of improving access to nutritious foods, volunteers taught beneficiaries how to construct and use greenhouses, how to utilize compost piles, and how to safely preserve fruits and vegetables through effective canning and drying techniques.

To support improved agricultural practices and dietary diversity, Mercy Corps distributed shovels and other simple agricultural equipment to 3,793 beneficiaries and volunteers in 2006. The program has also distributed sheets of plastic to approximately 300 volunteers in order to build demonstration greenhouses and has distributed 37,850 two-liter canning jars (10 per household) for families to improve food storage. Further, the DAP distributed tomatoes, carrots, beans, lettuce, beets, pumpkin, and cucumber seeds in 2006, and tomato, carrot, beans, pumpkin, onion and cucumber seeds in 2007—more than three tons of seeds.

Quantitative and qualitative data from the DAP final evaluation, conducted in June and July 2008, show that Mercy Corps met its strategic objectives. Beneficiaries reported cleaner and healthier households, less diarrhea among their children, greater knowledge of health issues, more variety of harvests, earlier harvests due to greenhouses, and more food stored and processed as a result of the educational seminars. Additionally, residents hinted that the DAP facilitated social networks and more freedom among women.

However, chronic food insecurity remains a serious obstacle to healthy and improved livelihoods in Rasht district. In the final evaluation, 22.1% of the children measured were underweight, farmers predicted a poor harvest for 2008, and households in the region were struggling to recover from the severe winter of 2007/2008. While the DAP is scheduled to close this year, Mercy Corps continues to support improved food security and livelihoods through its new and smaller Single Year Assistance Program with USAID and a Livelihoods Recovery program.

## FIELD STUDY METHODOLOGY

The goal of this field study is to explore the unintended impacts of Mercy Corps' DAP on women's lives and their roles in the home and community. This study found "unintended impacts" as processes or elements of the DAP that facilitated women's empowerment and social capital, which were not specific objectives of the program. This study reveals how the DAP nurtured women's social ties among each other; gave women more freedom to leave the home; provided women their only access to education; and garnered women more influence on decision-making and respect within the family and community. This data will allow Mercy Corps to explore if there are ways that future program planning similar to DAP can take an intentional approach to similar or even greater gender impact.

### **The Use of Qualitative Methods**

This study employed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and small focus groups in order to gather a range of perspectives and in-depth information.<sup>7</sup> Individual interviews and focus group discussions were limited to three participants because of the nature of the interview questions, which delve into sensitive and complex issues around interpersonal relationships and women's roles and status.

Interview guides were translated from English into Tajik by a member of the research team and then reviewed independently by another member, both of whom are fluent in Tajik and English, to ensure they were accurately translated and culturally appropriate. The team piloted the guides in the *jamoat* of Boqi Rahimzoda, and revised them as necessary. The study investigated the following issues and how they have changed as a result of women's participation in the DAP:

- The primary reason women participate in the DAP.
- Family and community reaction to women's participation in the DAP.
- Social ties among women in their communities.
- Women's roles, relationships and status in the household.
- Why and how often women leave their homes and when they meet with other women.
- The process of making decisions on family healthcare.
- Attitudes and behaviors toward women in the household and in the community.

The research team conducted a total of 36 interviews and focus groups, for a total of about 75 hours of interview time. They include:

- 12 interviews with beneficiaries (one in each of the 12 sampled villages).
- 12 interviews with community leaders including mullahs and local government representatives (one in each village).
- Six interviews with husbands of beneficiaries (one in each *jamoat*).
- Six interviews with Mercy Corps volunteers (one in each *jamoat*).
- Four focus group discussions with three beneficiaries each.
- Five focus group discussions with two or three mothers-in-law of beneficiaries each.
- Three focus groups with two or three husbands of beneficiaries each.
- The total number of people interviewed during the field study was 68.

With the help of local Mercy Corps volunteers, the research team chose interview and focus group participants who had at least two years experience with the DAP. A minimum two years experience among informants was sought in order to better observe impacts of the program. To further maximize variation, the researcher chose participants of different age, education, and in the case of the beneficiary, whether or not she lived with her husband's family.

## Sampling and Community Selection

This field study uses maximum variation sampling, which aims at capturing and describing the essential themes across different participants; this also allows for a smaller sample size.<sup>8</sup> However, this study does not seek to present statistically generalizable information, but a vivid picture of how the DAP impacted the lives of those involved in the program. The research team identified two villages in each of the six *jamoats* where the DAP operates, maximizing variation in terms of population, elevation, and access to medical facilities, roads, schools and markets because these factors hugely shape informants' lives in Tajikistan. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in the following 12 villages:

### **Kalai Surkh *jamoat*:**

- Niyozbegiyum is a remote village with a population of 483. It has no medical facility, requiring residents to travel 42 kilometers in cases of medical emergencies or treatment. Students must travel to a neighboring district to attend secondary school. There is no road access during the winter and fuel is scarce.

- Kadara is the center of the *jamoat* with a population of 1,813. The village has access to Garm (the center of Rasht district) decent roads, a secondary school and a medical facility that serves 20 villages in the district.

**Boqi Rahimzoda *jamoat*:**

- Shulmak has a population of 1,457 and boasts access to shops, medical facilities and primary and secondary schools. It also has road access year round.
- Varzigun is one of the highest and most isolated villages in the region. The narrow road leading to the village is closed for six months each year because of weather. The village has a primary and secondary school up to ninth grade, but attendance by students and teachers is sparse in winter because of the harsh conditions. There is no medical facility or market. The population is 480.

**Yasman *jamoat*:**

- Voring is less remote with road access most of the year. The village is the *jamoat* center and has a population of 529 residents who have access to a medical facility and schooling up to tenth grade.
- Safedob has a population of 305. This village is remote with limited road access that is completely closed during the winter. The village has a secondary school up to tenth grade, a small shop and a mosque. Generally, girls do not attend school beyond eighth grade.



*On the road to Yasman and Hoit jamoats.  
Photo by Amy Spindler*

**Hoit *jamoat*:**

- Hoit 1 is the center of the *jamoat* with a population of 2,822. The village has a secondary school, a large mosque, a hospital with a maternity ward and shops.
- Yarhichi Miyona is a mountainous and isolated village with a population of 472. Road access is sporadic during the winter and rainy spring. It has a secondary school, but it is often closed during the winter. The village has no medical facility or market.

**Askalon *jamoat*:**

- Askalon is the center of the *jamoat* with a population of 621. The village has a medical facility (but no medical specialists) and secondary school. The village does not have a market or shops. While it is close to Garm, the road is not always open because of weather.
- Chakiho lies deep in the gorge with a population of 205. The village has no medical facility, market or shops. Children have access to a small primary school up to fifth grade. A new school is under construction, but there are no funds to finish. The population sells fruit and livestock for income.

**Obi Mehnat *jamoat*:**

- Boloshar is isolated with no road access for six months of the year. Its 301 residents must travel to a nearby district for medical care and only have a primary school.

- Dahani Gumush is the center of the *jamoat* with a population of 396. It has a medical facility and secondary school up to ninth grade. Road access is decent, but limited in inclement weather.

## Data Collection

The research team included an international consultant, four members of Mercy Corps' Garm-based Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) staff, and one member of Mercy Corps' Dushanbe staff. Three of these Mercy Corps national staff spoke English and their roles alternated between interviewers and translators. The research team was intentionally small to ensure an intimate and manageable project, and one in which interview and focus group participants felt comfortable sharing information.<sup>9</sup>

Before conducting each interview and focus group, participants were informed in Tajik of their right to anonymity, privacy and confidentiality.<sup>10</sup> Participation was voluntary and informants did not receive any compensation. Once data was collected, the consultant reviewed all written notes with a member of the national staff who spoke English. Together, the consultant and a translator listened to all recorded interviews, translating and transcribing the data as a team. The team collected data from mid-October through mid-November, 2008.

## Data Analysis

The consultant applied open coding to analyze the data.<sup>11</sup> This process identifies themes that emerge from the raw data. Working with those broad themes, the consultant then created categories to group the observed phenomena. The descriptive categories created a framework for analysis. The consultant analyzed the data from mid-November through early December 2008.

## Using a Lens of Empowerment and Social Capital

Power is at the root of the term empowerment and can be understood as operating in a number of different ways. There are four types of power that underlie empowerment:<sup>12</sup>

- Power *over* describes an either/or relationship of domination or subordination.
- Power *to* describes the authority to make decisions and solve problems.
- Power *with* describes people organizing to achieve collective goals.
- Power *within* describes one's self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness to act and influence.

Underlying the unintended impacts of the DAP on women's lives are shifts in these four types of power within women's lives — as a result of participating in program. This study assumes that more power *to*, power *with* and power *within* are positive outcomes of the DAP, though not original goals of the initiative. This perspective is reiterated by Mercy Corps' Vision for Change, in which the participation of all members of communities are considered essential for the appropriate implementation and sustainability of programming that affects people's lives. Fifty percent of DAP volunteers are women.

This study also considers women's empowerment as it relates to their social capital. Broadly defined, social capital is the connections, loyalties, investments and mutual obligations that develop among people; either as part of their regular interactions in which close connections are strengthened, called *bonding capital*, or when new links are forged and exploited, called *bridging capital*.<sup>13</sup> And it can be viewed as the ability of individuals or communities to secure benefits as a member of social networks or other social structures. These concepts are clearly relevant in the analysis of the gender impacts of the DAP program.

*Underlying the unintended impacts of the DAP on women's lives are shifts in power within women's lives — as a result of participating in program.*



## Study Limitations

The study experienced several constraints and challenges. Because of inclement weather and muddy roads, the research team was forced to revise its schedule and was not able to travel to two villages initially identified as interview sites (two alternate villages were chosen that fit the study methodology). Following data collection in Varzigun, the team walked nine kilometers when the road became too muddy to travel. These obstacles were time-consuming and negatively impacted team morale. Also, autumn is the season for harvests and weddings in Tajikistan, limiting time available for interviews. It is recommended that future field studies in this region be conducted from late May through late October, when possible. This study also addressed the inequity of power between the interviewer and subject, as the subject receives benefits from Mercy Corps. The research team informed all participants that they would receive no benefits for taking part in the study, nor would their comments negatively impact programming. Using Mercy Corps staff on the study team presented potential for bias, but also provided in-depth knowledge of the program and trust in the communities where interviews were conducted. The research team took time to build rapport with informants and was receptive to all information to limit bias and reactivity affects in the informants.

## KEY FINDINGS

The data are presented within four major themes, detailed below.

- 1. Women have been empowered by access to education.** Participants and their families view the DAP seminars as a significant opportunity for women to get an education; it is often their only access to education.
- 2. Women have more freedom to leave the home.** The actual process of going to the DAP seminars has been a catalyst for change because it encourages women back into the public sphere in a culturally accepted way.
- 3. The seminars have improved social capital among women,** which has been used to produce other forms of capital. All of the women interviewed spend time before or after the seminars exchanging information, moral support and, in some cases, goods.
- 4. Women enjoy more respect from family members and influence** as a result of both the seminars, which have had a direct impact on their family's health, and the food distribution, which has improved their family's food security. This newfound respect for women has improved relationships between beneficiaries and their husbands and in-laws.

### **FINDING 1: NEW ACCESS TO EDUCATION** “Some are thirsty for water and want to drink. We’re thirsty for knowledge and want to learn.”<sup>14</sup>

As noted earlier, since Tajikistan's independence in 1991, growing evidence shows a reversal in the educational gains that were achieved during the era of the Soviet Union. School enrollment is decreasing and there is evidence of a gender gap, with girls falling behind boys in school attendance. During Tajikistan's civil war, from 1992 until 1997, many girls were kept at home for their protection and school infrastructure was destroyed, resulting in a less educated population in general as well as a severely less educated female population. Many of the women interviewed in this study, all between the ages of 23 and 72, did not complete secondary school; only two women graduated from university.

### **Access to and Empowerment Through Education**

Access to and empowerment through education was a consistent theme across the interviews and focus groups. The DAP seminars are viewed as a significant opportunity for learning.

Informants described their villages as isolated and remote, with the seminars being the *only* access to education for women. "I studied until the fourth grade and then the civil war started, so I had no opportunity to finish school. I attend the seminars so I can get more education," said Rajabe. This statement was echoed often. "I have no education. I grew up in a small village... my brothers went to school in different villages. This is the first access I've had to education. It is important for us as women to get information," said Gulsima, a mother of five.

Women consistently reported that they primarily participate in the DAP for education and this has been the case since the beginning of the program. Men and male community leaders placed equal value on women's education and food distribution.

Women valued the practical information that the DAP provided, while men approved of the education because the topics directly benefit the family; both perspectives were integral to the program's success. "My wife has learned a lot about better health practices and agriculture. More education means I have fewer problems at home," said Safar.

Informants consistently praised the seminar topics because they improved life at home and gave women the education they needed, defined as life skills. "An educated woman knows how to behave in the family. Uneducated women are blind and cannot do anything," said Siadatmat, whose wife participates in the DAP seminars. Mothers-in-law reported that they allowed their daughters-in-law to attend the seminars because they were learning how to take better care of their children and the home. Mullahs interviewed in this study supported the DAP because the seminars reinforced their view that women are guardians of the home. One mullah said:

*We say 'Go to these seminars because they teach life skills for women.' Prophet Muhammad respected women. We respect them as wives, sisters and mothers. We want women to have an education, but we do not want them to lose their integrity... I am not against women having a secular education. But a woman's role is to look after her children. This is her job, her role. She is obliged to raise her children as good citizens of society. This is why the DAP is so beneficial.*

However, there seems to be fragile support for women's education beyond household skills in the villages visited for this study. Communities seem to sanction education for women that reinforce and support their role in the home and benefit the family as a whole. Informants were excited about the seminars, so long as women did not gain more status or power than the men or elders in their household. Aisha said:

*With more education, my status and power have increased. When I know more about raising my children, I become more powerful. We do not have more status than men, but we have more knowledge on what is important in our lives because of the seminars.*

However, some remain skeptical of formal and higher education for women, saying that it may compromise a woman's integrity<sup>15</sup> or lead to arrogance if she were to pursue education outside of the village. Said one mother:

*A majority of people do not approve of educated women. I wanted my older daughter to study at university, but everyone in the village questioned it. They told me that she would lose her integrity, living in the city, and there is no reason for her to leave the village.*

Overall, women interviewed view the education provided by DAP as empowering for them because it teaches essential skills that improve their life at home. And it is accepted because it does not threaten the cultural and Islamic views of women's role in the home and in the community.

## Women as Students and Teachers

Twenty-four women report that education has empowered them to become informal teachers and give advice, which has positively influenced their family relationships. Said Barno, a young mother:

*When I come home from a seminar, my husband, his grandmother and his sisters are waiting and ready to listen to me. They want me to share information and I feel like I am a teacher at home. They listen to me now, like I am a teacher! This is interesting for me to be in this role.*

One beneficiary said that change starts with an educated woman because she educates others. Women reported that the seminars have boosted their confidence in sharing information and their own experiences with others. In three of the 12 villages in the study, women are learning basic reading and writing skills at the seminars, skills that are not in the scope of DAP activities but which volunteers are supporting. And as women gain confidence in these core subjects, they have become more focused on their children's education, earning them more respect from their in-laws and husbands. Fatima, a volunteer, said:

*Before the DAP, women could not separate the letter A from B. One woman in our community could not sign her name to receive the flour, oil and lentils. I taught the women letters and how to write their names. Now this woman says, 'Don't even touch my hand. I can sign my name myself.'*

Safar, a husband of a beneficiary, also sees benefits of basic education in his home:

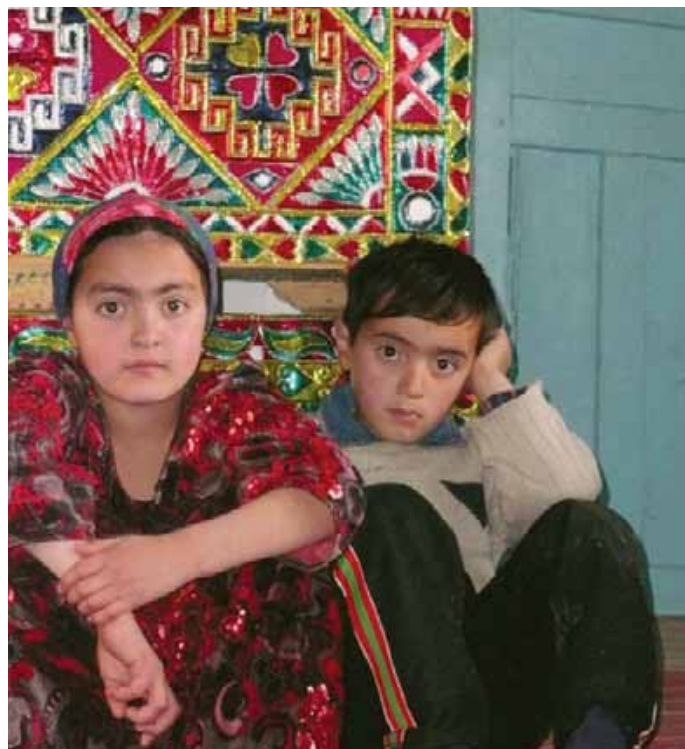
*After participating in the seminars, my wife decided to teach our children how to read and write. She values education more now. I feel warm toward her and we are closer because she is taking better care of our children. I respect her more. It is better that my wife is more educated because my life becomes easier when she takes better care of our children.*

**FINDING 2: NEWFOUND FREEDOM** “There was a revolution in my home. My husband has given me more freedom.”<sup>16</sup>

The actual process of meeting has been a catalyst for change as it has changed communities' views on women leaving the home. DAP volunteers conduct seminars in their villages and nearby villages about once a week. Seminars are held in volunteers' homes, beneficiaries' homes or local meeting spaces; and five to 25 women attend, depending on the size of the village.

### Leaving the Home

Three out of 48 women reported that they do not leave their homes often — some only two or three times a year. The reasons for leaving the home include only to attend weddings or traditional celebrations, funerals, or to see their own relatives. Family members of women who participated in the seminars supported their DAP seminar attendance



*Two children of a Mercy Corps volunteer, a champion of basic reading and writing skills for all women. Photo by Amy Spindler*

for three reasons: 1) Families knew the volunteer who taught the seminars; 2) seminars took place close to home and did not require women to travel far; and 3) women received flour, oil and lentils in exchange for their participation.

In Tajikistan, a woman's identity and her freedom are closely tied to her age and whether or not she lives with her in-laws. New brides<sup>17</sup> live with their husbands' families and traditionally do not leave the house for several years. Young brides reported that the seminars are their only opportunity to leave the home. However, women with grown children, women who do not live with their in-laws and, in some cases, women whose husbands work in Russia are able to leave their homes more freely; and the seminars seem to support this freedom. Said one husband who no longer lives with his parents:

*Women meet with other women and preserve and can fruits and vegetables together. Right now, they're canning green tomatoes. They do not need to ask permission; my wife simply tells me that she is working with a neighbor to can tomatoes. Before the DAP, my wife didn't know how to can or preserve so there was no reason to meet with neighbors to do this.*

These older women enjoy rich social ties, supported in their culture. They visit with neighbors and relatives; collect wood together; harvest fruits and wheat together; take care of each other when they are sick; and organize weddings together.

Young or old, every woman interviewed said that she asks permission from her husband or in-laws in order to leave the house. No women reported leaving the house alone. Informants attributed this practice to Islam and tradition. "Without asking her husband or an elder, a women will not take a single step out of the house. We bless them and then they go," said Muhammadrusso, a mullah. Every informant, particularly mullahs and community leaders, spoke of women needing permission before leaving the house. Said one community leader:

*Women never leave their homes unless they have a reason, such as a wedding or funeral. They have to ask their husbands first and get permission. They ask because this is what Islam tells us...that women need to ask their husbands before they leave the home. If a woman leaves without permission, her husband should divorce her. This is what the mullahs tell us. This is what I have read in the Koran.*

However, some men and women reported that there was a fine line between asking permission and informing their family members about attending the seminars, which quickly came to be viewed as an opportunity for women and their families to improve their lives. And for all women, the seminars provided them with more freedom. Said one volunteer:

*Women were not allowed to leave the house, not even to see a neighbor. But after the seminars, women are allowed to go to the doctor. On their way to the doctor, they can stop at a neighbor's house, go to a small shop, or just get out of the house.*

One beneficiary spoke about a different type of freedom:

*Before, we covered our entire head and face and we looked down. We did not make eye contact with anyone. We no longer wear long scarves to cover our entire faces. We feel a little more free because of the seminars.*



## New Brides Leave the House

Eighteen informants spoke of the custom of keeping a young bride in the home for several years (one woman said up to ten years) before she is allowed to leave the house. Elder women said they use this time to teach their new daughters-in-law how to be good wives and mothers. “We are like shepherds,” said one mother-in-law. For most new brides, the DAP seminars are the first and *only* opportunity to leave the home and often serve as a venue to meet new women in the community. The distribution of flour, oil and lentils was vital to men and elders allowing new brides to leave the house and participate in the seminars. Once they observed that their children and households were healthier, they fully supported their wives’ attendance. Said one mother:

*Before, we did not know the young brides because they were not allowed to leave the house. Now you can see new brides as soon as they get pregnant. We meet them at the seminars now; and we all have a lot more freedom to leave the house.*

Said Tilo, a young bride:

*My husband was very possessive of me, but he has become less jealous over time. He has given me more freedom and we understand each other better now [as a result of my education at seminars].*

I can attend the seminars and even visit with friends and neighbors...I have met some new brides and become closer with them. We talk about health of our families, household work and news of the village.

Women reported that the seminars help new brides acclimate to the villages of their new in-laws and feel more comfortable. Overall, the seminars support new brides to cultivate a feeling of community and a little independence in their new villages.

## New Opportunities

As a result of the seminars, older women (not new brides) have become more visible in the public sphere. Informants explained that by allowing women to attend the seminars, men realized that they would not be emasculated or embarrassed by women being outside of the home. This realization has begun to influence why and when women are allowed to leave the house, beyond the DAP seminars. Twenty-eight women and men of the 68 interviewed reported that they support seeing women in public and involving women in household or public decision-making processes. Although not the case in every village, one chief doctor reported the following:

*Before the DAP, we never saw women outside of their homes. Of course life has changed and women behave differently. They no longer wait for an elder to give them permission to visit a doctor. If they feel they are sick, they go.*

Robia observed the following:

*We see women strolling in the streets now. We are happier. I hear women say they are happy for this freedom to attend seminars and even visit their parents. It’s good to know that men and women can have equal rights.*

*For most new brides, the DAP seminars are the first and only opportunity to leave the home and often serve as a venue to meet new women in the community.*

In one focus group, two women said they also look forward to going to the DAP's biannual food distribution. Said Gulruksu:

*The distribution is also good because we get to go somewhere else. It's not near our home, so we get to see other places and talk with other women. Sometimes we want to talk longer, so we don't respond right away when our names are called [for the distribution].*

### Continuing Challenges

While every informant supported women's newfound freedom in attending the seminars, it is important to note that they have created only a small space for more autonomy and freedom and not all women experience expanded freedoms beyond the seminars. Four of the 48 women interviewed lamented their lack of freedom and described their husbands as possessive (other women nodded in agreement), although less so since they began attending the seminars. "The men here are uneducated and hate for women to travel alone...we have no freedom. The women are trapped. We're trapped. We're not allowed to go anywhere, to leave the village," said Gulnor. Another said: "We do not want our husbands to be possessive of us; we wish it would stop. We also want our in-laws to stop controlling us."

### FINDING 3: STRONGER AND EXPANDED SOCIAL TIES "Now women live in more homes than one because they spend a lot of time together."<sup>18</sup>

This study explored how the DAP supports social ties or social capital among women because it can be used to produce other forms of capital and act as a source of benefits through extra-familial networks, thus improving women's livelihoods. All of the women interviewed spend time before or after the seminars exchanging news, emotional support and, in some cases, household items. Some prepare meals to share after the seminars.

Meeting weekly has also given women a chance to build friendships and trust. In larger villages, women are meeting new friends; in smaller villages, women are becoming closer with others they already knew. Some women reported that the seminars also give them a chance to build relationships with their own sisters-in-law, whom they may have once lived with, but no longer do. Women feel more support as a result of their new and closer friendships. Said Sanambe, who no longer lives with her in-laws:

During the seminars, we meet new women and we have also become closer to other women. When we see each other now, it's like seeing our relatives. We speak with each other, we laugh together. We solve problems together. We advise young brides to be patient with their new lives and tell them that it is the same in every household.



*The mother-in-law of a beneficiary reported that her relationship with her daughter-in-law has improved as a result of sharing information from the DAP seminars.*

## Exchanging Information

Attending the seminars not only gives women new information on the health and agriculture topics, but gives them an opportunity to talk, for example, about their children; their husbands in Russia; relationships with family members; household problems; wedding parties; and the harvest and prices for the harvest. In the more remote villages, women barter apples for goods such as oil and soap. While they have little negotiating power with traders from the capital of Dushanbe, the women speak with one another to make sure that they are all offered the same price per kilogram for their goods.

Women exchanging news is another significant change. In some villages only one or two women have access to a television or radio. "I have a radio so sometimes I share the news that I hear. There is one show on the radio in which women call in and discuss their problems. We talk about this show together a lot," said Shokrona, one young mother. Women also use the time to organize weddings, circumcision ceremonies or other traditional events. Described one beneficiary:

*We make sure to talk about previous topics with women who may have missed a seminar. We ask about children. We find out who is pregnant and how life is at home. We talk about who is engaged, what weddings are being planned, and what will be in a bride's wedding chest. We talk about who is traveling. We talk about news and global issues, such as earthquakes. We also talk about what one of us hears on the television or radio. We talk about issues of electricity and other problems. We talk right up until the minute the seminar starts.*

Robia is a teacher at the local school, the only woman interviewed in this study who earns money outside the home. After the seminars, she speaks with women about their children's performance in school:<sup>19</sup>

*We talk about their children's behavior at school and how their children are doing. I advise them to pay attention to their children's education because I can't do everything. They need to support their children's education at home as well.*

As discussed earlier, women feel more confident and have more freedom as they begin to think of themselves, and are viewed by their families and the community, as more educated. As a result, women are sharing what they learn at the seminars with others in their own village and other villages (when they visit their parents or go to a wedding) who do not participate in the DAP. Said Safar:

*Before, women gathered at a wedding and they only sang and danced. Now they go to an event and they don't spend all of their time dancing. They exchange information. They talk about how to can and preserve, treatments for diarrhea, and recipes... Education is better than dancing when they have free time.*

Women also share what they learn at the seminars with women who are not beneficiaries. A volunteer also noted the rich social ties and exchange of information outside of the seminars:

*Women who participate in the seminars are sharing information with other women who do not participate. Everyone in this village has access to the education offered through the DAP. The women tell their husbands and their husbands meet at the mosque and share information with each other. And volunteers make home visits and teach women's in-laws.*

## Sharing Support

Traditionally, women in rural Tajikistan are responsible for most of the work in the household, which includes caring for their children, cooking meals, baking bread, cleaning the home, milking cows and harvesting their gardens. This burden increased following independence, as families are more dependent on subsistence farming and goods produced at home due to the limited wage-earning jobs available.<sup>20</sup> With many men now working in Russia, women in this study reported that they are both “fathers and mothers” and acting as head of the household if they do not live with their in-laws. Thus, moral and financial support is important to women’s and family well-being. “We have no time for arguments or useless conflict because there is a lot of work to do. We need to rely on each other. The saying is that if there is one meal, we should put it in the middle and share it,” said one beneficiary. A community leader reiterated this perspective, saying:

*I see that women’s relationships among one another have become closer. The way they communicate with other women has changed. Before, a woman was on her own when her child got sick. Now they take care of each other more. They ask about each other’s situations. When a problem arises, they come together and discuss how to find a solution.*

In some villages, Mercy Corps volunteers organized Mothers’ Funds, in which women each contribute one to three *somoni*<sup>21</sup> to be used in the case of medical emergencies. This idea has inspired the collection of money for other events. Said Barno:

*We gathered money to create a fund in case someone’s child gets sick. We use this money to find a vehicle to take the child to the hospital. You’ve seen the roads here. We need to take care of ourselves. We’ve also tried to collect money to celebrate birthdays and other events. And we have talked about getting together and each bringing potatoes, onions or yogurt to make complementary foods [for our babies] to exchange. We haven’t done this yet... We did not do this before the seminars gave us an opportunity. These are new ideas.*

Women report that they organize financial help for women who do not have husbands. Shokrona described the following situation:

*We have a woman whose husband left her alone with two children. Her life is very difficult and we help her. I’ll bring her a sack of potatoes. We’ll bring her coal. She always says she is going to leave this village [and go back to her parents], but we want to keep her here because we can help her. We’ll help her survive here. She recently circumcised her son and we all helped prepare for the party.*

Said another beneficiary:

*In this village, we have a woman who has nothing to eat. At these seminars, we help her a lot. We talk about what she needs and we bring her potatoes, onions and korpachas [thick wool blankets]. In the winter, it’s very difficult here.*

Women also offer one another moral support because the seminars give them a reason to meet. One beneficiary, Gulsima, said that women share their problems at home and discuss arguments they have with their mothers-in-law. Following an argument she had with her mother-in-law over how she disciplines her child, Gulsima said she shared her frustration with other women at the seminar. “We exchanged stories and then my heart felt lighter,” she said. Women regularly discuss arguments, their husbands in Russia, deaths in the family and other



problems. "When you talk about problems, you get rid of the poison in your heart," said one beneficiary. For some women, support and stress relief are another health benefit of the seminars.

#### **FINDING 4: REDEFINING RELATIONSHIPS, RESPECT AND INFLUENCE** "These seminars woke women up from a long sleep."<sup>22</sup>

Overall, women have gained more respect and influence as a result of both the seminars, which have had a direct impact on their family's health, and the food distribution, which has improved their family's food security as described in detail in the DAP final evaluation. This newfound respect for women has improved relationships between husbands and wives and in-laws and their daughters-in-law. "Men have become more respectful and kind toward their wives who are now bringing in income in the form of flour, oil and lentils," said one community leader.



*The father-in-law of a beneficiary said her household status has increased as result of her DAP education. Photo by Amy Spindler*

#### **Relationships and Respect**

As stated above, women's status and respect in rural Tajikistan is strongly tied to their role in the home. Women are earning more respect from their family members as they apply their learning at the seminar in the home. Said Gulsima:

*Relationships in family have changed and they treat me differently. As I gain more knowledge, I take better care of my children. My mother- and father-in-law are happier with me because I take better care of all of them. I pay more attention to their meals and our relationship has changed because of this. It is friendlier, it is more positive. My mother-in-law respects me more as I have become more educated. I am like her daughter. She did not tell me this before. They are proud of me and call me their daughter because I am more educated and take better care of our family.*

The food distribution also contributes to greater respect for women in the household and the community. Said one mother-in-law of a beneficiary:

*As a result of the DAP, the community realizes that young women have a voice. We used to say 'You do not have a voice, so why are you talking?' Now young women are valued more because of their education and the income they bring to the family.*

Men and women also report that this respect has improved relationships in the household. Eleven of the 20 men interviewed said that they respect their wives more because they have healthier children and cleaner homes. They report feeling closer with their wives because there is less stress in the home, which they attribute to healthier families, child spacing,<sup>23</sup> and more food stores in the form of canned or dried fruits and vegetables. The men say these positive outcomes are a result of the DAP seminars. Said one community leader and husband of a beneficiary, Madmathuja:

*Before, there was not respect between husbands and their wives. It seems to me that these relationships are improving as men respect their wives more. Our relationships*

*have improved because we are planning our families and spacing our children. We no longer have babies every year, so our babies and mothers are healthier. This is the happiness of our families: healthy babies.*

Said Ismatatalov:

*As women become more educated, we're more likely to consider their opinions. I love and respect my wife more. When she is busy, I'll rock the baby's cradle or make a fire to help her. She gives me advice and I respect her.*

Women say they feel more independent and confident in their roles as mothers, wives and managers of the home as a result of the DAP, and their husbands support this new independence. Ziodin said: "As my wife contributes to the family with flour, oil and lentils as well as knowledge, she feels more independent. I like for my wife to feel more independent." Said Gulsima:

*I am happier now because I have healthier children. I also want to mention that there is better understanding between my husband and myself. I talk more with him now...we have a generally more positive relationship. I believe in myself more and feel confident because I am more educated.*

Said Robia:

*Now young women speak up and express themselves more, which they were not comfortable doing before. Young women tell me that they feel more confident after participating in the seminars. Even men observe that their wives are more outspoken and active.*

While women have earned more respect, they still live in a paternalistic culture. "We turn toward Mecca to pray. A woman prays beside her husband to be sure that she is facing Mecca. You see? He is her Mecca and she looks to him for guidance," said Khmomedeen.

## **More Influence on Healthcare Decisions**

Traditionally, only elders and men make decisions on healthcare in the family. Generally, women do not make decisions on when to see a doctor or seek treatment, but must rely on their husbands to give them permission to do so. However, men and women interviewed for this study said that women have gained more influence in a range of medical decision-making processes as a result of the DAP education, covering such topics as anemia, pregnancy risks and diarrhea treatment.

It should also be noted that families are not seeking traditional treatment as often as before the DAP. Seven informants said that they and those in their village no longer seek a mullah to pray or read verses from the Koran when they or their children are ill. In response to this trend, one mullah expressed concern and contended that Islam needs to be incorporated into the seminar education. As a result of the health seminars, families have come to value medical treatment more than before the DAP (although there remains a serious lack of quality medical professionals and facilities in many villages). The final DAP evaluation showed that women seeking medical care at least four times while pregnant increased by 255% between November 2005 and July 2008 (remind dates of DAP). "Before, we always saw a mullah for treatment and we're doing that a lot less now," said one beneficiary.

*Women say they are now more open in discussing their pregnancies and miscarriages. They are speaking out against traditional treatments for miscarriage, such as sitting on a warm brick or in a grassy field.*

Said Gulsima:

*My father-in-law makes the decisions about healthcare in our family. When I am sick or my children are sick, we go to my father-in-law. My husband makes decisions for himself when he is ill. But now I have more influence in the family because I have more education on health issues. When my child had diarrhea, I knew what to do. I made suggestions to my family and was able to treat him. I offer my opinion now. Before, we just relied upon God.*

Men support their wives in seeking medical treatment. Said one husband:

*Attitudes toward women have improved in our community. Men are more supportive and respectful of what women need to be healthy. Men know that women have more information about health so we respect them more. Mutual understanding between men and women has improved...we understand each other better as women have become more educated. Decisions on healthcare come more easily now, more kindly even.*

Women say they are focusing more on prevention of illness and speaking more freely about health issues, thus leading to better health and more open relationships. Women say they prioritize breast-feeding, which required a change in traditional attitudes of both women and men. "We should not be embarrassed over something completely natural," said one beneficiary. They are also now more open in discussing their pregnancies and miscarriages, and they are speaking out against traditional treatments for miscarriage, such as sitting on a warm brick or in a grassy field. Women translate their knowledge directly into behavior change and improved health practices. Taking action and being more outspoken has even saved lives. Said one community leader:

*Now women have more influence on our decisions. For example, I was coming home when I saw our mullah was crying in the street. I asked him what was happening. He said 'My wife is dying. She is bleeding!' His wife told him to take her to the hospital immediately. She demanded to see a doctor. The mullah said 'Yes, yes...take her to the hospital.' I organized a group to take her fifteen kilometers on a stretcher by foot. Before the DAP, we didn't know and kept women at home.*

While the data show that women have garnered more respect and influence, they also show that it is tied to a woman's place in the home. Women said that they are being allowed more freedom and respect only because it is not threatening to men's power in the home and in the community. "There is a Tajik proverb that says 'Do not make your dog a hunter and do not make your wife a market woman.' It means that men are very afraid of women becoming more powerful than them," said Safarmo, a beneficiary. In Tajikistan's paternalistic culture, women must be skilled negotiators and communicators when sharing their opinions.

## Participation in the Public Sphere

This study shows that women's participation in the public sphere remains limited. When asked about women's involvement in solving community problems, 16 informants reported that women are sometimes involved in solving community problems; and the DAP has helped to create acceptance for women to participate in public life. Said one volunteer:

*We're starting to involve women in the discussions. Women are even going to the mosque and joining men in the discussion. This never happened before the women participated in the DAP...Our community still does not pay enough attention to women, but maybe in the future we will start to ask their opinion more.*

*"There is a Tajik proverb that says 'Do not make your dog a hunter and do not make your wife a market woman.' It means that men are very afraid of women becoming more powerful than them," said one woman.*

A community leader observed:

*As a leader in this village, I am very happy with the changes I have seen. Before, we could not see women outside their homes. Now women are coming together to solve problems in this community. Before we had our new medical facility, we were using our old medical building as a school. During community meetings, the women attended, spoke up, and said that they needed a medical facility. 'If a child doesn't have good health, how can he attend school?' One woman spoke up and said this. Of course the role of women has changed. Their status is higher. Now we can see that women can participate more in the community.*

## PROGRAM SUCCESS FACTORS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the final evaluation conducted in June and July 2008 and this subsequent field study, the DAP reached its primary objective of reducing household food insecurity and, in the process, empowered women in their daily lives in Rasht, Tajikistan. The following factors should be considered when planning future projects or programming in Tajikistan and other countries with similar gender and economic factors, particularly in rural and more conservative or Islamic regions. These factors contributed both to the program's sustainability and to decreasing the initial opposition that existed, discussed below.

- Effective dissemination of information about the program and its goals;
- Biannual food distribution;
- Seminar location and teachers; and
- Useful and culturally-appropriate seminar topics.

During the interviews, informants rarely acknowledged community or household opposition to the DAP. When it was noted, initial resistance was attributed to the possibility that it may violate the traditions and norms of Islam. Specifically, community leaders and elders were concerned that the seminars would put women in the mixed company of men or provide the opportunity for women to be seen by men. Most seminars, especially in the higher-elevation villages, include women only. But it should be noted here that two women reported that they initially lied to their families, telling their in-laws that they did not see men at the seminars when in fact they did. Community leaders of the more remote villages most often spoke about this perceived conflict between the DAP and their Islamic traditions. Said Firuz:

*In the beginning of the program, there was resistance from community members. We invited people to the mosque to explain the goals of the program. Two mullahs spoke out against the project; they were skeptical because we were targeting women. Others followed their lead. The mullahs told us that women would be seen by men and lose their integrity. They asked me: 'How will you answer in your next life? You are sinning and those men who see these women will be sinning.' I asked the mullahs to consider Iran, where women only show their eyes but are teachers and drivers. We're being too strict with our women in our village. I explained that the DAP would not dishonor women, but benefit the house. In the end, they agreed that it would be good for the family. The mullahs are influential. They do not interfere too much and are generally supportive of the DAP.*

## Effective Dissemination of Information

Community-wide meetings, involving all stakeholders, contributed to the success of the DAP. To lay the groundwork for the program, Mercy Corps staff first collaborated with local governments and then identified volunteers who were well known and trusted in their villages. Community meetings were held in mosques, schools and other public spaces. Volunteers explained the program goals and how it would operate. Said one volunteer:

*In the beginning, residents did not know what the seminars would be about. Some thought that participating in the seminars would separate us from Islam. There was some misunderstanding. But once we all understood the goals of the program, the reception was positive and we welcomed it.*

One volunteer said she openly confronted two men at a community meeting when they were starting rumors that the DAP would negatively impact women as it facilitated women meeting men outside of their families. One community leader explained that community-wide meetings stopped the rumors and actual participation over time cultivated trust in the program. He said:

*Villagers thought that this program came to create conflict in the community. They thought the DAP would extend help and then put them into debt. They thought that they would have to pay for the seminars and the flour, oil and lentils... People were afraid that they would lose their homes. We explained the goals. And once they began to participate in the program, they began to trust.*

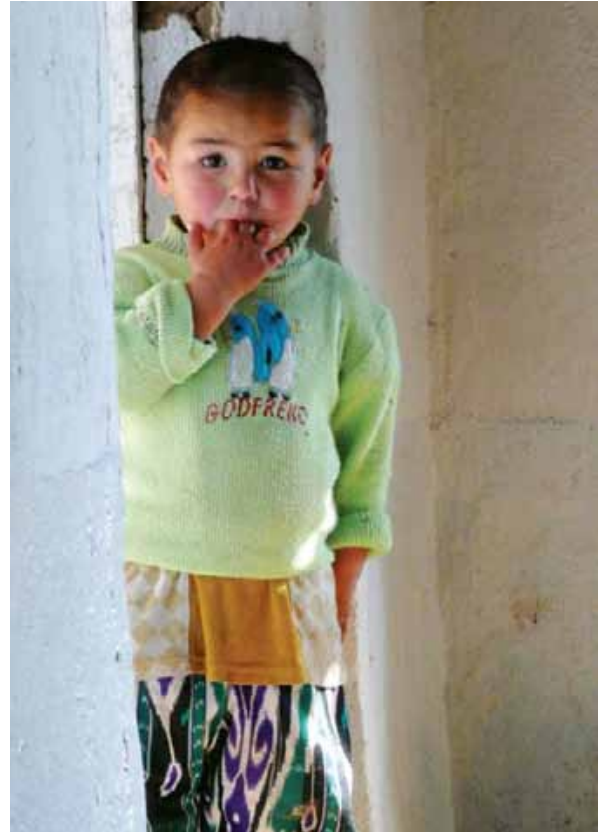
Over time, family members observed the concrete benefits of the DAP – including healthier children, cleaner homes and more food stored – household support for the program increased. Said one mullah and husband of a beneficiary:

*I work as the head of the mullahs and I need to know what is being taught in these seminars. If I was invited to the seminars, I would give an Islamic perspective and more people would be interested... But as we learned more about the seminars, we became supportive of our wives.*

This study shows that information spreads easily through villages; whether true or false. Quickly disseminating information through local leaders and trusted volunteers is important to clarify goals, limit rumors that threatened the launch and success of any program that is implemented by an organization outside of the community.

## Food Distribution

Women valued the education component of the DAP more than the food distribution, while community leaders, elders and men in the family equally valued education and the distribution of oil, flour and lentils. The DAP operates in villages where subsistence agriculture is the norm; and most families have at least one member working in Russia and sending remittances. The distribution is an important part of family income. During the final evaluation, one community leader estimated that the DAP provides families with 40 to 60 percent of their annual income.



*Once families began to see the benefits of the DAP, including healthier children, their trust in the program and its volunteers grew. Photo by Amy Spindler*



And one mother during this field study said: “Here, our main income comes from participating in the seminars. This is our survival. We have no other source of income for women here. We can grow and gather fruits or herbs, but that is limited.” The biannual food distribution also provided the initial incentive for women to participate and for their families to support their participation. Said Gulsima:

*There was some resistance from our fathers-in-law – allowing us to attend. But once they learned about the distribution, they were more supportive. They objected because they thought women might meet or be seen by other men, which is prohibited by Islam. Of course after receiving oil and flour, they supported us in attending.*

Said one community leader:

*From the beginning of the DAP, attendance was good because we had a lot of motivation. The flour, oil and lentils motivated women to participate. They were also excited to receive jars and canning instruments. Distribution is important, but the education is very practical so they attend. In the future, women would probably participate [without distribution] because the seminars are beneficial.*

The data show that food distribution supported the success of the DAP beyond the obvious benefit of providing nutritional support for families. Food distribution can advance community-wide support for a program; motivate families to participate in other program components; and empower women as they contribute income to the household.

## **Seminar Location and Teachers**

The seminar location and use of local residents to teach was instrumental in the seminars' high attendance. Since the beginning of the program, volunteers have conducted nearly 11,500 seminars and discussions on health- and agricultural-related topics. Every informant reported that women attend the weekly seminars in all but very important circumstances – such as when they must attend a wedding or funeral, take care of a family member with a serious illness, have pressing household chores or host guests at their home.

Informants said it was important that seminars were held close to their homes. Securing transportation and fuel, traveling without a male companion, and being more than a few kilometers from home would make it impractical and nearly impossible for women to attend seminars. Only two women said that it might be possible for them to travel to attend a seminar held outside of their village. Said one community leader:

*There would be less trust if we used volunteers who are not from this village. We have built trust over time and now it is easy to gather women for seminars...Women will get support from their husbands if they stay here in the village. Women would not be able to leave their children and find transportation to attend a seminar in a nearby village. They also feel comfortable asking their neighbors to walk with them to the seminars.*

As noted above, it was also important that family members knew the volunteers who taught the seminars. This built trust in the content being taught and the process. Said one community leader: “Our volunteers are very good teachers and well educated. We trust them and knew them before. We knew they would give us good information.” A network of trusted and local volunteers is key to community involvement and improves sustainability of the program; volunteers interviewed in the final DAP evaluation and this field study often said they would continue to teach seminars after the DAP closed.

## Useful and Culturally-Appropriate Education

Finally, every informant praised the seminar topics as useful and providing life-skills to women. As discussed in the findings section, the seminar topics reinforce and support a woman's role in the home, and thus were fundamental to the program's success.

Informants repeatedly tied the education to improved livelihoods and family life. Said one husband: "More education means I have fewer problems at home. I am buying less at the market and it feels good to know that I have enough food for the winter. We have more canned and preserved foods." In fact, the final evaluation data showed that 39% of DAP households had more current food stores (compared to the same time last year) and 47% planned to preserve more food in 2008 as compared to 2007.

Findings indicate that women valued the practical information, while their families approved of the education because the topics directly benefited them. The education does not threaten the cultural and Islamic views of women's role in the home and in the village. Informants recognized education as the sustainable component of the program. "If you give a woman flour and oil, her body utilizes it for a day or two. When you give her education, she uses it for life," said one volunteer.

Thus, future programming should carefully consider cultural and traditional gender roles in context of educational and participatory program components. Programming should empower women in their current roles, but also seek to empower them in new roles that they have skills and capacity for. A key contribution of this study shows that a network of local volunteers and program incentives can create culturally appropriate change that improves livelihoods and relations. This network of volunteers and existing knowledge should be used to build on existing programming. For example, while women in Rasht generally do not work outside of the home, it is considered women's work to collect medicinal herbs and wild crops. As a result of the DAP, it is more acceptable for women to gather and process fruits and vegetables. Processing wild crops or packaging medicinal herbs for sale may provide viable, small-scale employment for women in the future.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, this study indicates that both program content and structure will likely have longer-term unanticipated social outcomes among participants and in their communities. Thus, it is crucial to consider the interplay of cultural factors when designing and implementing similar development programs in future. The DAP seminar content and food distribution increased women's influence and improved their relationships at home. Its structure spearheaded social change by targeting women of child-bearing age, who generally do not hold much power or influence in Tajik society, and by including on-going educational seminars outside of the home. The findings indicate that this was possible because Mercy Corps involved all stakeholders and cultivated a strong network of local volunteers and community leaders who were the backbone of the program. They disseminated information about the DAP throughout the communities, taught weekly seminars and nurtured trust among community members, and provided an important forum for informal exchanges among women that contributed to a wide range of problem-solving and community cohesion. In these ways, the DAP empowered women in their current roles, as well as in new ways, which is a good model for future programming in rural Tajikistan and beyond.

*Future programming should consider cultural and traditional gender roles while seeking to empower women in their current roles, as well as in new roles that they have skills and capacity for.*

## END NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The program distributed to each beneficiary 100 kilograms of wheat flour and 16 liters of oil each autumn and 50 kilograms of wheat flour, 50 kilograms of lentils and 16 liters of oil each spring.
- <sup>2</sup> (US State Department, 2008)
- <sup>3</sup> (USAID, 1992)
- <sup>4</sup> (Falkingham, 2000)
- <sup>5</sup> See the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Global Food Security Forum Glossary at <http://km.fao.org/fsn/resources/glossary/en/>
- <sup>6</sup> The program distributed 100 kilograms of wheat flour and 16 liters of oil each autumn and 50 kilograms of wheat flour, 50 kilograms of lentils and 16 liters of oil each spring.
- <sup>7</sup> The interview guide included a list of open-ended questions to explore with informants. Without fixed responses, the interviewer is free to explore the topics beyond the specific question. This also allowed for flexibility and an efficient use of limited interview time and systematic and comprehensive data collection. See Lofland & Lofland, 1994.
- <sup>8</sup> See Patton, 2002.
- <sup>9</sup> Teams of two conducted the interviews, with one interviewer/note-taker and one translator/note-taker. Teams of three conducted the focus groups with one facilitator, one translator and one note-taker. Among the team, these roles were fluid, capitalizing on individual's strengths and interests in interviewing, facilitating, note-taking and translating. In all cases, only women interviewed women and at least one male was present while the team interviewed men. All notes were taken in English when the consultant was present for the interview or focus group. When the consultant was not present, a digital recorder was used to record the interview after obtaining permission from the interviewee. The notes were translated and transcribed within two or three days of every interview.
- <sup>10</sup> In this study, anonymity refers to concealing participant identity in all documents resulting from the research. Privacy is defined in terms of having control over the extent, timing and circumstances of sharing information about oneself with others. Confidentiality is defined as the treatment of information that an individual has disclosed – with the reasonable expectation that it will not be disclosed to others in ways that are inconsistent with the understanding of the original disclosure without permission.
- <sup>11</sup> See Strauss & Corbin, 1990.
- <sup>12</sup> See Williams et al, 1994.
- <sup>13</sup> See McMichael & Manderson, 2004.
- <sup>14</sup> Spoken by a young woman who finished university in Dushanbe; one of two women interviewed for this study who had some form of higher education.
- <sup>15</sup> Interviewees described a woman with integrity as one who is humble, obedient, reserved and who does not speak with men who are non-family members. It is also important that she is not seen by men or mix with men in public. Literal translation from Tajik to English uses the word "broken."
- <sup>16</sup> Spoken by a 40-year-old woman who no longer lives with her in-laws. She said that as a result of the DAP, her husband has come to understand that he will not be emasculated if she becomes educated or leaves the home.
- <sup>17</sup> Tajiks use the term "new bride" to describe a woman who has been married for several years or less and still lives with her husband's family. It is Tajik custom for the bride to move to her husband's village and live with his parents until the family can build a home for the couple. Many new brides live with their in-laws and have limited contact with their husbands who work in Russia.
- <sup>18</sup> Spoken by a community leader and volunteer who lives in a remote village.
- <sup>19</sup> Women rarely attend parents' meetings at school.
- <sup>20</sup> See Falkingham, 2000.
- <sup>21</sup> Somoni is the local Tajik currency; \$1 is equal to about 3.4 somoni.
- <sup>22</sup> Spoken by a mullah who lives in a less remote village and who supports the DAP, formal and Islamic education for women.
- <sup>23</sup> The DAP addresses family planning in the form of child spacing and teaches that breast-feeding can decrease a woman's chances of conceiving. During this study, three women spoke of having an abortion and one woman said she wanted an abortion. Women must ask their husbands for permission before obtaining an abortion. Three women and two men spoke of the benefits of child spacing. Two women have IUDs and have advised other women to get an IUD.

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## APPENDIX I

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR MOTHERS

REMEMBER: The goal of this study is to document **what** the unintended impacts of the DAP are and provide a better understanding of **how** they came about, with **specific attention** to any aspects of our DAP programming.

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this interview. Mercy Corps is conducting a field study in the jamoats where we operate the DAP in order to learn more about how the program has impacted women's lives in unexpected ways. The information that we gather will be shared with Mercy Corps staff and used to inform future programming. This interview will last about two hours. In this study, your identity will remain anonymous and your name will not appear in documents resulting from the research. You may decide how much information you want to share with me. I will be asking a series of questions. Please speak freely. The goal is to share information; both positive and negative. You will receive no direct benefits for participating and anything you say will not directly affect current programming in a negative way. Does this sound okay and may I have permission to begin the interview?

Document the following in your notes:

Length of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Time initiated: \_\_\_\_\_

Time terminated: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

#### SECTION I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The following questions are about you and your family and will be kept confidential.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of children: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of people in household: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of education: \_\_\_\_\_

Jamoat: \_\_\_\_\_

Village: \_\_\_\_\_

Household Income: \_\_\_\_\_

#### SECTION II: PARTICIPATION IN MERCY CORPS PROGRAMMING

The following questions are about the types of experiences you've had with Mercy Corps programs. Your honest feedback and suggestions will improve our ability to provide effective and well-implemented programs in the future.

1. How many years have you participated in Mercy Corps training sessions?

What types of activities and/or trainings have you participated in?



How often do you participate in the trainings?

2. What is the main reason you participate? What motivates you to attend the seminars?
3. How did others around you (in your family) react when you first started to participate in the DAP? Why did they respond this way? *Interviewer: Listen and identify whether or not there was resistance by the woman's husband, mother-in-law, both, community Mullah or others. Also note if there is no resistance.*

Did this response change over the course of the program? Why do you think this?

*Interviewer: Take time to understand the process of this attitude change if it happened. Ask questions such as: Can you tell me more? Why do you think this is?*

4. Has there been a time when you have not been able to participate in sessions even though you might have wanted to? If so, why? *Interviewer: Listen for who plays a role in the decision to participate.*
5. About how many women participate in the health and agriculture trainings you attend?  
Have you met women or friends while attending the trainings?  
Have you become closer friends with any of the women that participate in the program? How so?
6. While attending the trainings, do you talk with the women about other topics (not only the training topic)? If so, what do you talk about?
7. Are there changes in your daily life, relationships with family and friends, or changes in how you feel about yourself as a result of participating in Mercy Corps trainings? *Interviewer: After asking this question, make sure to follow with questions such as: Can you tell me more? Why did these changes happen?*

### SECTION III: INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES AND COMMUNITY/FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The following questions are designed to help us better understand your daily life and relations in your community. We are looking to better understand what they were like before and during the program. These again will be kept confidential.

8. How would you describe your role or position in your household?  
How is it different from the household where you grew up?  
How are household chores and tasks divided? Who is involved/decides in this division?
9. Has your role or position in your household changed since participating in Mercy Corps trainings?  
If your position has changed, how has it changed? Why? Can you tell me more?  
What factors have brought this about?  
Would you like it to change?
10. How often do you leave the house and why? For example, do you go to weddings or the market?  
Where do you go and with whom do you go with?  
Who makes the decision when you go somewhere?

Has this changed since participating in the DAP program?

11. Aside from the DAP trainings, for what reasons do you meet with women in your family or women in the community?
12. When meeting with other women, at anytime, what do you exchange? Do these exchanges happen more frequently at certain gatherings?
13. Who in your family usually makes decisions about health care? What is the process?

Can you tell us a story of a recent time your family had to make a decision about a health care issue?

Has this changed since you began participating in Mercy Corps trainings? If so, what role did the trainings play?

14. Who in your family usually makes decisions about purchases for daily household needs or major household purchases?

Can you tell us a story describing a recent time your family had to make a decision about a major household purchase?

Has this changed since you began participating in the DAP? If so, what role did the trainings or activities play?

15. Do you have access to financial services or banks? Does anyone in your family?

Please describe how money is controlled in your family.

Have you participated in making decisions in how to save or spend money? Please describe.

Has this changed at all from your participation in DAP programming? Please describe.

16. Have attitudes or behaviors toward women changed in your household or in your community since Mercy Corps trainings or activities began?

If it has changed, how so? Can you give me an example?

Would you like attitudes to change? Why or why not?

17. What groups, organizations or associations exist in your community? For example, do you have cooperatives, sewing groups, religious groups, political groups, women's groups, credit groups, parent groups, or health committees.

Do you have access to these groups?

If yes, how long have you had access to these groups?

Has Mercy Corps helped connect you to any of these?

18. Do community members come together to solve problems?

How involved are you or other women? Why?

Has attending trainings with Mercy Corps played a role in this? How so?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me and do you have any questions for me? I'd like to thank you for your participation in our study and taking the time to answer my questions today.

End interview.

## APPENDIX II

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS AND VOLUNTEERS

REMEMBER: The goal of this study is to document **what** the unintended impacts of the DAP are and provide a better understanding of **how** they came about, with **specific attention** to any aspects of our DAP programming.

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this interview. Mercy Corps is conducting a field study in the jamoats where we operate the DAP in order to learn more about how the program has impacted women's lives in unexpected ways. The information that we gather will be shared with Mercy Corps staff and used to inform future programming. This interview will last about two hours. In this study, your identity will remain anonymous and your name will not appear in documents resulting from the research. You may decide how much information you want to share with me. I will be asking a series of questions. Please speak freely. The goal is to share information; both positive and negative. You will receive no direct benefits for participating and anything you say will not directly affect current programming in a negative way. Does this sound okay and may I have permission to begin the interview?

Document the following in your notes:

Length of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Time initiated: \_\_\_\_\_

Time terminated: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

#### SECTION I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The following questions are about you and your family and will be kept confidential.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of education: \_\_\_\_\_

Jamoat: \_\_\_\_\_

Village: \_\_\_\_\_

Household Income: \_\_\_\_\_

#### SECTION II: PARTICIPATION IN MERCY CORPS PROGRAMMING

The following questions are about the types of experiences you've had with Mercy Corps programs. Your honest feedback and suggestions will improve our ability to provide effective and well-implemented programs in the future.

1. Describe your community.  
Do women have access to other educational opportunities in this village?
2. How did you and community members respond when the DAP first began to operate in your community?

Can you explain WHY the community responded this way?

Did your or the community's response to women's participation in the DAP change over time? Why? *Interviewer: Take time to understand the process of this attitude change if it happened. Ask questions such as: Can you tell me more? Why do you think this is?*

3. Have you seen changes in women and/or in the community as a result of the DAP?

### SECTION III: COMMUNITY AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The following questions are designed to help us better understand women's daily life and relations in the community. We are looking to better understand what they were like before and during the program. These again will be kept confidential.

4. For what reasons do women leave the house?  
Can you tell us about how a decision is made when a woman leaves the house?  
Whom do women leave the house with?  
For what reasons do they leave the house alone?
5. Who in the family usually makes decisions about health care? What is the process?  
Has this changed since women began participating in Mercy Corps trainings? If so, what role did the trainings play?
6. Who in the family usually makes decisions about purchases for daily household needs or major household purchases?  
Has this changed since women began participating in the DAP? If so, what role did the trainings or activities play?
7. At what other times, aside from the DAP trainings, do women meet with other women in the family or in the community?
8. Have attitudes and/or behaviors toward women changed in your community since Mercy Corps trainings or activities began in your community?  
Have relationships between men and women changed?  
If it has changed, how so? Can you give me an example?  
Would you like attitudes to change? Why or why not?
9. What groups, organizations or associations exist in your community? Examples of groups can include: cooperatives, religious, political, women's, credit, parent, or health committee.  
Do women have access to these groups?  
If yes, how long have they had access to these groups?  
Has Mercy Corps directly or indirectly helped connect women to any of these?
10. Do community members come together to solve problems?  
How involved are women? Why?  
Has women's involvement in Mercy Corps played a role in this? How so?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me and do you have any questions for me? I'd like to thank you for your participation in our study and taking the time to answer my questions today.

End interview.

## APPENDIX III

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR HUSBANDS FOR MEN IN THE HOUSEHOLD

REMEMBER: The goal of this study is to document **what** the unintended impacts of the DAP are and provide a better understanding of **how** they came about, with **specific attention** to any aspects of our DAP programming.

Introduction: Thank you for participating in this interview. Mercy Corps is conducting a field study in the jamoats where we operate the DAP in order to learn more about how the program has impacted women's lives in unexpected ways. The information that we gather will be shared with Mercy Corps staff and used to inform future programming. This interview will last about two hours. In this study, your identity will remain anonymous and your name will not appear in documents resulting from the research. You may decide how much information you want to share with me. I will be asking a series of questions. Please speak freely. The goal is to share information; both positive and negative. You will receive no direct benefits for participating and anything you say will not directly affect current programming in a negative way. Does this sound okay and may I have permission to begin the interview?

Document the following in your notes:

Length of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Time initiated: \_\_\_\_\_

Time terminated: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

#### SECTION I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The following questions are about you and your family and will be kept confidential.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of children: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of people in household: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest level of education: \_\_\_\_\_

Jamoat: \_\_\_\_\_

Village: \_\_\_\_\_

Household Income: \_\_\_\_\_



## SECTION II: PARTICIPATION IN MERCY CORPS PROGRAMMING

The following questions are about the types of experiences you've had with Mercy Corps programs. Your honest feedback and suggestions will improve our ability to provide effective and well-implemented programs in the future.

1. How many years has your wife participated in Mercy Corps training sessions?  
What types of activities and/or trainings has she participated in?
2. How often does she participate in the trainings? About how many sessions has she attended in total?
3. What is the main reason she participates?
4. How did you respond when your wife first started to participate in the DAP?  
Why did you respond this way? *Interviewer: Listen to whether or not there was resistance and why.*  
What do you think about your wife having more education?
5. Did your response change over the course of the program? Why do you think this? *Interviewer: Take time to understand the process of this attitude change if it happened. Ask questions such as: Can you tell me more? Why do you think this is?*
6. Has there been a time when your wife has not been able to participate in sessions even though she might have wanted to? If so, why? *Interviewer: Listen for who plays a role in the decision to participate.*

## SECTION III: INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES AND COMMUNITY/FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The following questions are designed to help us better understand your wife's daily life and relations in her community. We are looking to better understand what they were like before and during the program. These again will be kept confidential.

7. How would you describe your wife's role or position in your household?  
How are household chores and tasks divided? Who is involved/decides in this division?
8. Has your wife's role or position in your household changed since participating in Mercy Corps trainings?  
If her status has changed, how has it changed? Why? Can you tell me more?  
What factors have led to the change in her role or position at home?  
Has your relationship with her changed since she began participating in the DAP? Why?
9. For what reasons does your wife leave the house? Can you tell us about who and how a decision is made when your wife leaves the house?  
Whom does she leave the house with?  
For what reasons does she leave the house alone?

10. At what other times, aside from the DAP trainings, does your wife meet with women in your family or in the community?

11. Who in your family usually makes decisions about health care? What is the process?

Can you tell us a story of a recent time your family had to make a decision about a health care issue.

Has this changed since your wife began participating in Mercy Corps trainings? If so, what role did the trainings play?

12. Who in your family usually makes decisions about purchases for daily household needs or major household purchases?

Can you tell us a story describing a recent time your family had to make a decision about a major household purchase?

Has this changed since your wife began participating in the DAP? If so, what role did the trainings or activities play?

13. Do you have access to financial services or banks? Does anyone in your family? Please describe how finances are controlled in your family. Has this changed at all from your wife's participation in DAP programming? Please describe.

14. Have attitudes and/or behaviors towards women changed in your community since Mercy Corps trainings or activities began in your community?

If it has changed, how so? Can you give me an example?

Would you like attitudes to change? Why or why not?

15. What formal or informal groups, organizations or associations exist in your community? Examples of groups can include: cooperatives, religious, political, women's, credit, parent, or health committee.

Does your wife have access to these groups? If yes, how long has she had access to these groups?

Has Mercy Corps directly or indirectly helped connect her to any of these?

18. Do community members come together to solve problems?

How involved is your wife or other women? Why?

Has women's involvement in Mercy Corps played a role in this? How so?

Is there anything else that you would like to share with me and do you have any questions for me? I'd like to thank you for your participation in our study and taking the time to answer my questions today.

End interview.

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