

Case Study Series

**HOUSEHOLD DECISION-MAKING
AND SCHOOL ENROLMENT
IN AFGHANISTAN**

**CASE STUDY 3:
Nesher Villages
Belcheragh District,
Faryab Province**

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December 2005

Funding for this research was provided by the governments of Canada and Denmark (DANIDA) and the World Bank.



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About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

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Current funding for AREU is provided by the European Commission (EC), the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Stichting Vluchteling and the governments of the United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark (DANIDA), Switzerland and Sweden. Funding for this study was provided by Canada, DANIDA and the World Bank.

Acknowledgements

This series of four education case studies has been an AREU team effort. Gulbadan Habibi and I dealt with general research management; Saghar Wafa and Baser Nader led the fieldwork, with the assistance of Fauzia Rahimi and Hadi Akbari; Jeaniene Spink compiled the training manual and made initial contacts with the Ministry of Education and partnering NGOs; and Ahmadullah Amarkhil translated all of the detailed field notes.

For this Belcheragh (Faryab) case study, all collaborators would like to thank the following:

- Save the Children USA which coordinated AREU's fieldwork in the district;
- Community members (men, women and children) who took the time to share insights about their household decisions and schooling;
- Teachers and students of both the local boys' primary school and the local girls' primary school who also provided their insights; and
- AREU office support – especially that provided by Meredith Lewis and Brandy Bauer.

Pamela Hunte, December 2005

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Glossary

Afghanis/Afs	Afghan unit of currency; ~50 Afghanis = US\$1
<i>arbab</i>	appointed village leader
<i>band-i-barq</i>	hydroelectric power
<i>chador</i>	traditional piece of cloth worn by Afghan women over clothes, revealing only the hands and face
<i>gilim</i>	flat-weave rug
<i>hammam</i>	public bath
<i>jadu</i>	black magic
<i>jerib</i>	unit of land measurement; approximately one fifth of a hectare
<i>kafil-i-arbab</i>	assistant to the <i>arbab</i>
<i>kafshak</i>	sun pest beetle
madrassa	religious school
<i>mehmankhana</i>	guesthouse
mujahedin	fighters in the <i>jihad</i> , or holy war
mullah	religious teacher, mosque prayer leader
<i>qalain</i>	bride price
<i>qalin</i>	knotted rug
<i>qishlaq</i>	villages
<i>seer</i>	seven kilos of grain
<i>shura</i>	group of elders
<i>tandoor</i>	clay oven
<i>tawiz</i>	religious amulet
<i>woliswal</i>	district director
<i>woliswali</i>	district centre
<i>zera</i>	cumin

Acronyms

AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DEO	District Education Officer
IDP	internally displaced person
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoE	Ministry of Education
NGO	non-government organisation
NRVA	National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment
NSS	National Surveillance System
SDF	Sanayee Development Foundation
TISA	Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

1. Introduction

This report presents findings from a qualitative study on education conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in four sites in Afghanistan: two urban and two rural. This is a case study of a cluster of villages in Neshar, Belcheragh District, Faryab Province.¹ The key questions this study sought to answer were:

- Why do some households decide to send their children to school, while others do not?
- Why do some children in a household go to school, while others in the same household do not?
- Why do some children stay in school, while others drop out?

The household, defined here as a group of people living and eating together, was the basic unit of analysis for the enquiry. In-depth focus on the household allowed for careful examination of its complex internal dynamics, including decision-making processes and resource allocation, which may be either cooperative or conflicting in nature. Decisions about children's school enrolment (both sons and daughters) and other important topics were explored in detail. In addition to intra-household relationships, the unit within the context of the community was also considered through the study of inter-household social networks and community decision-making, with emphasis upon the role of education, available schooling options and perceived needs.

The primary focus was on demand-related issues in education (e.g. desire for girls' education), while also looking at some important supply-side issues (e.g. school location). This approach generated valuable insights in which typical Afghan villagers in Neshar – men, women and children – presented their own detailed analyses of their life situations.

A study concerning education in Afghanistan today must also deal with specific strategies of households as they attempt to cope with the many recent changes in their lives. In Neshar communities these strategies may or may not include seeking education for their children (of differing gender and age). Indeed, as Afghanistan struggles to rebuild, a successful Back-to-School campaign in 2002 (1381) has resulted in a striking total of 4.3 million children now enrolled in grades 1–12. However, some 2.5 million school-aged boys and girls are still not enrolled.² What are the reasons, often complex and multiple, for these differences?

¹ The three other research sites for this study included both urban and rural settings: two neighbouring villages in Chahar Asyab District of Kabul Province; Pul-i-Khushk (District 13) in Kabul City; and District 2 in Kandahar City. Case studies are available for each of these sites.

² *Securing Afghanistan's Future: Accomplishments and the Strategic Path Forward* (Technical Annex/Education), Kabul: TISA and International Agencies, 2004. Education is compulsory to grade 9 (*The Constitution of Afghanistan*, Article 43, 2003/1382).

2. Methodology

The study undertaken was qualitative, and its purpose was to gain in-depth understanding of household decision-making and school enrolment in Neshar. A small sample of households was chosen, not a large random sample as would be used in quantitative research. Rather than using an interview form with coded responses, this research used open-ended questions and answers. And rather than undergoing statistical analysis, the resulting data were examined for common themes or qualities, and a descriptive report was prepared.

A number of recent quantitative studies have collected data with which to examine the topic of enrolment of Afghan children in school. These include the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA).³ Data presented in this series of case studies provide in-depth insights which complement these quantitative analyses.

In carrying out this study in Neshar, Belcheragh District, the AREU education team⁴ coordinated closely with Save the Children USA (SC/USA), which is currently active in education throughout Faryab Province.⁵ Prior to fieldwork, a training workshop in qualitative research methodology was conducted by the AREU education team leaders for participating staff and partner NGOs.⁶ Local SC/USA staff members⁷ assisted the AREU team with their introductory fieldwork in Belcheragh District.

The AREU education team made initial contact with the Deputy District Education Officer (DEO) in Belcheragh Town, explained the research objectives, and obtained permission to conduct fieldwork. The Neshar cluster of villages was chosen as the research site because of its mixed ethnicity (Sayed, Tajik and Uzbek), location near the main road, and the presence of a boys' school and a girls' school. Similarly, the team met with the *arbab* (leader of the Neshar village cluster who coordinates with the government), outlined the research plans, and received his consent. Fieldwork was carried out in May 2005. According to the research design, a purposive sample of 12 households was sought out in Neshar containing the following:

- Four households in which *all* children of school age⁸ are enrolled in school;
- Four households in which *some* children of school age are enrolled in school; and
- Four households in which *no* children of school age are enrolled in school.

³ *Moving Beyond Two Decades of War: Progress of Provinces* (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2003 Afghanistan), CSO and UNICEF: Kabul, 2003; *Results and Discussion of Education Data Collected in the Afghanistan National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2003*, WFP, APEP/USAID, Save the Children USA: Kabul, 2005.

⁴ The AREU education team leaders were Saghar Wafa and Baser Nader. Other members of the AREU field research team were Fauzia Rahimi and Hadi Akbari. Overall management of the project was by Gulbadan Habibi and Pamela Hunte. Jeaniene Spink compiled the training manual for this work and made initial contacts with the Ministry of Education and partner NGOs.

⁵ SC/USA is undertaking community-based, gender-sensitive basic education for the poor in Faryab. Its regional office is in Maimana, with a district office in Belcheragh Town. In Belcheragh District it has recently assisted in the construction of a primary school in Charmgary (grades 1–6, with separate shifts for boys and girls).

⁶ Other partner NGOs were Sanayee Development Foundation (SDF) in Chahar Asyab and Oxfam GB in Kandahar City.

⁷ Ms Rabia and Qasimi Sahib, Education Officers, SC/USA, helped the AREU team in this area. Their assistance was greatly appreciated.

⁸ For this study the term "school age" is defined liberally and includes children and youth from 7–18 years of age. Due to the years of conflict and the fact that many individuals have missed years of schooling in the past, students' ages do not always correspond to their grades.

With the assistance of the *arbab* and his assistant, the *kafil-i-arbab*, heads of household were contacted and introductions made. After considerable searching, the final sample included 13 households: three units with *all* children in school; eight units with *some* children in school; and two units with *no* children in school.

Each participating household's male and female members were visited by a team of two men and two women field researchers (respectively),⁹ facilitating the collection of necessarily detailed qualitative data. While one researcher asked open-ended questions and kept the conversation going smoothly, his or her team member took extensive field notes. Following each conversation, lengthy field reports were prepared from each in-depth discussion which contained information concerning complex household social dynamics and decision-making, along with important economic data, the unit's migratory history during recent decades of war, degree of female mobility, hopes for the future and other information. Repeat visits were made to a selected sub-sample of six households to follow up on specific topics and explore additional topics. In summary, the research explored the livelihoods of these urban households, specifically the degree to which education plays a role in their complex survival strategies.

To guide the conversations, a series of discussion topic outlines was used. Focus groups were also conducted where appropriate. In addition to daily participant observation and numerous walks through the district, individual discussions were held with:

- The Deputy District Education Officer (DEO) in Belcheragh Town
- The *arbab* (leader of the Neshar village cluster and representative to the government) and his assistant, the *kafil-i-arbab*, in Neshar-i-Kolon
- 13 households from throughout the Neshar village cluster:
 - Discussions with men, women, and children
 - Six households with repeated visits

Focus group discussions were held with:

- Male teachers of Neshar Boys' Primary School in Neshar-i-Kolon
- Female teachers of Naswan Girls' Primary School in Neshar-i-Kolon
- Male students (grades 5–6) of Neshar Boys' Primary School
- Female students (grade 4) of Naswan Girls' Primary School

As indicated from the above range of respondents, this study focused particularly on demand issues in education on the part of the local populace, while not forgetting important supply issues in education too. The study's findings and concluding recommendations will help to guide current plans by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to make improvements to teacher training, curricula, outreach/media messages and other undertakings in the area of education.

⁹ Because many of the female Uzbek respondents did not speak Farsi, the headmistress of the local Naswan Girls' Primary School, Ms Neelab, acted as translator for the AREU team in these households. Her assistance was greatly appreciated.

3. The Research Setting

3.1 Location

Belcheragh District is located in the southeast of Faryab Province. Maimana, a city of approximately 75,000, is the provincial capital. The field site of Neshar, which includes nine separate villages (*qishlaq*) scattered on the edges of the low rolling mountains on both sides of the Tagab River, is located approximately 28 kilometres east of Maimana on the main gravel road. Around 11 kilometres beyond Neshar further to the east on this same road is the district centre (*woliswali*) of Belcheragh Town. This centre has an estimated population of 10,000, and is the site of government offices, a bustling bazaar and a large market held every Monday and Wednesday. Residents of Neshar travel more frequently to Belcheragh Town, either by foot or donkey (an hour trip), than to Maimana, which is a lengthy two-hour trip by jeep, costing 150 Afghanis.

3.2 The rural community

The largest of Neshar's nine villages is Neshar-i-Kolon, which includes 130 households, a handful of small shops, a restaurant, a mosque and a public bath (*hammam*) for men.¹⁰ Both the local boys' school and the girls' school are also located here. Across the wide, bridge-less river bed, which is often dry but also floods dangerously in the spring, the other smaller communities are found. The total population of the cluster is approximately 500 households. Homes are made of mud and stones, and are built in close proximity to one another. Near the settlements are numerous orchards of fruit trees and grape arbours, gardens (onions, tomatoes, melons, sesame, etc.), and irrigated fields of mainly wheat but also opium poppy. Higher on the mountainsides, more distant from the communities, there are rain-fed fields of wheat.¹¹

Leadership of Neshar for the past one and a half years has been in the hands of the local *arbab*. Selected by the community, he had in previous years been a powerful Uzbek mujahedin leader in the region. He appointed his assistant, the *kafil-i-arbab* (who is Sayed), six months ago when this individual returned from Mazar-i-Sharif because, as the *arbab* said, he appeared to be "an active and bright person" – not like the previous assistant who had been lazy. The *arbab* has a large *mehmankhana* (guestroom) near his residence in Neshar-i-Kolon which is used for meetings of the community *shura* (group of elders).¹² The *arbab* seeks to settle any community conflict (such as disputes between villagers over land, which are quite common,¹³ or debts) locally, but if the issue is extremely serious (such as murder, robbery or religious dispute), he refers the case to the district director (*woliswal*) in Belcheragh Town. Each of the other eight communities in the cluster has its own mosque and

¹⁰ The *hammam*, which is located at a natural spring, has recently been renovated with SC/USA assistance.

¹¹ In the National Surveillance System (NSS) classification, this is in Belcheragh's Zone 3 (Mixed Irrigated and Rain-fed Land). (Save the Children and NSS/Faryab, 27 November 2004). Charmgary, the NSS sentinel site, is about five kilometres to the east of Neshar.

¹² The district director (*woliswal*) had suggested that the local *shura* meet every 15 days or so, but the *arbab* noted that the people were not interested in periodic meetings and so it meets only on a case-by-case basis.

¹³ SC/USA approached the community of Neshar last year about the possible construction of a new school building but, due to disagreements over land, this was not done. For a general discussion of land disputes in neighbouring districts, see L. Alden Wily, 2004, *Land Relations in Faryab Province: Findings from a Field Study in 11 Villages*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

frequently a *mehmankhana* of one of the wealthier residents. They also attempt to solve their problems locally, but if that is not possible, the *arbab* meets with the local mullah and provides advice to him.¹⁴ The *arbab* does not receive a salary, but the locals do provide him with wheat and other produce occasionally. His assistant noted that leaders in the area are usually those who are wealthy and have a number of relatives. At present education, although helpful, is not thought to be a necessary qualification for leadership in this context by either the villagers or the government.

Traditionally villagers work together in the construction of water basins (*dand*) on the edge of the river banks which serve as water sources for both humans and livestock. More recently, they have also provided group labour to one of the wealthier men who is constructing a hydroelectric turbine (*band-i-barq*) using one of the local streams. When completed, this will provide electricity to a number of households in the area. At present only a few of the more affluent households have electricity in the evenings, which they obtain from private generators.

In recent years some international agencies, along with both international and local NGOs, have also been coordinating with the district government in the construction and reconstruction of various community facilities in the Neshar area, usually using local labour. As mentioned above, SC/USA built the local *hammam*, which entailed the concreting of a natural spring in Neshar-i-Kolon. In addition, it has constructed a few water pumps. ACTED (Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development) was involved in the improvement of the main road, on which village men worked and received payment in wheat. As a wheat-for-work project, the World Food Programme organised the construction of the water pump in Hassanabad, the second-largest community in the Neshar cluster, and it has also distributed cards for wheat to 12 of the poorest households in the cluster.

Despite these recent undertakings, respondents are united in stressing their ongoing and urgent need for better roads, health facilities and schools in Neshar. Security is another pressing problem, with gunmen frequently coming to the communities at night to rob the villagers.¹⁵ Protection against river flooding and clean drinking water are two other pressing needs. In addition, many individuals noted that corruption and favouritism within the government and other organisations is common, with the poor reaping little of the benefits from development activities to date.

3.3 The villagers and their backgrounds

The village cluster of Neshar is ethnically mixed, with each mountain community usually comprised of one of the major groups of the region: Tajik, Sayed¹⁶ or Uzbek.¹⁷ The *arbab* related that the populace originally came from the Belcheragh Town area to the east, while the Sayed said that their genealogies indicate that they arrived in the area during the time of Habibullah (1901–19).

¹⁴ Concerning women's participation, both male and female villagers related that women could refer their problems to the male *shura* if necessary, and once a dispute between two women had been settled in this way. There was also one mention of "an NGO which made a female *shura*" in the area, but no more details about were available.

¹⁵ In previous years, these gunmen were mujahedin commanders; they now continue to demand "their share" of wheat and other produce. Many households keep dogs for the protection of their homes and supplies.

¹⁶ Also termed Saadat, the Sayed speak Farsi and claim direct descent from the Prophet Mohammad.

¹⁷ Another group, the Maliki (Pashtuns originally from Kandahar), was also mentioned by the *arbab* as residing in the area, but no households of Maliki were encountered in this research; possibly they went to Kandahar with the fall of the Taliban and have not returned.

The sample of 13 households located in five of the nine sub-villages was composed of the following ethnic groups:

- Sayed: seven households
- Tajik: three households
- Uzbek: three households

In the years of intense conflict when the Taliban were in power (late 1990s–2001), all of the sample households left Neshar at one time or another and became internally displaced persons (IDPs). Many units sought refuge “in the mountains” and returned to their homes frequently. Other heads of household moved their families to Belcheragh Town, Maimana and/or Shibirghan for longer periods of time. No women or children from these units sought refuge in neighbouring countries, but three heads of household spent a number of years during the conflict working in Iran, and two other men lived in Pakistan for a considerable period of time. These individuals periodically returned and took part in regional fighting. Some men were jailed, and homes were burned and looted. Most households have returned to Neshar since 2001 and the fall of the Taliban.

The vast majority of adults in these families – both male and female – have never been to school, although a number of men note that they have had years of religious training at the mosque when they were young. The only adult female in the sample who was literate was the headmistress of the local girls’ school; originally from Badakhshan, she came to Neshar four years ago when she married her husband who is a local mullah and also a teacher at the local boys’ school.

3.4 Household composition

The households in this rural sample are large, with an average of eight members¹⁸ and some complex kin relations. The majority (N=9) are nuclear in structure (containing only parents and children), while the remainder (N=4) are extended in structure (containing three generations or married brothers and their children). In general, it is the wealthier households which are larger and extended in composition. There are cases of polygyny (multiple wives) in two of these larger units. In one of these, an individual had married his deceased brother’s wife (levirate) which is a common tradition, especially during the recent war years.

Most of the villagers are closely related through marriage and live in close proximity to one another; there is also much informal visiting between these neighbouring relatives,¹⁹ and the communities are tightly knit social entities in which everyone knows each other very well. This sometimes results in extensive gossip and “backstabbing”, which in one case had even involved the use of *jadu* (black magic) between members of an extended family unit.²⁰

¹⁸ The Central Statistics Office (CSO) has calculated the average household size in Afghanistan to be 6.1 members (CSO, 27 November 2004, *National Surveillance System Round One Report on Belcheragh and Kohistan Districts*, Kabul, p. 3).

¹⁹ Upon entering the households the research team often encountered numerous relatives and neighbours present. In addition, close female relatives (i.e. female respondents’ mothers, sisters etc.) from nearby areas (especially Garziwan District in neighbouring Sari Pul) frequently come to visit village households and stay for a number of days.

²⁰ A widow (who has since remarried a widower whose previous three wives had died) considers herself the victim of *jadu*, which was conducted against her by her previous sisters-in-law who evicted her from the house.

Early marriages are extremely common in Neshar, with girls marrying as early as 11 years of age, although 14–15 years is more common.²¹ However, males are usually considerably older (ten years or more) at marriage than their brides due to the prevalent tradition of an extremely high bride price (*qalain, tuiana*). Respondents quote figures for the bride price from 100,000 Afghanis (US\$2,000) in the case of poor families to 1,000,000 Afghanis (US\$20,000)²² for richer households. Regardless of economic standing, this is a considerable investment which demands concerted and long-term savings on the part of the groom and his family,²³ and many young men must work in Iran to earn the necessary money for their marriages. The *arbab* of Neshar related the following:

Many young boys have gone to Iran because of our poor economic conditions here in Neshar. Presently there are 65 boys from our mosque [i.e. the surrounding area] who are working there...pretty soon there won't be any left in the village.

Among the 13 households in this small sample, males from almost half of them (N=5) were working in Iran. These included young unmarried sons working for their *qalain* (“making money for themselves”), along with a father and son who had been out of contact for a number of years and were feared dead. In two other cases, married daughters (both with and without children) were living in their parents’ household while their husbands were working in Iran; this appears to be a common occurrence in this region and may be a variation of a tradition of the area, *kulagh bazi*.²⁴

3.5 Economic activities

The households in this sample are largely poor subsistence farmers who struggle constantly to make ends meet. A total of three units were classified as above average in economic standing with respect to others in the community; four were average, four were below average and two were poor.²⁵ A total of seven out of 13 households own their own land which are small plots, both irrigated and rain-fed, and range in size from only 1–7 *jeribs*.²⁶ The remainder either rent land (N=1); have small gardens near their homes (N=3); or are landless (N=2).

Irrigated crops, in fields located close to the river and settlements, include onions, tomatoes, potatoes, melons and sesame (*kunjid*), along with grape arbours and orchards of fruit trees (mulberry, quince, apple, cherry and Russian olive). Fields of wheat and opium poppy (*tariok*) are also common.²⁷ Rain-fed crops found in small plots at higher altitudes are mainly wheat.

²¹ Afghan civil law (Article 71, Subsection 2) sets the minimum age of marriage for females at 16 and for males at 18.

²² 50 Afghanis = approximately US\$1

²³ Respondents also noted that years ago the custom of *badal* was more common, in which one household would exchange for marriage a son and a daughter for a daughter and a son from another unit, but this practice seems to occur less frequently today.

²⁴ In *kulagh bazi* a bride remains in her father’s house until the full bride price is received; during this period the groom can still visit the bride weekly, and they may even have one or two children before finances are settled and she finally leaves for his household.

²⁵ One of the extremely poor households is headed by a female who has five children; her husband and oldest son went to Iran four years ago and are presumed lost.

²⁶ 1 *jerib* = approximately half an acre = one fifth of a hectare

²⁷ It was estimated by the research team that 50 percent of households in the Neshar village cluster cultivate opium poppy.

As many respondents (both male and female) related, in recent years the wheat crops in Neshar have been decimated by widespread infestations of the sunn pest beetle (*kafshak*). This shield-shaped insect not only eats leaves, stems and wheat grain, but it also injects chemicals that break down gluten, which reduce the baking quality of the resulting wheat flour.²⁸ In addition, households related that frequent flooding by the nearby river has also eliminated much of their wheat crop. With these losses, many households have thus turned to the extremely profitable cash crop of opium poppy.

As far as livestock is concerned, no household in the sample owns very many animals. The richest unit in the sample owns a bull,²⁹ a calf and 20 goats. Average units may have a cow, a few sheep and goats, and a donkey, which is very important for transport to and from the bazaar in Belcheragh. The very poor have no livestock at all. Farm produce such as wheat, milk and vegetables is largely for individual household consumption and is not sold in the bazaar, although it may be frequently shared with nearby relatives in times of need. Cash crops such as sesame and grapes are usually taken to Belcheragh Town for sale in the bazaar.

Men, women and children work in the fields daily, especially those which are irrigated and are nearer to the home than the highland rain-fed fields. Both sons and daughters fetch water from the river, spring or water pump, in addition to collecting dung for fuel and fodder for the livestock. Sons take goats to the more distant mountainsides for grazing, and also gather a special type of dried root (*karmak-i-zer-i-zamin*) in the mountains which is used for fuel by most households.

Some physical assets found in a typical village household included the following: pillows/cushions/quilts, *gilim* (flat-weave rug), dishes/teapot, radio, baby cradle, family photos³⁰ and a *tandoor*. A better-off unit may also have a cassette player, sewing machine and motorbike.

In addition to farming, almost every household's males are also engaged in various forms of off-farm work in the informal sector. One enterprising individual owns two mills and is constructing a *band-i-barq*. Another has a general store in Belcheragh Town where he sells food supplies, and a Sayed has a small shop in Neshar-i-Kolon where he writes *tawiz* (religious amulets). Others work as day labourers for 100–200 Afghanis per day; boys may make only 25 Afghanis per day. One landless head of household buys various items such as plastic sandals in Belcheragh Town, brings them to Neshar by donkey, and sells them in the rural communities.

The mountainsides provide a number of highly valued substances which are collected especially by young boys and sold in the bazaars to supplement a household's income.³¹ These include *pista* (wild pistachios), *zera* (wild cumin) and *anghoza* (a

²⁸ See www.uvmedu/entlab/sunnpest, the University of Vermont Entomology Research Lab's website, and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Zones (ICARDA), for more details about this ancient insect pest.

²⁹ A bull ox, especially important for ploughing the fields, is often "borrowed" by those households who do not own one.

³⁰ Some Tajik households also display photos and posters of Ahmad Shah Masood and Mohammad Yunus Qanooni, both of the Jamiat party.

³¹ This work can be dangerous, and a boy in the village had recently broken his leg while searching for high-altitude wild plants.

resin from the root of the asafetida plant, which has many medicinal and culinary uses both in Afghanistan and abroad).³²

Gilim weaving, which is done by women and girls in a total of six of the 13 sample households, is also a major source of income, especially for those of middle or low economic standing. Woven on horizontal wooden looms, most *gilims* made in Neshar are maroon in colour, with a traditional wheat design being very popular. Other rugs also produced are of the knotted variety (*qalin*). In the following example from an Uzbek household, a woman stressed the importance of this work for her household's economy:

The economy of the villagers here is very poor. We [she and her two daughters, one of whom had dropped out of third grade in order to weave more] weave rugs here at home and we're busy with this job night and day. My husband doesn't have any job – he goes out and comes back every day with nothing. We pay the household expenses through our rug weaving.

Two of the girls weaving rugs are my daughters, and the other two are the daughters of my sister. My girls are not very good yet, and so my nieces are teaching them. For this, I provide them meals three times a day. They weave about ten rows in a day, and I pay them 30 Afghanis per day. They're weaving a rug with the wheat symbol in it...If four people work on a rug, it takes two months to complete, and if only two work on it, it takes four months.

When the rug is finished we take it to the shopkeeper who has given us the rug weaving set and all the materials, and he pays us 4,000 Afghanis or gives us foodstuffs like rice and oil.

Most households which weave rugs establish relations with shopkeepers in Belcheragh as in the above example, and earn 2,000–6,000 Afghanis per rug. In one case, however, a Sayed woman notes that they buy all of the necessary materials for themselves and, when she and her daughters³³ complete the rug, her husband sells it in the bazaar himself. In the one case of a female-headed household in which the husband and oldest son were thought to be lost in Iran, rug weaving is especially important. The woman told this story:

My eldest son once came back from Iran and asked for money. I gave him the money I made from weaving rugs. He didn't listen to his uncle and went back to Iran...he doesn't care about us...he's now with his Iranian friends. One of my sons here works as a labourer and he gets paid 25 Afghanis a day. I weave rugs and sell them to the shopkeeper and I get paid 2,000–2,500 Afghanis for each one. I spend that on my children. We sold our livestock after my husband disappeared and spent all that money. Now my brother helps us when he can, but he also has children...

In this research sample, the only case of employment in the formal sector is that of a head of household who teaches at the local boys' school in Neshar and his wife

³² One enterprising head of household had travelled to Tajikistan recently with his brother selling *anghoza*; he had returned after six months. *Anghoza* is also highly valued in India, where it is known as *hing*. High-altitude Afghanistan is one of the major sources of this substance.

³³ The daughters in this household also do embroidery "for money".

who is the headmistress of the local girls' school. Their salaries, when they are finally paid, are approximately 2,000–2,500 Afghanis per month.

In summary, households in these villages exhibit a pattern of economic diversification, in which men, women and children combine agricultural activities with additional off-farm informal labour both within the household and in the wider Belcheragh area. Sons may work in Iran or, as in one case, in Maimana, but any remittances to their families in Neshar are infrequent, if at all.

Monthly household expenditures were estimated by respondents in conversations, and these ranged from 2,000–6,000 Afghanis, generally varying according to the number of members in the household who generated income, and how much they generated. Respondents noted that much of their expenditures were on food³⁴ and noted that, since their wheat crops have been failing in recent years either due to sunn pest infestation or flooding, they must now also buy wheat. Winter expenses are also considerable, with wood costly and dung or dried roots the alternative. Another area of extremely heavy expenditure for all households is that of health care and medicines.³⁵ Villagers repeatedly mentioned the poor quality of locally available drinking water and the lack of maternal and child health assistance. An illness episode treated in Belcheragh Town, where a government clinic and private doctors are located, costs approximately 500–600 Afghanis per visit. Treatment in more distant Maimana, where there is a large provincial hospital and numerous private doctors, could cost 1,000 Afghanis and may also require an overnight stay. Many households cannot afford this, and would rather go to the local *kampir* (a traditional practitioner/herbalist who may be either male or female) for their health care.

3.6 Debts

All of the households in the sample were in debt, ranging from 6,000–150,000 Afghanis, with an average of 60,000 Afghanis. Sources of the loans are most frequently shopkeepers, along with relatives, a landlord and a friend. Medical care is a frequently mentioned use of the loans; business ventures, parents' funeral costs and general household expenditures were also noted. A poor woman mentioned that "landlords and rich people give loans with *sood* (interest), and we have to pay that too". Some heads of households have borrowed wheat from other villagers and are now working on their land to pay off the debts. Women who are in debt to shopkeepers weave rugs and pay this off little by little.

Strategies which are coping, adaptive and/or accumulative were exhibited by the sample, with physical assets often being sold. Blankets were sold to obtain cash for necessary medical care; a goat was sold to pay off a loan; a bull was sold and the money invested in a hydroelectrical system. In addition, in the only case in which the sale of opium was specifically mentioned (a poor household in which none of the children are enrolled in school), a woman related the following about her household's economic situation:

³⁴ There are a number of cases in which relatives willingly help one another in times of food shortages by loaning them wheat, etc. On the other hand, others noted that the presence of guests increases a unit's food-related expenses and is often seen to be a strain on limited budgets.

³⁵ Health problems are a major concern in all households. Malaria is especially common, with tuberculosis, typhoid, kidney problems and heart ailments also being mentioned. Infants and small children are frequently sick and many are undernourished.

We were indebted to shopkeepers, and so we sold one of the goats to pay the debts. We had two kilos of opium, and we sold that for 6,000 Afghanis. With that we built the house – but we still haven't built the roof. When we find the money, we'll do that too. We cultivated opium this year too, but it's been stricken by kafshak.

The large sum of money obtained through the bride price for the marriage of a daughter was noted by only one household: the unit had bought land and started to build a new house with the 100,000 Afghanis received from the groom's family. The bride's mother elaborated further:

My daughter is married, and she's 18 years old; she got married three years ago and has a daughter. She lived one year with her husband, and then he brought her back here when he went to Iran. She lives with us now, and her father pays all of the expenses. Her husband sends money to his mother, and she sends 500 Afghanis (or less) to my daughter now and then...

This second similar example, taken from discussion with a mother in another household, further illustrates the complexities of kinship dynamics and money:

Two of my daughters are married. One of them lives in the village on the other side of the river. My second daughter is 17, and it's been four years since she got married. Her husband's house is in Akh Pulach, but she still has not been there. She lives here with us, and actually her husband was living here too...He fought with his parents two years ago, and then he went to Iran. We've heard that he'll be back in the fall...It's the custom here that if the husband of the daughter is away, the father of the girl should cover her expenses. So my husband is paying all her expenses, and he (the son-in-law) has not sent any money to his wife yet.

3.7 Female mobility

Because the majority of villagers are relatives and not strangers, women and girls are quite free to move within their respective communities. Informal visiting between relatives, neighbours and friends is common. Women fetch water from the nearby river or spring and work in the fields. Weddings, funerals, celebrations such as Nawroz (the Persian new year) and events at the girls' school are also legitimate reasons for a woman to leave her household. However, when a female leaves her home village, especially to travel to Belcheragh Town or Maimana, she should be accompanied by her husband or son, and she usually wears a *chadri*. As one Uzbek head of household related, "We want humans to be free, but this is our tradition – women should stay at home."

3.8 Options for education: the supply side

To follow are the major educational facilities currently available in Neshar in which the children from the sample households are enrolled, as well as a few other options outside the village context.

In Neshar-i-Kolon

Mosque schools: Each sub-village has its own small local mosque and mullah who teaches both boys and girls the Holy Quran. This activity is especially common during winter vacations.

Nesher Boys' Primary School:³⁶ Located in Nesher-i-Kolon near the *hammam*, the school was established four years ago³⁷ and currently has about 330 students enrolled from grades 1–5, with hopes of expanding to grade 6 next year. The school is an unfinished building “from the time of Junbesh”, but classes are held either under nearby trees or in tents which, along with some floor coverings, have been provided by UNICEF. Male teachers, of which there are nine, have studied to grades 10–11 themselves, and are not professionally trained. The headmaster noted that they had not received their salaries (2,000–2,500 Afghanis per month) for six months and they are not enthusiastic about their work. The men find the lack of books, chalk, blackboards and books makes their task extremely difficult. Students (many of whom are in their teens) walk to school from near and far, with the trip sometimes taking a few hours. There is supposed to be a daily distribution of fortified biscuits which is appreciated by students and their households, but this is infrequent and there are numerous absences each day. The teachers have little control over the students, and are often absent themselves. Boys from ten of the 13 sample households were enrolled in this school.

Naswan Girls' Primary School: Further up river in a nearby section of Nesher-i-Kolon, the girls' school is located during the cold season in a crowded two-story house, which was donated for this purpose by an absentee landlord. In warm weather, the girls meet in tents at the boys' school (in separate shifts). Some 220 girls are enrolled from grades 1–4, and there is a staff of three female teachers and four male teachers (who are not professional but have studied from grades 8–11); they have not received their salaries of 2,000–2,500 Afghanis for months. The headmistress, who has received some teacher training, married into the community four years ago from Badakhshan, which is when the girls' school was established. Good communications exist between the Nesher Boys' School and the Naswan Girls' School, and the male headmaster communicates with the DEO for the females when needed.³⁸ In addition, the headmistress' husband also is a teacher at the boys' school. Girls from ages 7–14 walk to the Naswan School from near and far, with many (but not all) wearing uniforms of black dresses and white scarves. The wide and often flooding river lacking a bridge is a major problem. School attendance is not good, despite the scheduled daily distribution of biscuits and the bi-monthly distribution of oil to all female students.³⁹ Girls from 9 of the 13 sample households are enrolled in this school.

In Belcheragh Town

Secondary and high school facilities are available in Belcheragh Town for both boys and girls, but none of the Nesher children were in attendance.

³⁶ The Deputy District Director of Education (DEO) in Belcheragh Town noted that there are a total of 22 primary schools (12 boys' schools and 10 girls' schools) located throughout the district.

³⁷ In the past (1356/1978) another school had been established by the government in Nesher but, as the *arbab* said, “people hated school very much at that time” (due to Communist influences and civil conflict), and it was closed.

³⁸ The social norms of Belcheragh Town are conservative and the male DEO only agreed to meet the male members of AREU's research team in his office.

³⁹ The NSS report of Belcheragh District (24 November 2004, p. 4) notes that primary school students receive 100 grams of fortified biscuits daily, and girl students receive four litres of oil every month. Respondents in Nesher noted that this schedule is often not followed, however.

In Pakistan

A teenaged boy from one of the Sayed households, in which the head of household is a *tawiz* writer, has been studying at a madrassa in Pakistan for the past four years. His father sends him money periodically.

3.9 The cost of education in the context of the household economy

The majority of the sample was poor, in debt, with tight budgets and monthly expenditures used primarily for foodstuffs and costly medical care. Sending children to school calls for a household's ongoing investment in school supplies (notebooks, pens, pencils and books) and uniforms. In Neshar these cannot always be provided, but a child may attend school anyway. A few examples from households of differing economic standing will serve as illustration.

Household A, with nine members, is comparatively well off, with one son and two daughters enrolled in the local primary schools in grades 3 and 4. Both parents are firmly committed to educating their children, especially their sons. Their father, who is a Haji and has two wives, stated that he spends 500–600 Afghanis monthly for his three children's school supplies of notebooks, pens and the occasional book. In addition, each child gets a small amount of spending money per day. He noted that many households in Neshar cannot afford the costs related to schooling.

Household B, nuclear in structure with nine members, is landless and very poor; the head of household is a day labourer, his wife and daughters weave rugs, and the oldest son is a day labourer in Maimana. Two of the children are enrolled in the local primary schools: a boy in grade 2 and a girl in grade 1. The mother had attempted to enrol another daughter this year, but she was told that the girl was too young. She related the following:

One of my sons and one of my daughters are going to school now...We just can't afford to spend money on them. My daughter's teacher told her to make a black uniform and then come to school, and my daughter is now asking me to make her black clothes. Her father says, "How can I – we don't have enough money to eat well – how can I buy her clothes?"...We send our children to school so that they may bring home the foodstuffs like oil and biscuits. We can use it here at home then. But it's been some months that they don't give them any oil – just those biscuits and that's all. Our economy is so poor...

3.10 The schools and the community

Adult respondents in all of the sample households – both males and females – are not happy with the quality of education their children are receiving in either the boys' school or the girls' school. One of the first points to be noted is the lack of a proper school building and, although requests have been sent to the authorities, no action has been taken. This is linked to land disputes among the villagers, which are common in the region,⁴⁰ and suitable land is not available for a new school. When approached by SC/USA last year with the possibility of constructing a new school building in Neshar, the community was not able to come to an agreement, and SC/USA instead chose to work with another village in the area, Charmgary.

⁴⁰ See Alden Wily, *Land Relations in Faryab Province*.

Secondly, the quality of teaching at the local schools is seen by parents to be another pressing problem, especially at the boys' school. The teachers are repeatedly referred to by many villagers as "just mullahs who don't know anything". It is commonly known throughout the communities that the teachers are often absent from class and do not take their work seriously.

In addition, the lack of textbooks and other supplies is seen as a serious problem in both schools, along with what is perceived to be corruption in the distribution of oil and biscuits. Some accused the DEO in Belcheragh of taking the supplies (especially the valuable cooking oil), while others believed that the local teachers were selling it rather than handing it out to the children. No one is completely sure where the problem lies.

To teach in the context of Neshar is in itself a difficult task, especially when salaries do not arrive regularly. Many of the male teachers are also farmers or hold other jobs too. A male teacher bitterly noted the following:

When I took this job, I was promised that we'd receive a salary and also some coupons (for wheat, oil etc.) but I still haven't received any. And during the whole four years that we've had this school they still have not held one seminar for us teachers...

In addition, the lack of understanding on the part of the rural population is mentioned by many of the female teachers, although they do add that this is improving. Recalling events of the past, a young female teacher related this:

Before when the school was just beginning, people were coming and asking us, "If we send our children to school, will they be taken to America later?" They were really afraid that their children would be taken away! There was much propaganda and discussion among the people until they got to know that these days there is nothing going on like that.⁴¹

As a female teacher, working in rural Neshar is especially difficult. None of the female teachers are native to the villages; they have married into the closely-knit community in recent years. During the focus group with the female teachers at the girls' school, the following difficulties and family support systems for the women were mentioned:

Teacher 1: The people here are so unwise here – they say all kinds of bad things about us.

Teacher 2: I can't even talk to the administrative officer who is male, because the people think ill of that and say bad things about me.

Teacher 3: Yes – they just don't understand. But my son told me not to care at all about what people say. And my husband also told me that I'm an educated woman and I must use my talents to teach the village children to become educated too. God's blessings will come...

Teacher 4: And I have another problem. My father-in-law doesn't want me to teach and forbids me to do so, but my husband (who works for the district government) tells me to go and teach!

⁴¹ Many school children had been sent to the USSR from Afghanistan during the Soviet regime in the 1980s.

With very few literate adults in the community, it is often difficult for children to find assistance at home with their lessons. Some respondents noted that a local mullah assists, in another case a literate uncle helps. On a positive note, despite all the criticism towards the schools voiced by the respondents, there is considerable interaction between parents and teachers; after all, many of them are neighbours and relatives who know each other well. The headmaster of the boys' school stated that they are frequently in contact with parents: "...we do have some functions and invite the fathers – we discuss the problems of the school with the *arbab* and the village elders too". Fathers of all economic standings related that they had been to the boys' school. Teachers at the girls' primary school also stated that mothers of the girls came to the school often to ask about their children's lessons. Every Friday female teachers receive invitations to visit students' homes for lunch or tea, which they often attend. One of the mothers in the sample households noted happily that her daughter's favourite teacher had recently been a guest in their home and added that "some teach well – some do not".

4. Who Goes to School, Who Doesn't, and Why

Table 1 shows some basic information about the children of the 13 sample households in Neshar. There is a total of 75 children (39 boys and 36 girls) aged 18 and under in these units.⁴² The greater number of boys present in the category of school-aged children is largely explained by the early marriages of a number of girls in their teens and their departure from the households.⁴³ Comparing the second and third columns in Table 1, about 47 percent of the boys of school age in the sample are enrolled in school, while approximately 48 percent of the girls of school age are enrolled in school.

Table 1. Children in and out of school in Neshar (13 sample households)

Number of children aged 18 and under		Number of school-aged children (7–18)		Number of school-aged children in school now	
Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
39	36	30	25	14	12

A total of 11 households have enrolled at least one child in school. Out of these, eight have enrolled both boys and girls, two have enrolled only boys, and one has enrolled only girls.

Boys enrolled in school (N=14) range from first to fifth grades at Neshar Boys' Primary School in Neshar-i-Kolon. Girls enrolled in school (N=12) range from first to fourth grades at Naswan Girls' Primary School in Neshar-i-Kolon.⁴⁴

Concerning those children who are *not* enrolled in school, which includes 16 boys and 13 girls, the great majority of these individuals have never attended school at all. Also included in these totals are six children in four households (four boys and two girls) who have dropped out⁴⁵ of school: a boy who dropped out after first grade; two boys (aged 10 and 12) in one unit who studied only to first grade; a boy who dropped out after second grade; a girl who studied to second grade; and a girl who studied to third grade.

Gilim weaving, an essential part of the livelihoods of six of the 13 sample households, done by both mothers and daughters, is infrequently combined with school enrolment on the part of little girls. Out of a total of 10 school-aged girls who weave rugs, two girls attend primary school too.

4.1 Villagers' opinions about education: why children go to school

When adults in the sample were asked what they thought about education in general, both men and women voiced their positive support, and noted its importance in present-day Afghanistan. These opinions were closely involved in their decisions to send their children to school. A relatively well-off father (who spent time

⁴² This yields an average of almost six children aged 18 and under per household – a large dependency ratio regardless of household structure.

⁴³ The Afghan Minister of Women's Affairs, Masouda Jalal, has recently been quoted as saying that early marriage results in "...an incomplete education, limited opportunities and serious health risks". IRIN, 13 July 2005, "Child marriage still widespread", <http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=48115&SelectRegion=Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN>.

⁴⁴ Some parents were unclear about exactly what grades their children were enrolled in.

⁴⁵ For this study, the definition of a dropout has been determined by the respondents themselves, rather than defined by the child's school or teacher.

during the war in Pakistan and has also been on the Hajj), with both sons and daughters in primary school, has high hopes for his children and his community:⁴⁶

The school here is a primary school only up to the fifth grade. We'll try to make it a secondary school but, if that doesn't happen, I'll try to send my children to Belcheragh or Maimana for further study. Or maybe we'll just all move to Shibirghan so that they can continue schooling. I hope that my children are able to study until the twelfth grade and then go to the university. In fact, if I can afford it, I'll send my sons and daughters out of Afghanistan for education...I wish the same for my daughters as I do for my sons. I want my sons to be bright, and my daughters to be scientists and writers. My parents lived a very poor life; they tried hard and at least they sent us to a madrassa. Now I have to try hard too so that my children become something in the future – then they can help their country too.

A mother with two sons and two daughters in school related the following to the female education team, also including her ideas about child discipline:

When my children were born, I wished for them to be able to go to school. I didn't go to school myself because it was the revolution then and there was no school...Now there's much more freedom than in the past, and there's a school here in Neshar too. I want my children to study until they become something – like you with your pens and papers. Then their lives will become better, they will teach others, and their lives will be bright.

But I just wish that the school would have a better building so that they would become fonder of studying...I did see one of their teachers at a party one time, and I asked her about how my children were doing. I also told her that if they are misbehaving and not studying, then she should just hit them...

Another woman had similar positive opinions about the important role of education for her children – both boys and girls:

There was no school in the past around here, and people didn't know about things like that. Now it's been four years since the school has been here. People send their children to school to become wise, to be able to tell the difference between bad and good, so that they can serve their families and the nation.

School is for both boys and girls. Education and learning is not only the right of men but it's the right of women too. Women also need to learn. I send both my son and daughter to school, and I send them also to the mosque too to learn how to pray and read the Holy Quran.

A mother in an extremely poor household, who had lost five children “from malaria” and whose infant daughter is seriously undernourished, had this idea about education and why her 12-year-old son is in fourth grade:

The people in our village are not sophisticated, but now they do see the need for education, and they send their children to school to become wise

⁴⁶ In a focus group with the female teachers at the girls' school, the women mentioned that those people who migrated to other cities or out of Afghanistan during the war were those who send their children to school: “they have felt the need for education”.

and literate. They want their children to become something in the future – a doctor or an engineer.⁴⁷ I wish my children to have a comfortable life in the future. And when people mention my name and say that my children are literate, that will make me very happy...

Tears welled up in the mother's eyes as she continued:

My family and I haven't eaten for many nights because there is nothing to eat. And my son returned from school today saying he was dying of hunger – I had nothing to give him.

Getting an education in the rural context of Neshar is not easy. Non-literate parents were also concerned about the fact that they could not help their children with their studies. One mother of four children (sons and daughters) related how she nonetheless assists her children as much as she can:

There's no one at home to help them with their homework; they just do whatever they are able to do by themselves. As a mother I can only help them like this: I wake them up in time for school, I get their clothes ready, I wash their clothes, and serve them their meals. Their father gives them money for pens, notebooks and books.

A non-literate father from a poor landless household, who has one son and one daughter in school, summed up the situation in Neshar:

The reason I send my children to school is because I want them to be able to get free from all our misfortunes in life and become something...but they have a lot of problems. The teaching is not good here, and there is no good school building, and no supplies. It's also hard for the young children – especially girls – to cross the river...⁴⁸

4.2 Household decision-making

Before dealing more specifically with decision-making and school enrolment, the general process of making decisions within the rural household in Neshar will be briefly examined. Closely linked with this is the quality of relationships between various household members, including the distribution of power within the unit. The dynamics of interaction within these families, which contain many members of differing ages and genders and, correspondingly, different statuses and roles, are exceedingly complex and require a considerable amount of time to understand. Important clues emerged during the in-depth conversations, however, and some of these are summarised here.

Discussions with both male and female respondents indicated that although decision-making power may be primarily possessed by the male head of household, as is often stereotypically thought, adult females are often active participants in the decision-making process and, in some cases, wield considerable power within the household themselves. This varies considerably between units, however. Family structure is often an important variable here, but individual personality and negotiation skills

⁴⁷ The phrase “become a doctor or engineer” was used so frequently that it appeared to be just another term for “being educated”.

⁴⁸ Although both men and women respondents feared the dangers of flood waters in relation to their children going to and from school, other security issues had not been mentioned at all.

also play a crucial role. A few examples taken from the sample households will illustrate some of this diversity in the quality of relationships.

In Household A, a polygynous extended family in which the head of household, two wives and children live, relations between husband and wives (and between wives) appeared to be mostly harmonious and household decision-making participatory – except in important decisions about arranging marriages. The youngest wife, who has six children, of whom three are in school, had this to say:

My husband makes most of the decisions, but he takes my advice too. He always asks me what is needed at home and what he should buy from the bazaar. When he buys me clothes I tell him the style and colour I like, and he brings that for me. And whatever he cultivates on our land, he takes my advice on that too...

Of course fathers make the decisions about marriage – women don't have the right to give advice about this. Whether the mother is there or not, if the father wants, he'll get his daughter married. If the mother is not in agreement and her husband does not listen to her, his wife becomes angry at him and doesn't talk with him – and may not show her face to him for a month or so. Then finally the husband unveils her face by force and talks with her.

Most respondents agree that it is the male head of household (usually the father) who has the primary say in issues surrounding marriage of daughters and sons, although some mothers play an active role in negotiating throughout the sometimes lengthy process. In Household B, which is a large nuclear unit, a mother of five sons and four daughters, two of whom are married to local boys, stated proudly:⁴⁹

About my two daughters who are married – it was the decision of both my husband and myself. If I don't give my consent, my husband does not get them married.

Women vary in their assessments of the degree of power they have within their households, however. Here is a realistic, tongue-in-cheek statement from a mother of five in Household C, a collateral extended unit (two brothers and their families living together):

Men make the decisions about the marriage of their children. If they want to get their daughters married, they do; if they don't want to, they don't...And if a man has a lot of money, maybe he'll give some to his wife. If it's only a little money, he'll keep it for himself...A woman can't even really cook what she likes – I mean, if the husband doesn't bring what she wants from the bazaar, she can't cook it! Whatever he brings – it's his decision in the end.

4.3 Household decision-making and school enrolment

From the overcrowded local schools for both boys and girls, along with the fact that most of the sample households have enrolled at least some of their children in school (often both boys and girls), it is evident that villagers clearly perceive the

⁴⁹ In a separate discussion, her husband agreed when asked about household decision-making: "My wife and I make these decisions together."

value of education (as well as the value of the biscuits and oil which are frequently distributed). However, there are also many boys and girls in the sample who are not enrolled.

Table 2. Children who had never been enrolled in school (12 boys and 11 girls from 10 households)

<i>Household</i>	<i>Child</i>	<i>Who decided</i>	<i>Reason(s)</i>
#3	pre-teen boy	father	poverty no bridge on river
#4	teenaged boy	father, mother	school not good ⁵⁰ helps father in shop
	pre-teen boy	father, mother	school not good snakes in school school too far (1.5 hours)
	teenaged girls (2)	father, mother	help mother at home
#5	teenaged boy	father, mother	poverty does chores school not good
	pre-teen boy	father, mother	poverty does chores school not good
#6	teenaged girl	father, mother	poverty girl weaves rugs
	pre-teen girl	father, mother	poverty girl weaves rugs
	teenaged boy	father, mother	poverty works as day labourer school not good
	pre-teen boy	father, mother	poverty collects fuel/roots school not good
#7	teenaged girls (2)	father	poverty girls weave rugs
#8	teenaged boy	father	poverty helps father on farm school not good
	pre-teen boy	father	poverty tends livestock school not good
	pre-teen girl	father	poverty collects dung school not good
#9	teenaged boy	mother, boy	works as day labourer school not good
#11	teenaged girls (2)	father	religious reasons
	pre-teen girl	father	religious reasons
#12	girl	father	poverty
	boys (2)	father	poverty helps father

⁵⁰ “School not good” = respondents’ mention of unqualified teachers, improper buildings and lack of supplies (books etc.)

Table 2 shows some basic information about the school-aged boys and girls in the sample households who had never been to school (12 boys and 11 girls) from ten households, while Table 3 shows similar data for the children who had dropped out of school (4 boys and 2 girls) from four households. Listed in the tables are the household members primarily responsible for each decision, and also the major reasons involved in each decision.

Table 3. Children who have dropped out of school (four boys and two girls from four households)

<i>Household</i>	<i>Dropout</i>	<i>Education history</i>	<i>Who decided</i>	<i>Reason(s)</i>
#1	pre-teen boy	dropped out after first grade	mother, father, boy	didn't learn anything school not good school too far (1 hour)
	pre-teen girl	dropped out from second grade	mother	girl became misbehaved mother needed girl's help at home people talked
#4	12-year-old boy	dropped out after first grade	father, boys	didn't learn anything school not good snakes in school
	10-year-old boy	dropped out after first grade	father, boys	school too far (1.5 hours) boy collects <i>zera</i> boy grazes cow
#5	teenaged girl	dropped out after third grade	mother	poverty girl must weave rugs people talk
#7	teenaged boy	dropped out "after a few years"	father	didn't learn anything school not good school too far (1 hour) poverty

The children who had never been to school were both boys and girls, and were both pre-teens and teenagers. They were from a total of ten of the 13 sample households. Concerning the decision-makers in these cases, it was primarily a child's father who played the most significant role, although very often mothers were active participants in this process too. In two cases it was the mother who played the primary role in decisions pertaining to school enrolment of her daughters. The lack of other relatives' participation in decision-making may be due to the fact that so many of these households are nuclear and not extended in structure, and other kin are not present within the unit.

As is evident in both Table 2 and Figure 1, there are a number of reasons pertaining to both supply issues and demand issues which are involved in household decisions as to whether a son or daughter is enrolled in school in Neshar. Villagers were quite clear about the negative aspects of formal education in the Neshar schools, with more complaints being made against the boys' school than the girls' school. Many fathers are especially adamant about the situation, as this head of household from the sub-village of Hassanabad stated:

We have many problems with education here. First of all, there are no professional teachers, there is no proper building for the school, and there are not even enough books for the students. We don't have teachers, so the

local mullahs are teaching in the school, and they don't know anything themselves – how can they teach? The school is also very far from our village, and so the children can't reach it on time. It's about one hour away. For girls, we also don't have a proper building. It's good that the teachers for the girls are female, but they are not trained either. Only the headmistress is a professional person, and she's from Badakhshan originally.

Figure 1. Reasons associated with decisions to not enrol children in school

Supply-related reasons	Demand-related reasons
<p>Unqualified teachers (especially M)</p> <p>No proper building (especially M)</p> <p>Lack of supplies (M and F)</p> <p>School too far (1–1.5 hours) (M and F; especially F)</p> <p>No bridge on river (M and F; especially F)</p> <p>Child didn't learn anything (M and F)</p> <p>Snakes in school (M)</p>	<p>Poverty (M and F)</p> <p>Weaves rugs (F and M) Is day labourer (M) Collects/sells zera (M)</p> <p>(M and F) Helps mother at home (F) Helps father on farm (M) Helps father in shop (M) Collects fuel/roots/dung (M and F)</p> <p>People talk (F) Religious reasons (F)</p> <p>Girl became misbehaved (F)</p>

As important as these supply issues may be, they combine with many demand-related reasons to limit the school enrolment of many children in Neshar (Figure 1). On the demand side of the equation, it is poverty that plays a crucial role in deciding who goes to school and who does not in many of the households. For example, here is a response from a 39-year-old father of three sons and four daughters (of which one boy and one girl are in school), who also distrusts the local school staff:

I've got two jeribs of land, but that was swept away by flooding, so we're now having a lot of problems. I had to borrow 100 seer of wheat, and I'm working for the people to pay it off...One of my sons and one of my daughters are in school. The reason I'm not sending my other children to school is because I don't have a good economic situation. Otherwise they're all very interested to go to school and study. My other son is working as a day labourer, and my third son sometimes collects dried plants in the mountains. My other daughters are weaving rugs.

...and the school itself isn't good anyway. There are no school supplies, and the teachers aren't good either. I've bought pens, notebooks and books for my two children so many times. The Ministry of Education is sending supplementary supplies to the school, but the teachers are selling those – they don't ever give them to the students...

Where children are generating valuable income (by weaving rugs, working as day labourers, gathering *zera* etc.) and are not enrolled in school, it is clear that, although the desire for education may be very strong on the part of both parent and child, the opportunity costs may simply be too great for their households to bear.

However, regardless of the many supply and demand factors limiting enrolment in Neshar, it must be remembered that most households do enrol *some* of their school-aged children in school – and most frequently (in eight households) this includes both boys and girls. Considering the previous discussion of villagers' positive opinions about education in general, this may be interpreted as a household's strategy to prepare for the future – to enable their children to make the most of their lives and succeed in modern-day Afghanistan. In addition, this may also be interpreted as a strategy by which a household can obtain much-needed foodstuffs (biscuits and cooking oil) when and if they are distributed either at the boys' school or the girls' school. It appears that, in most instances, children's school enrolment actually involves a combination of both tactics.

The complexity of the decision-making processes involved not only in enrolling a child in school, but also in keeping him or her in school through the years, is evident from the cases of dropouts (four boys and two girls) which are listed in detail in Table 3 and illustrated graphically in Figure 1. In the first case of a girl (from a relatively well-off household) who had dropped out of second grade in Naswan Girls' Primary School, her mother had been the primary decision-maker, and there were at least three interrelated reasons involved. As the frustrated mother of two sons and four daughters (of which one boy and two girls are presently still in school) related, they may also withdraw their other children in the future:

We took one of our daughters out of school this year because I was alone at home, and there was no one to take care of the kids. She was in second grade. Her father wanted her to go on in school, but I didn't allow her to. She had learned nothing but fighting and misbehaviour in school; she was even going to other houses and fighting with people. So we thought that she wasn't learning good things and we took her out. She herself is interested to continue in school. But people were talking ill of her going, too. That's why people around here don't let their growing daughters go to school – the bad words of people really hurt...

Now we're thinking of taking our other children out of school too. After all, the way to school is so far from our village, and the boys are just studying under tents. Going to school especially in hot weather is really difficult. Two of my daughters now go to school from 8am to 12 noon, but they learn nothing! I really don't know if the teachers are poor or if the students are poor...

In another household, a large nuclear unit with five sons and three daughters, two boys (10 and 12 years) had both dropped out of Neshar Boys' Primary School after

completing only first grade. None of the children of the unit were now enrolled. Their father, a shopkeeper in Belcheragh Town, related numerous problems:

My children are not going to school, and we have many reasons for that. First of all, the distance is very far and, second, the school is located on the other side of the river and some of my children are too young to be able to cross. Sometimes the water increases, and there is no bridge. Another problem is that there is no proper school – children are studying under the trees and in tents. The school rooms aren't suitable. There are many reptiles in the rooms – like snakes – I've seen them there many times. Also, the students don't have school supplies – like pens, notebooks and even books. Most people are poor and they can't afford to buy these things for their children. In addition, the teachers are not good. One of my sons who was going there some time ago complained about the teachers a lot. They just came to class to call the attendance and that's all – they didn't teach anything...If there was a good school in the village, I'd send all of my children to school – both boys and girls. Then they would become educated...

The mother in this household related a similar story about her ten-year-old son, who has dropped out of school, which indicated a far-from-ideal relationship between student and teacher:

Yes, my son was in school before. But he was saying that there were no lessons at school, and that there were no teachers to teach them. So why should he go? I told him not to leave school, but he didn't listen to me. He also was saying, "I go such a long distance, and then I don't learn anything. Other boys are not going, so why should I?" And later our son saw his teacher, who asked him why he wasn't coming to school. He said to his teacher: "Why should I come to school? When I was there, you didn't teach me anything, and now you're asking me to come to school?"

This father of two sons (the oldest of whom is working in Iran and another who has recently dropped out of school) and three daughters (all of whom weave rugs, with only the youngest enrolled in school) had this to say about the quality of education in Neshar:

...Because we're poor, one of my sons went to Iran, but he hasn't helped me with anything so far. And I did send my second son to school for a few years, but he still couldn't write his name. What kind of a school is that? It doesn't have a proper building, there are no good teachers, and it's too far for the children to reach there anyway.

In this last example, a girl had gone to school until third grade and had then dropped out to weave rugs due to the poor economic situation of her household. As her mother noted, there were no supply-related issues involved here – only a number of demand-related factors:

I make the decisions about sending my daughters to school or not. And I don't send them because they have to weave rugs. My husband says that girls should go to school too, but I don't let them. We have a lot to do here at home, and we're poor. They have to weave rugs to make a living.

...And the other reason they don't go to school is that when girls do go to school they become misbehaved and then the villagers backstab. It hurts me not to send my daughters to school – but what can I do? We have no other way...

To conclude from a somewhat different perspective, here are the impressions of teachers about why children in Neshar are enrolled in school or not. In a focus group discussion with the female teachers at Neshar Girls' Primary School, the researchers what kinds of people in the community send their children to school, and what kinds of people do not. In brief, in the opinions of the teachers, the main types of villagers who send their children to school are:

- people who are well-to-do; and
- people who have migrated to other cities or outside of Afghanistan (and so they have seen a lot and have “felt the need for education”).

And, in the teachers' opinions, the types of villagers who do not send their children to school are:

- extremely religious people (they say that girls adopt bad behaviour at school, and they may have an affair with someone and “escape”);
- people who have enemies (their enemies say bad things about their girls);
- people who have many livestock (boys have to graze the animals and girls have to weave rugs); and
- people who have children who can't or don't learn (they feel it is a waste of time to send them to school).

Most of the points mentioned by these teachers had also emerged from household discussions. Of interest, however, is the teachers' impression that well-off people in Neshar send their children to school. Although this may be true initially, and children from such units are certainly enrolled in school, the data also indicate that they may not always be the ones who stay in school. Indeed, in two households (out of a total of three) in the sample classified as above average in economic standing, children have dropped out of school.⁵¹ In these cases, major reasons involved in the decision for children to leave school are largely supply-related; they involve the perceptions of both parents and children that the “school is not good” – a classification which includes unqualified teachers, improper building and lack of supplies (books etc.). It is not necessary for these households to obtain any distributed food-stuffs from the schools, which may serve as an incentive for poor units to retain their children in school, and so their children – both male and female – have dropped out. This is just another example of the many complexities involved in understanding who goes to school and who does not.

⁵¹ The other above average household is that of the married teachers, and it contains no dropouts.

5. Recommendations

This research has yielded insights into the livelihoods of the residents in the village cluster of Neshar, Belcheragh District, Faryab Province. Based upon these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Increase knowledge and understanding of communities and households**
 - Teachers should know the local community and individual households, and they should utilise this knowledge not only to improve relations with those households which enrol their children, but also to reach out to those which do not.
 - Educators should increase their knowledge of local households' decision-making behaviour about school enrolment and should understand the interplay of supply and demand issues in their community.
 - Outreach activities should be planned which bear in mind the fact that in many households both mothers and fathers play active roles in enrolment decisions. Supportive parents should be encouraged to become local advocates for education.
 - To achieve these goals, teachers should receive basic training in community analysis, rapid appraisal, and related participatory techniques.
2. **Improve gender relations within and between households**
 - Male and female teachers should receive basic training in gender relations so that they can positively influence their students and families to enrol both boys and girls.
 - A specific curriculum should be developed which stresses positive gender relations in the home and society.
 - Both male and female educators should discuss local perceptions of social risk related to enrolling girls in school openly with students, parents, and the community, and work with the community to change these perceptions.
 - Teachers should identify supportive households and parents and encourage them to become local advocates in this area.
3. **Improve communication between households and schools**
 - Teachers (male and female) should build upon parents' interest and concern about their children's education by encouraging their constructive participation in the local school.
 - To foster trust and ownership, school visits by parents should be encouraged. Small-scale class functions and awards events, along with parent-teacher conferences, should be held. For secluded mothers, meetings and events could be held in local homes.
 - Teachers should identify interested fathers and mothers and encourage them to become local advocates in fostering positive relations between all households and the local school.
 - The school food supplementation programme should be continued with better monitoring and organisation.
4. **Improve communication between communities and schools**
 - Appropriate aspects of school management should be decentralised, and educators should encourage communities to become more involved in their

local schools (e.g. monitoring and management). With the overall guidance of the Ministry of Education (MoE), the head teacher and local leadership should coordinate this and all interested parents should be involved. Roles of all participants should be clearly defined.

- Fostering feelings of community ownership and commitment are critical, as is the accountability of the school to the community.
- Local and district educators should initiate public awareness campaigns to make parents and communities aware of their new school-related opportunities and responsibilities.

5. Target outreach to children not enrolled in school

- Outreach is crucial to those children not enrolled in school, and for this to be successful educators must know the community and its households well. There is a pressing demand for non-formal activities such as home-based schooling, accelerated learning opportunities, literacy training, etc.
- Home-based literacy training should be targeted at specific groups (e.g. teenaged girls in conservative settings; working children and youth).
- With the MoE focused on formal education, the involvement of experienced NGOs in these targeted programmes is necessary.

6. Address the broader issue of poverty

- Poverty is one of the major factors inhibiting the enrolment of both boys and girls in urban and rural contexts. With parents unemployed, children and young people must often work in lieu of schooling. The creation of employment opportunities for adults is a necessity.

7. Develop supplementary reading for students

- A series of short, regionally specific, gender-sensitive stories of individual boys' and girls' lives should be developed, featuring children who are enrolled in school as well as those who are not.

8. Conduct longitudinal research on household dynamics and education outcomes

- Longitudinal research on the ever-changing dynamics of households, school-related decision-making, and education outcomes should be undertaken, utilising the sample households from this study.

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