
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN POST-CONFLICT TAJIKISTAN: BONUONI NOVOVAR (WOMEN INNOVATORS)

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Arising from the widespread disharmony, disappointment, and disillusionment resulting from Tajikistan's civil war of the 1990s, *Bonuvoni Navovar* represents something of a rebirth and reaffirmation of the belief that by working together, women and men can make a difference in their own lives and that of others. "Women Innovators" – or, in Tajik – Bonuvoni Navovar (BN) is a women's organization established in 2002 with support from the World Bank, with the mission of economically and socially empowering women. BN is based in Buston, a community outside the capital of Dushanbe, where it provides its services. Using a participatory community-driven development approach and active networking by project staff and community members, the empowerment project has reached a critical mass of over 11,000 beneficiaries and leveraged \$750,000 in cash, kind, and infrastructure donations, in addition to a World Bank post-conflict grant of \$692,283.

Post-Conflict Challenges

While Islam is the dominant religion in Tajikistan, Buston is an inwardly oriented community that initially was distrustful of outsiders. Conflict was not inherent within the community but was caused by the civil war which erupted in Tajikistan immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Buston can be viewed as a transitional post-conflict community that was severely underdeveloped even before the war. It has become integrally part of the armed opposition and was one of the last holdouts against the central government. Nevertheless, after the opposition by the warlords ended, the central government reached out to Buston with partial compensation for destroyed homes. Meanwhile, the central government requested World Bank gender and social development expertise. In close cooperation with the World Bank team, the central government selected Buston to be the site for the women's socio-economic empowerment project.

Economic and Social Challenges

Women were one of the most marginalized groups in this area. In Buston, widows, and wives whose husbands have left to be labor migrants, generally live with the extended paternal family, where they are often emotionally and economically disempowered. High unemployment caused by the transition and the civil war affected the community as a whole, but women especially were vulnerable and adversely affected by unemployment. While during Soviet times women often worked with men in factories, in post-conflict Buston women faced a lack of job opportunity, physical security, education, and training.

Objectives of the Women's Empowerment Project

- Mobilize community and external resources to support and empower women heads of households.
- Establish and enable a central community mechanism, a pilot women's membership organization—Bonuvoni Navovar—capable of addressing post-conflict social and economic needs of women heads of households.
- Increase the employability and access to employment of women living in the project community.
- Document the components of the economic empowerment model for women that effectively replicate in other communities in Tajikistan or other post-conflict societies

Lessons Learned

Lesson #1: Ensure that the goal of the project is accurately understood by the whole community.

The team succeeded in mobilizing the community to implement the project using a participatory community development approach. Respect for local knowledge, culture, and expertise were important factors in developing trust in the community. In spite of all this, the introduction of the project did not come about easily, because male leaders

feared that proselytizing might be the motive behind the activities. During the beginning phase of the project, men in the community were concerned that the purpose of the project was to convert the women to Christianity. To change these misperceptions, the local project team began a dialogue.

The project team met with religious leaders from mosques and scholars from the Islamic Studies Center, and courses were offered to women on gender in Islam. Male secular and religious leaders from the community agreed that the studies were beneficial for women and the community as a whole. The Chief of Party, the implementation manager hired by the World Bank and Counterpart International participated in the dialogue on a day-to-day basis along with local staff.

Community mobilization involved the following activities: i) establishing contacts with the *mahalla* (community) leader and the school principal; ii) conducting a series of community participatory assessments of women's self-identified needs; iii) enhancing capacity through training for women to manage BN activities, including management of the Women's Center; iv) starting and managing a nongovernmental organization (NGO); and v) reaching out and developing synergies with other community projects and NGOs. Training priorities also focused on basic computer skills, NGO administration and management, accountability, the NGO electoral process, startup of a business, maternal-infant care, and access to credit. Such training raised awareness of the difference between aid dependency, participation, and ownership.

Interactive seminars were held on various themes such as responsibility of Muslims for their neighbors, women's rights under Islam, principles of citizenship, and participatory democracy. As the project evolved, continuous community meetings were held to explain, discuss, and suggest ways for the project to progress.

The above project activities were also designed for women's voluntary participation and organic emergence of women leaders. Women willingly organized themselves into four groups. As the training and seminars drew to a close, the groups elected their leaders. The elected leaders exhibited traits such as risk taking, willingness to change their lives and take responsibility without aspiration for personal gain. These leaders comprised the founders of the women's organization. What became apparent, though, was that women who only joined in the hope of material aid or jobs dropped away within a few months—and only the real innovators remained.

Lesson #2: Engage the broader community early on in a project.

The team and BN worked within the structure of societal and religious traditions important to the community. At the beginning of the project the risk of marginalization involved the extreme poor and the drug addicts. The project team addressed these risks by raising awareness of Muslims' responsibility to the immediate neighborhoods, called *guzars*. Furthermore, to avoid running into such risks, the district leader, as a government appointee, expressed his full support for the project. This was instrumental in convincing the formal and informal community leaders to include the disadvantaged groups. These groups obtained access to water through the water users' associations. Male leaders gained an opportunity to play a larger leadership role in the community and as a result became supportive of the women's organization. Children, too, could learn how to use a computer. This helped them with their studies. Some young men who were members of Islamic extremist groups initially opposed the idea of the project. Surprisingly, over time they began to engage in the dialogue with the members of the women's organization and supported discussions on women's roles and Islam. Therefore, we realized that engaging the broader community early on in a project contributes to reducing the risk of marginalizing other groups of society.

Lesson #3: Effective communication skills are essential for women leaders.

In a post-conflict community, skilled women leaders have a need to establish effective communication skills for smooth operation and implementation of the project. Therefore, communications skills are crucial to create synergies between local leaders, powerful interest groups, and community residents, thus ensuring that conflict will not arise between these groups. This is important in societies where local legitimate male leaders represent micro-political structures (for example, warlords, clan leaders, and religious leaders) that are suspicious and distrustful of innovations and social change.

For that reason, a line of diplomatic communication was established within the project. The women elders in the community were some of the first champions to start this line of diplomacy with the *mahalla* leader. By communicating the purposes of the project to the local male leaders, the women were able to achieve conflict aversion and male buy-in and support. Initially, communication was house to house to talk about the project, and later the team spread flyers. Meetings were organized on each *guzar*, or neighborhood, and community meetings were

held at the school and at the Women's Center. Flyers were continuously distributed throughout the community to announce and promote the events staged by the Women's Center.



Grand Opening of the Women's Empowerment Center

BN is now a registered local NGO that helps to empower formerly mistreated women in Buston. It helps women to improve their own socio-economic conditions, as well as those of Buston generally. BN also builds external community relations with national and international partners, including NGOs. The building where the center is located has been purchased and has been rehabilitated. Importantly, the facility created a space where the community felt that women could meet in a sheltered and secure environment for training.

Key Benchmarks and Results

Based on two-year benchmarks set by the conditions of post-conflict grant, the project achieved the following results:

1. Communication and Mobilization

Women from the center mobilized the community's human and financial resources and doubled the value of the project's approximate worth of \$750,000. These efforts included water system rehabilitation, school rehabilitation, labor for BN center rehabilitation, and a health clinic.

2. Establishment of a Women's Center

The center provides both a secure environment and a space where women can regain self-esteem and where their specific economic and social needs can be addressed through tailored job and skills training as well as community participation. The center is equipped with a computer resource center, which can be used by members of the broader Buston community.



Center offers a safe environment for women



Training and skills development in the Center

3. Smart Economics: Setting up mechanisms for sustainability

One of the first priorities of BN was to develop a financial foundation in order to sustain the project after World Bank assistance terminated. BN researched numerous types of business endeavors and settled on a bakery. The bakery was chosen as the ideal economic activity, because most women know how to bake, and the demand for baked goods in Buston is strong. The bakery, named Sladko-Ezhka (Sweet Tooth), officially opened in August 2004. It is managed by BN and employs 10 women from Buston and 2 from Dushanbe.

4. Income Generation

BN identified access to credit as one of the major issues faced by women in the community. Lack of access kept women from the capital resources necessary for improving their economic conditions. With credit, women members

of BN now engage in business activities such as animal breeding, retail, and small production/processing. A *group lending* strategy created social, moral, and economic incentives. Project impact evaluation concluded that at the end of the two-year grant project, activities that were funded by the loans provided the equivalent of a family's income for two months during each three-month loan cycle. The post-conflict grant included a small loan fund of US\$25,000. Staff hired a business trainer from Counterpart International with expertise in microfinance who trained a woman from the center. Later this woman set up the loan program using the loan tool manuals provided by the trainer. The loan program was based on a credit needs assessment, and each woman had to take business training and agree to the terms of a group lending guarantee as a prerequisite to accessing a loan. The loan repayment was 100 percent. After two years of successful management of loans and mentoring from staff, the loan fund is now operated by a Tajik microfinance institution that is owned by BN.



“Sweet Tooth” as smart economics

Lesson #4: Fill in the gap between government services and community demands.

5. Water Users' Association

Community action led by an organization like BN is an efficient way to gain results when the government is not interested in solving community problems such as water supply and distribution. An unintended result was that BN was able to establish a community water system, which had been a problem that the local government had ignored for years. To resolve the issue, BN approached and built a partnership with the World Bank's *Dushanbe Water Project*. The center established a water users' association that purchases water from the main Dushanbe water utility and is in charge of its redistribution. The success of the water service delivery has resulted in BN's gaining the respect and recognition of the local government. This has contributed to further improvement of public relations between the government and the community as an essential condition for averting conflict.

Results

- Establishment of a women's center and building for training, assembly meetings, and project management, providing business services to community and a place where women can voice their needs and concerns.
- Active community involvement and support proceeding from respect for local knowledge and expertise.
- Women's economic and social empowerment by regaining self-esteem, employment, access to credit, and sustainability.
- Development of a women's empowerment model assessed by the government and external evaluators as a best local fit for replication countrywide; and selection by the World Bank as an example of good gender practice.

Video: [Women's and Socioeconomic Development Project in Tajikistan](https://streaming3.worldbank.org/eca/media/ecssd/TJWomen.wmv)
([mms://streaming3.worldbank.org/eca/media/ecssd/TJWomen.wmv](https://streaming3.worldbank.org/eca/media/ecssd/TJWomen.wmv))

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