



What Afghan Youth Want From Radio

Straight Talk

A Weekly Radio Programme for Afghan Youth

Formative Qualitative Research

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for
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Executive Summary

This is a report of qualitative research into the aspirations of young Afghans aged 15 – 24 years and their radio listening practices. The research was conducted in March 2005 in three major locations: Jalalabad, Mazar-I-Sharif, and Balkh. The findings and recommendations in this report will help guide a group of young Afghans engaged by Media Support Partnership in Kabul, to launch a weekly radio programme called *Straight Talk (ST)* in September 2005. *ST* will be aimed at young people and aired in Dari and Pashtu.

Researchers interviewed a total of 47 men and 59 women in various locations including high schools, a university campus, youth centres, a shrine and a park. Most interviewees were young people but a small number were parents and teachers. Interviews lasted for 30 – 50 minutes and researchers used a checklist of topics and questions. Individuals were selected randomly to capture a range of characteristics including ethnicity, gender, ever-attended school and never-attended school/madarassa.

In terms of ethnic breakdown, the survey respondents include Pashtoons, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Peshaii speakers. In terms of socio-economic diversity, three groups are broadly represented: middle, low, and very low income.

Radio listening

The results of the survey are encouraging: radio listening amongst young people appears to be high and most of those interviewed listen daily, usually after lunch and in the evening.

Preferences

- The BBC and VOA are popular stations with young people as are local radio stations including Radio Azadi, Aman and Sharq. However, in cities radio competes with TV, and young people from middle and low income groups often prefer it.
- Young people like listening to music but are also interested in news, debate and programmes, dealing with real issues or problems that offer insight, analysis and helpful solutions. Such programmes according to local journalists, youth workers and young people are in short supply, whereas music is not.
- Most young people indicate strongly that they want radio to contribute to both their broad education and their schooling. They want information about Afghanistan, its history and culture, its development and place in the world. They want to know how to help themselves, their families and their country and they want to be informed in an interesting, entertaining and frank way. They also want to know how other young people live in neighbouring countries.

- Young men and women would like a radio programme that gives them a voice and encourages debate about issues that affect them (for example, schools in rural areas, the introduction of private education, how much study to do, examination procedures, how to get into university, available courses, marriage and job opportunities).
- Women say they want radio to deal with the specific problems they face in relation to their status, education, work and security.
- Young people want to hear provincial, district and rural perspectives, not just voices from Kabul.
- There are high expectations of what the media can achieve in Afghanistan in terms of improving civic behaviour, government accountability, and changing harmful cultural attitudes and practices, particularly towards young women. Young women say radio should do more to persuade and influence fathers, uncles, brothers and imams on issues relating to their rights.

Young people's hopes and fears

- The first hope amongst all young people is for long-lasting peace and better security. Young people (men and women) also say they want a '*developed and progressive*' Afghanistan and by this they mean schools, universities, colleges, vocational training, parks, factories, hospitals, clinics, sports facilities, libraries, buses, Internet connections, well-constructed buildings, and a vibrant economy. Women see themselves educated and working in a modern Afghanistan. Men, on the other hand, do not mention women's role in their vision of the future.
- Young people, male and female alike, say they want good quality education up to the higher levels. Many say security is a key factor in whether they're allowed to go to school or not.
- School and university students, both male and female, hold high hopes of becoming professionals: doctors, engineers, journalists, teachers, or lawyers. They have little knowledge of what these careers entail or of alternative forms of employment (skilled, semi-skilled etc.). However, some girls from low-income families expressed a hope for modern factories for women workers. Some mothers endorse their daughters' hopes for work while others are more reticent. (In this research, fathers were not consulted.)
- Young people's fears are largely expressed in opposition to their hopes: that war will return; that kidnapping and violence will continue; and that education, work and a decent future might be elusive. Young men also voice concerns about financial security, government corruption and bribery.

General problems expressed by youth

- Young women say their problems are related to difficulties in either getting to school or staying long enough to complete their education. They also talk about security, harassment in public and negative cultural practices as significant problems. Most young women talk about their need for '*rights*' and '*respect*' and some use the Koran to justify a better status for women in Afghan culture.
- Young men, particularly Pashtoons, express problems with their position in the tribal or joint family system. They say because they are young they cannot participate in decisions that affect them, including schooling, work and marriage. They also point to the negative emotional impact of family feuds and internal conflicts.
- Some young people describe embarrassment and humiliation at having to complete their education as mature students.
- Returnees find it difficult coming to terms with life in Afghanistan which seems harsh and alien, offering little in terms of opportunity compared to where they lived as refugees.
- Young men and women from low-income families mention hard lives of relentless struggle with little hope for the future.
- A group of female students were concerned with the problem of gaining entry to university after a bureaucratic error in the registration procedure barred them from taking the entrance exam. University professors say entrance to university is problematic for students from outlying provinces and centralized policy and procedures currently favour those in major cities from higher income families.

Health issues

- Young people do not talk about their health problems openly. However, there are youth organisations that provide health services to young people who could advise Media Support Partnership (MSP) (eg, Solidarité Afghanistan Belgium in Jalalabad has a doctor who visits young people at the youth centre twice weekly).
- Hospitalised young people generally have no access to radio or any form of entertainment.

Friends and feelings

- Both young men and women know what it is to have a friend. Students say they make friends easily but it's not so easy for those who cannot

go to school and work. Young men can roam freely in public which gives them more scope for making friends than young women.

- Young men do not always see friend-potential in those from other nationalities, ethnic groups or religions. At times they talk proudly of conflicts with others of different identity and also of revenge.

Views on marriage

- Although young people have no knowledge of the legal age for marriage, all young women and many young men believe it should take place between 18 – 24 years. Attitudes amongst some young men vary: some say marrying young, at 17, helps avoid '*immoral behaviour*' while others say men should marry later, at 30, preferably to a much younger woman (14 – 18 years).
- Students tend to say girls and boys should complete their studies first.
- Many young women say they should be given the right to 'choose or refuse' a marriage partner, which some point out is sanctioned by the Koran but not upheld in local culture.
- Some parents and teachers do not think young people should take responsibility for choosing a marriage partner although they agree they should be involved.
- Young people have almost no knowledge of the marriage contract but teachers say they should be informed. They believe radio and imams can play a role in raising awareness but that change cannot be enforced.
- Young women and female teachers are all too familiar with problems associated with early marriage and education. They say some girls drop out as early as 13 to marry, often at the request of husbands-to-be and in-laws. Teachers say major factors in early marriage are poverty, ignorance and discrimination.
- The financial burden of marriage (bride price and dowry) is escalating in Afghanistan and many young people say this issue makes them anxious and unhappy for the future.

Elections and voting

- Young women we interviewed were very aware of the age for voting – but almost all were high school or university students. Levels of awareness amongst men, even students, are patchy. Men and women say they do not understand the election process or what democracy really means.

Drugs

- Like health, most young people do not talk openly about drugs and many admit ignorance on the topic. There are also incorrect beliefs on the effects of drugs.

Police, army and security forces

- The police and army are regarded with mistrust and at times anger. Young men think ISAF play a useful and important role but they do not like American troops who they feel are disrespectful.
- No young person expressed a desire to join the army or the police.

Sports

- Sports are popular with both young men and female students. Many hope for more recreation space in the future. There was little indication of whether young people like to listen to sports on the radio but most, including girls, express a desire to know more about sports and engage in an activity.

Environment

- There is very little environmental awareness in Afghanistan amongst young people in, for example, the areas of protecting of wildlife and nature, deforestation, pollution, litter, sewage disposal and water protection.

Introduction

This is a report of qualitative research into the aspirations of young people aged 15 – 24 years and their radio listening practices. The research also explores the expectations held for young people by some adults, mainly teachers, parents and youth workers, as well as how they perceive their needs and problems.

In total, the researchers met and listened to 128 young people (78 female and 50 male) as well 50 adults. The research was conducted during March 2005 in two provincial capitals, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif and also Balkh town, using guided focus group discussions and individual interviews.

The aim of the research was to identify and understand how young Afghans view themselves as citizens in a new Afghanistan; the challenges they face in their transition to adulthood; the opportunities available to them in albeit difficult circumstances and their communication, information and education needs – via the media.

The findings and the recommendations in this report will help guide a group of young Afghans engaged by Media Support Partnership (MSP), a Scottish NGO with a field office in Kabul, to launch in September 2005 a weekly radio programme. The programme, *Straight Talk* will be aired in Dari and Pashtu and aimed at young people between the ages of 15 – 24 years. This endeavour has been funded by the British Foreign Office as an initial one-year pilot project.

The report also aims to capture the differences between young men and women – the most significant of which concern gender, location, returnee (from refugee status abroad, usually in Pakistan or Iran), economic status, schooling, work, marriage and to some extent ethnicity. For the 15 – 24 year olds, age was less of a marker than the other characteristics. The term 'adolescent' has no equivalent in local Afghan languages and is not necessarily helpful in a country where the lines between child and adult are often blurred. In fact the transition to work or marriage or having children is usually more important.

If there are generalisations to be made across the diverse group we interviewed they relate to young people's collective hopes for peace and security, for education and job opportunities, recreation facilities, for a say in their future, particularly regarding whom and when they marry, and for a reduction in costs associated with marriage.

These shared aspirations are **not** always, as is often assumed, in conflict with expectations held by other members of Afghan society for the same group, for example, family members, teachers, religious leaders, the state and the media - but in some cases, they can be. Examples of where family, religion

and state may embrace and endorse young people's rights in doctrine¹, only to take them away in practice are well-documented. We have tried to identify positive commonalities between young people and dominant members of their universe and found many. However, where there are conflicts of interest, young people and their teachers perceive few spaces for negotiation.

It is hoped that *Straight Talk* will give a voice to young people, find their supporters on key issues amongst peers and elders and become an ally and a guide. The programme will be guided by a rights-based approach and indeed find local frameworks to advocate for it. At the same time its producers and journalists will no doubt recognize that what is taken for granted in terms of personal autonomy for some in Afghanistan is regarded by others as a fundamental challenge to traditional society. Therefore, the programme will aim to take the middle path but embrace the challenge of testing the boundaries in order to be forward leaning. It will aim to question and encourage without lecturing or patronizing. How it will do this is also, in part, the subject of this report.

¹ For example: the Koran promotes education, both for girls and boys, but local culture to the contrary often takes precedent.

Background

Media Support is based in Scotland, with a mandate to provide information and education and promote development and democracy goals in developing countries. Media Support also manages long term HIV/AIDS communications projects in Botswana and Mozambique, undertakes regular short-term consultancies for DFID and others evaluating media projects or developing communications strategies, and also provides DFID with advice on mass media and development.

Media Support consists of two organisations **Media Support Solutions (MSS)** (a consultancy company) and its sister organisation **Media Support Partnership (MSP)**, a company limited by guarantee with charitable status. Since January 2003, MSS has been providing the distance-learning component of the USAID-funded Afghan Primary Education Programme from its offices, which include studios and sound editing suites, in Kabul. This has involved producing and broadcasting a daily radio-based teacher training programme in Pashto and Dari on 35 radio stations as well as developing a comprehensive monitoring system. The daily radio programmes give practical advice to some 70,000 largely untrained primary teachers on the curriculum and child-centred teaching methods. Initial research shows very high rates of regular listening (91%), recall and learning indicating these programmes are greatly appreciated by teachers, parents and students alike.

Straight Talk is managed by MSP and funded by the British Foreign Office. The project involves extensive training for producers, researchers and presenters and the production of a weekly 30-minute radio programmes in both Dari and Pashto for young people. The project will also include a monitoring component that assesses the impact of ST in terms of listening rates and recall on a range of attitudinal and behavioural indicators.

Of particular interest to *Straight Talk's* donor(s) are issues relating to civic education, human rights and primary health care (including mental health, drug-related issues and HIV/AIDS).

An important challenge facing MSP staff will be to explore with listeners local frameworks of reference for rights and good governance. In preparation, it is recommended that MSP provide training for staff on rights and governance issues.

Methodology

This research was conducted in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangahar province, in Mazar-i-Shariff, the capital of Balkh province and in Balkh town, which is about 20 minutes drive from Mazar. The research was designed by MSP. Interviews were conducted by Rahmani Rahmanullah, Asim, Shufkat and Yazmeen Azoo. Consultancy support was provided by Juliette von Seibold.

The research findings are drawn from the focus group discussions and the interviews outlined below:

Interviewees

Overall 47 men and 59 women were interviewed for this study.

Nangahar province

- In the capital Jalalabad's Abdul Haq Park, near Besud River, we interviewed 25 young men in three separate focus groups. Most were in school, three were not; some were middle class, others were economically disadvantaged.
- In a youth centre run by Solidarité Afghanistan Belgium (SAB), in Jalalabad, we interviewed 10 young men, 16 young women and four female teachers in separate focus groups. All were economically disadvantaged, some had disabilities (including missing limbs) and all were affected by the war. We also interviewed the Director and Operation Director, Jean Claude Marie and Engineer Hafizullah. SAB works with war-affected young men and women, including street children and ex-child soldiers. SAB provides a one-year programme of basic literacy and a choice of 30 to 40 skills for young men and five for young women.
- At Jalalabad hospital, individual interviews were held with three paraplegic girls aged approximately 13, 16 and 18 years. One had fallen from a tree, the other was hit by a falling wall, and one had cancer of the lower spine.

In Balkh's provincial capital, Mazar-i-Shariff

- At the offices of a youth organisation, we held a discussion with seven youth volunteers, four men and three women, all adults, who included teachers, university lecturers and journalists.
- At the Mazar Shrine, we interviewed 16 girls and young women aged between 14 – 24 as well as four older women teachers, in separate focus groups. Some of the young women were from Mazar and others were from surrounding villages and other districts. The teachers were from Faryab.
- At the Mazar Shrine, we interviewed three young men attending Balkh High School, Grade 12.
- At Sultan Razia High School, we interviewed two teachers and held a separate focus group with 10 girls, aged 14 and 15 years.

- At Balkh University, we interviewed 13 young women aged between 18 and 22 in a group. (They had come from outlying districts to register for the university entrance exam but had been turned away because of a bureaucratic error, namely the failure to communicate the policy change. This error affected just under 1000 students, delaying their studies by a year.)
- Latifa Jan (not her real name) a widow and a working mother with seven children – six boys and one girl.
- At a tuition centre, we held interviews with the male director and two male students.

In the town of Balkh

- At the High School for Girls we held a focus group with 10 teachers and another with six girls aged between 13 and 18 years.
- At the High School for Boys we held a focus group with 20 boys aged between 14 and 20 years.

Questions and issues discussed

Researchers asked young people five main questions:

- What do you want for yourself in Afghanistan?
- What do you want to be?
- What do you look forward to?
- What do you worry about?
- Do you listen to the radio?

Depending on the direction of the conversation, other topics and issues were explored, for example:

- Radio listening practices (including demand for a youth program)
- Education (access to, young people's role in decisions relating to their education)
- Friendship and feelings (what it means to have a friend)
- Work (aspirations or experiences)
- Marriage (attitudes and feelings; knowledge of the marriage contract, rights)
- Dealing with problems
- The Elections (knowledge of voting age, how to register, expectations)
- Environmental awareness
- Music, literature and film
- Impact of war

In most cases we covered about 60% of the issues planned. In others, we could only focus on what was of immediate interest to the interviewee(s).

Diversity amongst young people interviewed

Although the research was random, and confined to two provincial cities and one town, we managed to capture the opinions of a diverse group of young people with the following characteristics:

- Pashtoons, Uzbeks, Takjiks and Peshaii speakers
- Men and women
- Low income and middle income
- Those who live in a city or town and those who live further afield
- Returnees from Iran, Pakistan and Russia, and those who had grown up in Afghanistan
- Those attending school, those who had dropped out, those who had returned to school and those who had never attended
- Those studying in skill training centres (basic education and skills)
- Those in work
- Those who are not married (the majority) and those who are (mainly women)
- Disabled in limb, including one boy who had lost both legs, and three hospitalised and paraplegic girls
- Those who had suffered from war-related trauma (loss of family members, physical abuse, active fighting)

We did not explicitly aim to interview returnees but found in the course of our discussions that such young people experience a shared sense of dislocation, alienation and frustration. They almost always have a different perspective to those who have grown up in familiar surroundings.

Most young people interviewed for this report were engaged in some sort of education, largely because they live in cities and towns, making access much easier and safer than for those living in rural areas. Interestingly, many of the young women we interviewed referred without prompting to the problems of others less fortunate than themselves – namely girls and boys living in rural areas unable to get to school or stay there and more often subject to ‘cultural practices which are not good for them.’

About Nangahar and Balkh

Jalalabad is the capital of Nangahar province and has a population of about 60,000. The city dominates the entrance to the Laghman and Kunar valleys. Jalalabad is a vibrant trading centre with Pakistan and India. Oranges, rice and sugar cane are grown in the fertile surrounding areas. The city has cane-processing, sugar-refining and paper-making industries which should be visited as they are bound to employ young people. Jalalabad was a military city and a summer resort. In ancient times it was a major city of the ancient Greco-Buddist centre of Gandara. It was Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire of India, who chose the site for today’s city, which was built in 1570 by his grandson Akbar. Today, many international agencies and NGOs are based in Jalalabad, including UN agencies and those working with war-affected young people such as Solidarité Afghanistan Belgique, the

International Committee of the Red Cross and the Sandy Gall Appeal, who work with young handicapped people. Jalalabad also has a university and a medical school which is attended by young men and women. There are insufficient hostel facilities to cater for those from rural areas wishing to study. Although most of Nangahar is Pashtoon, small populations of Sikhs and Hindus are to be found in Jalalabad. Further afield in the province are groups who speak minority languages such as Peshaii and various Nuristani dialects.

The province of Balkh lies in the north of Afghanistan. It is bordered by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and has easy access to Iran. 20% of the province is irrigated and cultivated, mainly in the centre. 30% of the province is rain-fed, mainly in the mountainous south, and in the north runs a large expanse of desert. In the spring apricots, plums and mulberries abound. Before the Soviet invasion the province boasted a thriving silk industry. Today it has all but died and only a few villages engage in silk production and weaving, but the potential remains. The carpet weaving industry is booming and many young people work the looms of this large cottage industry.

The province's capital, Mazar-i-Sharif, has a population of 131,000 people. It is a major commercial centre and also a seat of learning. It is held sacred as the alleged burial place of Ali, son-in-law and cousin of the prophet Muhammad. Pilgrims flock to the shrine and Wednesday is reserved exclusively for women, providing an excellent opportunity for interviews particularly with those who have come from outlying areas. The local bazaars conduct a busy trade in goods from Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian states.

The city's university, with faculties of agriculture, engineering and journalism, is continuing to rehabilitate itself. However, there is enormous pressure for places and while we were visiting there were marches and protests from young men and women who were barred from taking the entrance exam. According to a faculty member, the Department of Education had failed to communicate that registration had moved to Kabul and over 950 young people, men and women, were adversely affected. This was a hot news story in Balkh and the voices of young women affected have been recorded and are in the MSP office for review.

Balkh town is about 20 minutes by car from Mazar and is one of the oldest cities in the world. It is the legendary birth place of the pre-Islamic prophet, Zoroaster. Alexander the Great is thought to have founded a Greek colony here. Before Islam, Balkh was a prominent centre of Buddhism and renowned for monasteries and stupas. Islam arrived in the 8th century and, under the Abbasid Caliphate, the town was a great centre of learning. In 1221, it was sacked by Genghis Khan and lay in ruins until Taymur rebuilt it in the 16th century. The town is still beautiful, with green and leafy avenues, a beautiful park in the centre and wonderful old ruins. The population of Balkh province is mixed with Tajiks, Uzbeks, Pathoons and Hazaras. There are also populations of Arabs who trace their ancestors back to the Muslim converters of the 8th century.

Chapter 1

Listening practices and demand

High rates of radio listening amongst young people

Almost all young people interviewed say they listen to the radio daily, usually after lunch at 1pm and in the evening (after 6pm for young men and after 8pm for young women).

However, there is competition from TV in the cities and larger towns. Young people from Mazar say there is one popular youth TV program which teaches English. Most say there is very little or nothing on the radio. Young women in Balkh mention three radio programmes for youth, one each on Azadi, Aman and the local station Nabahar.

Popular radio stations include Azadi and the BBC

The most popular radio stations amongst young people in Jalalabad are Radio Sharq, Azadi, VOA and the BBC, whereas in Mazar and Balkh they are Radio Aman and Azadi.

Radio listening is often a public activity amongst men who like to carry their radios in public and listen together in small groups. Young women say they listen at home or in their hostels. Young women are not in any way prohibited from listening to the radio.

Youth workers say young people don't listen to the radio properly, *'they listen with half an ear, and because of the war and the Taleban, they want music and entertainment.'*

Young people like listening to music but they want more from the radio

Young people themselves tell a slightly different story. They say they like music a lot but they don't want to listen to it all the time. Indeed many young people say there is too much.

Most young people, including young women, have high aspirations for a good education and they expect the radio to contribute to their education and understanding of the world they live in. Several groups of young people mention that *'good programmes dealing with real issues'* have been *'replaced by music'* or *'rubbish programmes that don't help us or educate us in any way.'* Local journalists interviewed in Balkh don't disagree with these comments and one explains why this has come about:

'We receive about 200 – 400 letters a week and most of them are requests for music. In comparison we receive 50 letters a week asking us to talk more

about social issues, problems in society. When Radio Aman² came to town we lost listeners, all the stations did. We had to play more music to compete. Eventually listeners got fed up [with the music] and we were able to do a bit more of the serious stuff.'

Students, including young women attending school and university, feel more balance is required between programmes that entertain and those that inform and educate. They say they like to listen to news, current affairs and programs about society and culture.

Young women from the SAB training centre in Jalalabad say they like drama, particular *New Home New Life* and RTT's drama from the *It's Great to Learn* series '*because (they) talk about real life problems in a nice and interesting way.*'

There is demand for a youth radio programme

Almost all young people say they would be interested in a radio programme designed specifically for them.

'We want a radio programme that talks about our problems and tries to help us find solutions. Radio...can do a lot to help us.' (Young woman, Balkh)

What young people want from radio

Music and entertainment can be easily found on the Afghan airwaves, what is lacking, say young people, are programmes that educate and inform in an interesting and frank way. Many suggest a youth radio programme that talks about Afghanistan, its history, geography and people. (They want facts and figures.) They also want to know how the country can modernize and what role they can play. They want fresh ideas and they are interested in how young people from other neighbouring countries are living.

Quite a few young men express concerns about their studies. They want to know if they are studying enough; how much time students their age spend studying in other countries. All young people, but particularly girls, would like some extra tuition on key subjects as well as information about exams, for example, how to study for exams, and how to answer questions effectively.³ Those in Elementary and Secondary schools or those applying for university or further education would like to know what courses are available and where.

Two Radio Balkhi female journalists and two from Voice of Youth (a campus radio station run by the French NGO Sayara) say young people like to listen

² Radio Aman is a popular private radio station which plays mainly music. The station also has advertising spots and is funded in part by USAID.

³ In Mazar-i-Sharif students of all ages, from primary to university, are engaging in extra tuition – if family finances allow and facilities are sited close-by. Students in Balkh town are aware of this and annoyed that they don't have access to the many new tuition centres advertised on the billboards in the provincial capital.

to news items and issues that concern them. They told us that the ‘hot news issue’ of the current week (end of March 2005) was the Balkh University registration fiasco mentioned above. *‘We will cover this story in detail because we know it will attract a lot of young listeners including those who live in the districts outside Balkh.’*⁴

Youth workers say that if Radio Azadi were to launch a program for youth the production team should broadcast crucial information regarding the opening and closing dates of school terms, dates and timings of public examinations and more complicated issues relating to curriculum changes.

‘Education policy is changing all the time but it’s not communicated effectively to young people, particularly those living in places in far away provinces like Badakshan and other isolated areas. Radio Azadi is really the only radio station that can help in this matter.’

Broadcasting such information is one way to promote and normalize education without confrontation. It can demonstrate to Afghans of all ages that their world **is** moving forward, that there **is** an education system, it **is** rehabilitating itself and young men as well as young women are already aboard **at the higher levels**.

From 16 – 24-year-old women in particular, there is high demand for radio programmes that deal with the very specific problems they face in their daily lives and these are discussed in more detail in the later chapters of this report.

Radio interviews in the provinces, not just Kabul!

Many young people who go to school say the media in Afghanistan is Kabul-centered and out of touch with the realities faced by young people in the provinces, particularly the small towns and villages.

‘Tell your programme makers and all the other Afghan media to get out of Kabul and the other cities and into the countryside to towns like Balkh and start talking to the youth there.’

Youth workers and most young people interviewed are eager to point out that young people living in rural areas are the most neglected in terms of access to information, education and entertainment and yet they make up the majority of the population.

⁴ It is likely that media coverage of the student demonstrations in Mazar-i-Sharif was instrumental in persuading the Minister of Higher Education to visit the province and meet the demonstrators. Although he did not apologise for the failure of government to communicate the revised policy on the university entrance exam, local media experts and some members of the Faculty of Balkh University expect that the government will now have to take action to ensure such a mistake does not occur again and provinces are not discriminated against in favour of city dwellers.

Journalists from Youth Voice, however, remind us how difficult, time-consuming and expensive it is to travel and interview those living in the districts.

'Transport (to rural areas) is so expensive; we don't have the budget for it anymore. Then there's the problem of travelling alone as women. It takes a long time to get anywhere and the unexpected often happens. You break down, or the road is closed, and you have to turn back.'

Young men and some parents would like a youth radio programme to talk about current affairs, including development projects, corruption issues in education, and private education.

'There are many young people who are interested in the privatisation of education. We've never had private education in Afghanistan. Education should be available for all people, not just the rich who can afford to pay the high fees. You should discuss these things in the radio program with young people and the authorities.'

Challenges ahead

Airing the views of young people on the sort of issues they are interested in will doubtless challenge, at some point, established power relations, either within the family, or in society. In this regard, one young female student from Balkh tells of her own very negative experience with a local radio station:

*'We made a drama for Radio Nabahar about problems girls like us face - early marriage, having to drop out of school because of gossiping neighbours, or in-laws – that kind of thing. The boys did one about the lack of electricity. But after we delivered (the dramas to the radio station) the radio people came and visited our families and said: "Look to your daughters, they should keep their mouths shut!" Imagine! They were actually worried people would be offended by the dramas of thirteen-year-olds! I actually think people would like our dramas a lot if they had a chance to hear them. I think they would help people see things as we do. I don't believe they would make problems.'*⁵

It is possible that the international NGO responsible for this project could have done more to involve the radio staff and persuade them to support young people. One way of doing this could be to include respected community members who share the views of young people, for example, their teachers and educated parents who could also speak on their behalf. In addition, holding a session with radio staff to listen to the dramas with the key supporters and airing the dramas on the radio with an older and respected member of the community (a supporter), providing both an introduction at the beginning and a commentary at the end.

⁵ This initiative to put young people's voices on air is part of a project managed by an international NGO. Its aim is to raise awareness on child rights and promote positive change.

Chapter 2

Influence of the media

On civic behaviour

Youth workers from Balkh worry about the high levels of violence in families and in society. Female teachers in Jalalabad speak also about abusive behaviour in families - verbal, mental and physical. This perceived breakdown in behaviour or traditional etiquette is often attributed to the war or lack of education, but also to the influence of the media. In some cases teachers and parents blame the media for endless coverage of conflict, for the use of bad language and the normalization of violence. (War makes good news.) Many adults recall a time when people were more considerate, polite and courteous.

Young people often have high expectations about what radio programmes can do to remedy this situation and others. Youth workers say young people could be influenced in a positive way by a radio programme that helps young people define and promote civic behaviour, well-mannered actions in private and public.

'Instead of people looking to the media for education, the media is following what people do – for example the violent films that show those with the most destructive and negative views and ways of living. It's fine to give everyone's view but you have to be able to draw out the lessons. Radio can play an important role in showing young people everywhere acceptable forms of behaviour.'

On promoting positive attitudes and practices (culture/tradition)

Young women feel a youth radio programme could do a lot to encourage the authorities to act more for girls' education up to university level.

'There are not enough primary, elementary or high schools for girls and universities are too far away and too expensive for most of us. There are entire districts where there isn't one school to be found for girls even though parents are begging the authorities to provide teachers and books. Listen to us young women. Put our voices on air. Take what we say to the authorities.'

Young women also say they have high expectations of what radio can achieve in terms of changing negative traditional attitudes.

'Radio can reach all men in Afghanistan and give them an understanding of our needs. Men have fought for 25 years out of a desire for power amongst themselves. These things happened because they and we are not educated. We need to persuade men to put away the guns, to stop fighting amongst themselves. The world is moving on with education and we are left behind. Radio can persuade them.'

On motivating the authorities/accountability

There is a common belief that once pleas for schools in remote areas are heard on the radio the authorities will be motivated to act:

'The authorities will listen when they [the problems people face] are openly talked about in public. If it's on the radio they will be convinced.'

Legitimate demands from the public are not always welcomed by governments anywhere in the world and doubtless efforts are taken in Afghanistan to prevent certain stories reaching the press. Young people know that the media is not always independent:

'Not many radio stations are brave enough to talk about our problems. I think it's because they are owned and managed by the government. They don't want it known that we have problems.'

Some adult men feel the media could do more to provide an alternative to the culture of dependency that has arisen in Afghanistan.

'While we were refugees in Iran and Pakistan some of us may have got an education but we also became lazy and dependent. We waited for handouts. In my neighbourhood the road needs to be repaired. People say: don't worry, an NGO will come and do it.'

Chapter 3

Hopes and Fears

Young people appear to share similar hopes for peace and security, education (at all levels), a developed and progressive Afghanistan and to be able to find good jobs and have financial security. Their fears and anxieties are usually expressed in opposition to these hopes.

There are, however, important differences in how young men and women perceive their hopes and fears.

Peace and security

The first hope shared by all those we interviewed is for peace and security. For all, war and conflict has shaped their lives and in many cases the threat of it continues to do so. War has dictated where young people live today, where they lived in the past, for how long, and in what conditions. In the minds of young people, war has left the broken schools, broken roads, education in tatters, and few opportunities for the future. It has torn families apart, claimed mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins. War has exposed many young people to harassment and abuse, violence and death. It has left a significant number of those we interviewed orphaned, either fending for themselves or living with families already burdened with too many mouths to feed.

'We want peace above all.' (Mazar schoolgirls)

'Peace and security.' (Balkh schoolboys)

'We have to have peace, security and the disarmament processes.' (Teachers from the Girls' High School, Balkh)

'We want a secure Afghanistan.' (Jalalabad park boys)

'No more war.' (SAB girls, Jalalabad)

'I want peace forever.' (Mother and Teacher, Faryab)

'We want the violence to end. We want unity...and good security.'
(Mazar-i-Shariff Tutorial college)

Young men and women from Balkh mention with some sense of relief the improvements that have been made following the demise of the Taleban, but anxiety regarding security still remains.

'The security is better; these days a commander cannot come and demand that young boys join him to fight.'

'Things are changing. Before we couldn't go out, now we can. All women have hope. How else could we live?' (Young woman, Mazar Shrine)

Some young men and women speak specifically about wanting an end to ethnic rivalries, competition and conflict.

'We want unity amongst all people.' (Young people, Mazar)

'We don't want all this conflict and negative competition between ethnic groups.' (Balkh schoolboys)

'We don't want any more fighting or divisions between people. People are always trying to divide everybody up here. We're all Afghans. You should not see a person and say – they're from here or there. In Iran, people are Iranians and that's how it should be in Afghanistan.' (Mazar Shrine girls)

Development and Reconstruction

Many young people, men and women, from Jalalabad, Mazar and Balkh also express a desire to see a developed and 'progressive' Afghanistan. They want schools, universities and colleges. They want parks and places to play. They want a vibrant economy and good relations with other countries. Teachers and parents we interviewed support young people in this view.

'We hope one day Afghanistan will have factories where people can work, skill training and roads. Pakistan has these things and we want them too.' (Jalalabad SAB boys)

'We want a secure and developed Afghanistan. This means hospitals, roads, schools, universities, parks, sports facilities and internet connections at home.' (Jalalabad park boys)

'I want a progressive Afghanistan with nice buildings, good clinics and security – security above all.' (Mazar Shrine boy)

... roads, buses, sport facilities.' (Balkh schoolboys)

'...a place to play.' (Mazar schoolgirls)

'We want parks and we want libraries where we can read good books.' (Mazar – tutorial college)

However, there are differences in the way young people think about development and progress. While young men talk more generally about economic opportunities and infrastructure, most young women are more specific. They say development and progress should bring new opportunities for girls and women that they haven't had before. They justify these opportunities by referring to the sacrifices they have made and the suffering they have experienced during the war. They would like Afghan society to now

recognize their need for education, work and financial security. They also expect development to bring an end to discriminatory and harmful cultural attitudes and practices.

'We want peace, development and education. This means no war, good schools for girls, special schools for married women, hospitals, factories for women and women's financial problems solved. We want traditions that put us in a bad way to stop. Budd (the practice of battering women to settle disputes) should be forbidden.' (Jalalabad SAB girls)

'I look forward to a time when I have rights. My rights and those of other women should not be trampled on. We should be allowed to be educated now and work.' (Young woman, Mazar Shrine)

Education

Most young people want a good education. Many students mention the need for others less fortunate than themselves to have access to schools. This means there is an innate sense of civic respect and responsibility towards others.

Those who have missed out on their education say they hope they will be able to join a class in the future.

There are, however, young people who do not necessarily see schooling as a pleasant experience and one young man interviewed said he looked forward to leaving his school/madarassa.

Adults (parents, teachers, youth workers, and NGO workers) support young people in their desire for education.

'We want schools and reconstruction.' (Balkh schoolboys)

'I have one hope – to leave the madarassa, then I'll be happy.' (Young man, Mazar)

'We want proper security and then everyone, absolutely everyone, has to go to school and not just primary. We need higher education too.' (Teachers from Balkh Girls' High School)

'For my daughters I want education and knowledge about their rights. For my sons, I want them to work to rebuild this nation.' (School teacher, Faryab)

'I'm a teacher, forget about me. I want schools for girls because we want educated daughters.' (School teacher, Faryab)

'As long as I live, education is the most important thing I can give my children (my sons and my daughters). Without it, you are blind, you cannot work.' (Mother)

'Right now this group of women you see in front of you have one hope: We want to be able to take the university entrance exam. We've been working and studying all our lives in appalling conditions and then we're told we can't get registration cards (for the entrance exam) because of a bureaucratic error. This is very unfair.' (Young women from a number of different northern provinces)

'All my life I've hoped above all to go to university. I wanted to study to be a journalist but then my parents married me and my husband just won't let me go even though I've passed the entrance exam.' (Young woman, Mazar Shrine)

Young people know that their education system is in a weakened state and for that reason express a hope for extra tuition and classes out of school

'We want courses in the evening for those girls who are either working or studying during the day.' (Mazar schoolgirls)

'We want peace, good schools, courses and language study.' (Mazar Shrine girls)

'Many young girls are facing all those old excuses from the family and the community: 'there's no school; it's too far away; the security is bad.' We hope this ends and the country can develop like the rest of the world.' (Teachers from Balkh High School)

Work

Aspirations regarding work are generally high amongst those going to school and those taking basic education and skill training courses. Most Elementary and High School students, including girls, would like to go to university and study to be doctors or engineers. A smaller number say they would like to be lawyers and journalists. Male students in skill training in Jalalabad say they would like Afghanistan to industrialize and develop factories where young people, both men and women, could work. (It's worth noting that factories do already exist, including a food processing factory with women workers in Kandahar.) Many young women in skill training and basic education in Jalalabad would like to continue their studies to university level and become doctors, teachers or engineers. Their teachers say many girls opt to retake a year's basic education so they can rejoin mainstream schools and eventually qualify for university. Interestingly, none of the girls expressed the hope to work in the fields of weaving, sewing and tailoring (the skills being taught at SAB).

Overall, young people's ideas regarding work are limited. They want to join 'respectable professions' – medicine, law, engineering and occasionally journalism.

'We want job opportunities. We want factories and places where we can work.' (Young woman in a Mazar tutorial college)

'Right now our country is very weak. We depend on other countries giving us money. We have to stand on our own feet now and that means everyone should get educated and get working. I'm now in 7th Grade. I want to study law because when you're a lawyer you can argue for legal rights and help protect people.' (Young woman, Mazar Shrine)

'For myself, I want to work like you when I've completed my studies. I want to be a journalist one day.' (Zakina, aged 19, Mazar Shrine)

'We want jobs too. We dream of becoming doctors, engineers, teachers...' (Young women, Jalalabad)

'Nowadays there are rich people in our country. I hope those who study will have the opportunity to earn good money.' (Young men, Jalalabad)

We briefly explored the possibility of women taking jobs in the public sphere with teachers from Faryab who we met at the Mazar Shrine. They say:

'Intellectuals let their daughters work but so far ordinary people haven't started this.'

This is an interesting reflection and raises several questions. The teachers are older married women, but they are still daughters and they are still working! Perhaps work in the public sphere is only considered respectable in some quarters if a woman is older and married. It is worth noting that society is often blind to women's work. Indeed, as we interviewed the women teachers from Faryab in the forecourt of the shrine in Mazar we were in fact surrounded by working women most of whom were selling their wares, others were policing the tombs.

Fear that the war will return

The prime fear amongst young people who have grown up with so much war and conflict is that it will return, and they will have even less control over their lives.

'We worry that the war will return. We've had 25 years of killing, bombing and running away as refugees. We worry about being kidnapped and the Taleban coming back to power.' (Jalalabad SAB girls)

Fear of kidnapping and violence

Another huge fear amongst young people of both sexes is kidnapping. Girls also worry about violence and harassment on the way to school. When boys worry about kidnapping, it may also be associated with being drafted by local warlords to fight.

'People are afraid of kidnapping. That's why so many girls don't come to school.' (Mazar schoolgirls)

'If kidnapping stories are in the news then it's very difficult for us to go to school the next day because our parents are worried. Many girls don't come to school the day after a kidnapping.' (Mazar schoolgirls)

'We worry about being forced to do something against one's will.' (Young women, Balkh)

'We worry about kidnappings.' (Balkh schoolboys)

'We need better security. Although students come to school, fear is everywhere. Parents worry that everyone is a kidnapper. The only reason we wear burkas is fear – it's not our tradition.' (Mazar schoolgirls and shrine girls)

'10 children were kidnapped in Kabul. They were going to be taken to Iran but they found them just in time. It's dreadful – they just put the men who did it in prison. They should have cut off their heads!' (Mazar High School, girls)

Fears regarding education, work and the future

The security situation makes it difficult for young people to concentrate on their studies. In addition, many young people worry about the standard of their education. As mentioned in Chapter 1, those at school would like access to extra tuition and guidance on how to study.

'We worry about studying and exams.' (Mazar schoolgirls)

'We worry about coming to school because of the security situation. The fear makes us so unhappy and if we're unhappy it's difficult to concentrate on studying.' (Balkh schoolgirls)

'There are still no primary or elementary and high schools for girls in many districts.' (Mazar Shrine Girls)

'The standard of education is very low. We have no libraries, no lab equipment and no sports facilities.' (Balkh schoolgirls)

'The classes are so large it's difficult for students to learn.' (Teachers, Faryab)

Almost all young men worry about the future and whether they will find jobs.

'If you haven't studied and are working, there are no opportunities to catch up. You're too busy working and worrying about the future. What will happen to us in the future, how will we manage?' (Young men, Jalalabad)

Financial worries

Most young men worry about their future financial security.

'We worry about kidnapping and about not having enough money to live.'
(Balkh schoolboys)

'We worry about our future. How are we going to be able to make enough money to live?' (Jalalabad park boys)

'I worry about security, education and finances.' (Teacher, Mazar Shrine)

Corruption

A small number of young men, and some adults too, worry about the level of corruption and express discontent with government.

'We're unhappy about the level of corruption and the amount of bribes that have to be paid in daily life.' (Young men, Mazar)

'We want the authorities to stop behaving like dictators.' (Young men, Mazar)

Chapter 4

Pressing problems

During our interviews many young people talked spontaneously about their problems.

Young women's lack of access to facilities and their social position

Young women generally talk about their lack of access to schools and other basic facilities.

We need schools and reconstruction! We need electricity!

Many young women also talk about their position in Afghan society and the discrimination and unfairness they feel they face in everyday life. They see their problems as different to those of men.

'We face specific problems as women in Afghanistan. In so many ways we are not treated fairly.'

'In rural areas the attitude against girls' education continues. This is a big problem for them, and for the country.' (Female teacher, Balkh)

Many of the young women interviewed show a keen awareness about their rights. They don't see the issue of women's rights as being anti-Afghan culture and tradition but rather part of it. Many use the Koran to justify their rights and they express a hope for Afghan culture to adjust to their needs. They say that if they were more respected by men and society in general they would have more of a say in matters that affect them, namely their education, their access to paid work, and when and how they marry. They would also be able to move around more freely, without constant fear. One mother very sensibly points out why it's necessary for young women to be educated and to develop skills for paid work.

'When I was young I wasn't educated. No one thought it was necessary. But it's been a big problem for me. My husband died some years back leaving me with all the responsibility. I had to go out to work, I had no choice but because I wasn't educated and had no skills, all I could take was this low paid cleaning job.' Adult mother, Mazar

Female teachers in Balkh say the biggest problem young people face is poverty. Poverty, they say, is what drives parents to send children, including girls, to work, tailoring and cleaning in other people's houses, rather than to school.

A few young and adult men also demonstrate insight into women's problems but most do not talk about them.

'Many women face problems here. They don't always have the right to go to school. In many girls' families, it's embarrassing to say, more care and love is usually given to sons by mothers as well as fathers.' (Young and adult men, Mazar)

A few young women say the problems women face begin with the lack of welcome they receive at birth and as the young men above point out, this can often continue.

'When girls are born, families weep, when boys are born, there are celebrations.' (Balkh schoolgirls)

Young men's position in the family – and family conflicts

Young men, specifically those from Jalalabad or the surrounding areas, have problems within the tribal or extended family system. Quite a few Pashtoon men say their problems are related to their age and therefore lack of status within the family. The key issue for them is not having a say in decisions that affect them. They also talk about the problems of family conflict. Living in a family with high levels of internal and external conflict (for example, feuds) must expose young people, both men and women, to high levels of fear, trauma and anxiety.

'In our families, the elders tell us what to do. They never listen to us.' (Young men, Jalalabad)

'We don't take part in discussions or decisions, it's a big problem. Father knows best.' (Young men, Jalalabad)

Families just give orders and whatever our grandfathers or our fathers say, we have to accept.' (Young men, Jalalabad)

Joining school when you're older

Some young people who missed school during the Taleban years mention the embarrassment they feel at having to sit in class with much younger children. Teachers also mention the problem of having older students in class but in relation to their sexual development and awareness and the negative influence it may have on younger children.

Being a returnee

Young men and women who have been refugees either in Iran or Pakistan often refer to the problems they feel on returning to live in Afghanistan.

'It's hard to return (to Afghanistan) after you've been a refugee. In Pakistan we had proper schools, electricity, roads, water and here there is nothing. Suddenly life is very different. We've come back to destruction. Even our homes are destroyed.' (Schoolboy, Balkh)

'We are so sad about leaving Iran and returning here. We miss our friends, our school, and our old life.' (Young women, Mazar Shrine)

However, the experience of being a refugee has not been good for all young people. Some faced many problems both living abroad and again on returning home.

'We've had a hard life. In Pakistan when we were refugees we were always in trouble with the police who beat us a lot. We lived in poverty. We had to learn another language very quickly and we were far away from our home and our families.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'It was hard there and it's hard here too.' Young man, Jalalabad

Some of the young people interviewed, particularly young boys from the youth centre in Jalalabad, were sad and morose. Many had lost their immediate families and are more or less fending for themselves. They are unhappily resigned to a life of struggle.

'This is life. This is what I've got. I have to face it.' (Young orphan boy, working, who lives with his sisters in Jalalabad)

Health

Afghanistan has some of the lowest health indicators in the world and women in particular are severely disadvantaged. 770 women and children die every day in Afghanistan, mostly from preventable diseases and yet we noted that most young men and women don't generally talk about their health as a problem.

In Jalalabad, the SAB youth centres provide young people with weekly access to a visiting doctor. In this way, young people get accustomed to seeking professional help for medical problems, rather than consulting a friend or a relative. The service is very popular and MSP could consider a working relationship with SAB on common problems faced by youth for a 'health spot' on the programme.

Chapter 5

Friends and feelings

Students say it's easier to make friends if you're at school or studying. Young men and women who work, either inside or outside the house, have less time for friends.

Young men have many more recreation opportunities than young women because they are free to roam around in public unaccompanied. In contrast, young women have to be accompanied in public. On Fridays, even working young men go to local recreation sites or chaikanas to meet others. In Mazar, many young women are able to go out and meet once a week at the Shrine of Hazrat Ali on Wednesdays - Lady's Day.

'We can go anywhere, because we have friends everywhere.' (Young men, Jalalabad)

'We're just three people and we work. We can sit and chat but we're too few to play.' (Young men, Jalalabad)

'We can go wherever we like.' (Most young men in Jalalabad, Mazar and Balkh)

Friends mean a lot to young women and men. One young woman from Jalalabad explains what a friend is:

'I call a friend someone who shares your sadness and your grief. Someone who shows you the right path and points out when you're on the wrong path.'

Young people readily admit that they get angry with their friends from time to time but these conflicts appear to be easily resolved.

'Yes you get angry with your friends sometimes. Look at my best friend here sitting next to me. I get angry with her all the time but then we make up.' (Young woman, Jalalabad)

'When you have arguments with your friends, you try to say sorry and make up.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'If we get into fights with our friends, we try to sort them out before they go too far.' (Young men, Mazar Shrine)

Relationships with other groups (ethnic, religious etc.)

Relationships with other ethnic groups, sects, religions etc., can be problematic, particularly for young men. Confronting someone different can be a cause for aggression, abuse and fighting. Revenge is never far off.

'In Pakistan, I got into a fight with a Punjabi and he beat me. When I saw a Punjabi here in Jalalabad, I got my revenge and I beat him up.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

Our researchers noted the aggressive behaviour of some young men in Jalalabad towards young Sikhs – a minority community in the town. During Friday recreation at a spot by the river a sudden downpour of rain broke overhead. As all the young men ran to find shelter, one young man stooped and threw a stone at a young Sikh boy for no apparent reason and drew blood.

Chapter 6

Views on marriage

Legal age

Most young people are not aware of the legal age for marriage in Afghanistan and almost none are aware of the purpose of a marriage contract. All the young women we interviewed, and many of the men, feel that 18 – 24 is about the right age to get married. However, some young men think differently. They say the right marital age for men is older (30) whereas for women it's younger (14 – 18 years).

'I think 20 is the right age.' (Young women, Mazar (and Jalalabad))

'Well I think it should be higher, 23!' (Young woman, Mazar)

'A woman should only be allowed to marry after she's finished Grade 12 or university.' (Young women, Balkh)

'I don't know the legal age for marriage.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'Don't know anything about the contract; don't know anything the law says about marriage.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'I think men should marry at about 30 and women at about 14 – 18.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

There are young men who see clear benefits in marrying before the age of 18.

'If I marry at seventeen I will avoid immoral behaviour.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'If I get married now at 18, I'll have a son - and in 18 years time that son will be the age I am now and then he'll work for me.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

There is consensus amongst students in high schools that young people should in fact marry only when they have completed higher education (meaning university).

Some teachers and young women say with pride that Islam accords young people more rights in marriage than local culture.

'For marriage we should follow the prophet's guidance. He said women should marry at an early age. The prophet's daughter got married at 9 but these days things are different; a young woman is ready for marriage at around 20.'

Young women, particularly those in Jalalabad talk about having the right to choose and refuse. Others also talk about wanting to have a say in the decision to marry.

'Remember, the prophet asked his daughter if she could agree to the man he had chosen. She said yes. But the important point is this: He gave her the right to say 'no.' This is the example he set our parents. If parents knew their religion they would follow the prophet in these things.' (Young woman, Mazar Shrine)

Teachers we interviewed feel strongly that young people need to know their rights in relation to marriage and that radio could play an important role in this.

'Girls and boys need to know their rights. In fact, everyone needs to know that Islam gives young people more rights than they have at the moment.' (Female teacher, Jalalabad)

'It's important that people like you who make radio programmes inform mullahs and imams of these facts. They're the ones that need to know! You could do a lot to change people's misperceptions.' (Female teacher, Jalalabad)

While some teachers believe young people should participate in decisions relating to whom they marry, others feel they shouldn't be given full responsibility for looking and choosing.

'Well, young people may choose for themselves in Kabul, but that doesn't happen in Faryab!' (Teacher, Faryab)

Financial burden of marriage

We didn't ask young men about marrying more than once, nor did we ask young women about their views on being a second, third or fourth wife. One young man from Jalalabad, however says: *'happiness is only possible with one wife.'* Other young men may think differently.

When discussing marriage, many young people mention the financial burden involved. In Jalalabad, young men and women complain about the 'bride price' whereas in Mazar, Tajik's and Uzbek's talk about a similar practice called 'Qaline.' Payments for both range from \$2,000 to \$10,000 and do not include the cost of establishing a new household or entertaining wedding guests. Young people think these costs are too high and prohibitive. High marriage costs also make the whole issue of marriage seem threatening and unpleasant for those who do not have wealthy families.

'We don't think about marriage because it's a huge financial burden. How will we ever afford it?' (Young men from all provinces)

Early marriage

We spoke about the issue of early marriage with young women, not with young men. Young female students and teachers are very familiar with girls being taken out of school by their parents to get married. Teachers say they try to persuade parents to delay the marriage but they often feel they have little if any influence on the decision. Teachers don't tend to believe the legal age for marriage can be enforced by an outside authority. They feel early marriage is related to poverty and lack of education and that attitudes will change over time with awareness.

'We all have friends who have dropped out of school to marry. They can't complete their education if this happens and there's no one who can step in and stop their parents from doing this.' (Student, Mazar)

'We try and stop it (early marriage). Once or twice a year at school we meet the girls' parents and we talk about these things and the problems young girls face if they do this. During the Taleban years many people took up the practice after having left it. I ran private classes for girls and this helped delay marriage. Parents would say, "Oh well, let her finish her studies and then we'll get her married."' (Teacher, Mazar)

'It's about poverty. Parents see the money they are spending on sending a daughter to school, buying the books, feeding her, clothing her and they think it would better to marry her and then it's the responsibility of the in-laws.' (Teacher, Balkh)

Chapter 7

About the Elections and voting

Knowledge about voting varies amongst young people interviewed. Amongst the groups of young men interviewed randomly in the Besud Park in Jalalabad and Mazar some knew all about voting while others did not.

In contrast, almost all young women interviewed in the SAB Youth Centre and in Mazar and Balkh know when they start voting. Young women we interviewed may know more about voting because they come from more educated families than the young men we interviewed. Knowledge on voting in rural areas is likely to be more patchy amongst both young men and women.

'We don't know much about voting.' (Young men, Mazar)

'I really don't know what age I'm allowed to vote.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'I know about voting and I've told my family. I've got a registration card and I know what to do.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'You can vote at 18. My mother and some of my sisters voted in the last election.' (Young woman, Balkh)

'We're too young to vote – you have to be 18 but our mothers all voted.' (Schoolgirls, Mazar)

Overall, there is a lack of understanding about political processes and the meaning of democracy amongst those we interviewed⁶.

'We don't really understand the process. Some of us have registration cards, others don't.' (Schoolboys, Balkh)

'I don't really understand what political parties do or what democracy really means.' (Young man, Balkh)

Young men who know about voting say they wouldn't vote on an ethnic basis but rather according to who would serve the country best. They say leaders should work for Afghanistan by improving the school system and creating jobs.

⁶ This has also been noted during other field trips. For example, in Kandahar in December 2004 we were presented with a pro-democracy flask (for *chai*) to be handed to local tribal leaders during rural awareness-raising presentations. On the front of the flask was a circle with the word 'democracy' written in Pashto and leading from this were other smaller circles each with their own words, including 'good governance', 'accountability', 'voting' and 'elections'. We noted that local NGO staff found it difficult to translate these words into frameworks local people understand. One of our researchers points out that local leaders are quick to pick up the terms and manipulate their meaning to their own interests.

Chapter 8

About drugs

The World Bank suggests that drugs net \$3.3 billion annually for Afghanistan but only \$600 million actually stays with Afghan farmers. Poppy growing in Afghanistan does not play a role in reducing poverty. Instead it creates huge indebtedness, 'poppy slavery' and imported women labourers. It also encourages the selling of women to pay debt and generally results in a lack of law and order. Where poppies grow, government services such as health facilities, schools etc. are slow to operate because of the poor security.

Most young people we interviewed don't talk openly about drugs and many admitted ignorance on the topic. Those who have some knowledge do not have a positive image of them. However, there are misconceptions concerning the effects of drugs. Only one young person, a woman, talked about her indirect experience of drugs through a family member addicted to heroin. For her, drugs are strongly associated with inter-family conflict, stealing, lying and violence.

Recommendations and Discussion

ST researchers will need to collect and become familiar with key facts about drugs in Afghanistan (for example, what drugs are available, number of users; profile of users, and harmful effects). This can be done by visiting NGOs working on drug-related issues (see the Akbar directory).

ST could use a mixture of fact and personal testimonies from users and those who have experienced rehabilitation. Identifying such people can be done in coordination with agencies who work on drug-related issues, *ST* can provide information on where young people can get help if they have problems with addictions (for example, how to give up smoking). *ST* can also look at alternatives to poppy cultivation and interview Afghan experts from agencies and NGOs and communities involved in alternative livelihood projects.

- What dangerous drugs are commonly used in Afghanistan?
- What effects do these drugs have?
- What social problems are associated with certain drugs?
- What does the law define as a drug?
- Which slot would you choose to talk about drugs?
- Should drug barons be allowed to stand in the elections?

Chapter 9

Police, army and security forces

Due to time pressures, we were only able to interview young men in the Besud Park in Jalalabad about their perceptions regarding the police, the army and security forces. These young people do not have a positive image of the police. They associate them with taking bribes and using unnecessary force.

Some young men say police misuse their position in society.

'The police don't treat people respectfully.' (Young man, Jalalabd)

'My father can't come to my school without getting an appointment but a policeman can just storm in with his gun.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'Even in private schools and courses children of commanders or police are given special privileges because people are afraid of them.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

The young men we spoke to in Jalalabad say they think the role of the National Army is to defend Afghan borders and keep security. They think ISAF troops do a good job and are in favour of more of them. They stress, however, that they do not want more American troops in Afghanistan because they feel they behave very badly.

'In some places American troops just barged in to people's houses with their guns. This is very disrespectful. Even the Russians didn't do that.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

Chapter 10

Sports

Young people, both men and women, talk about their need to have more access to sports facilities and recreation. They don't tend to talk about wanting more sports news on the radio.

Female students in Balkh say they would like more information on how to play netball, as there is an old court in their school grounds.

More research is required to find out what kind of sports bulletins young people would like.

Chapter 11

Environmental challenges

Concern about the environment is now an important global issue but in Afghanistan there is still very little awareness. Although there is little industry, there is still considerable pollution from car and truck engines and waste products which now include increasing amounts of non-biodegradable items (for example, plastics and petrochemicals). In addition there is much deforestation and few efforts are being made to protect the wildlife including endangered species. Very little exists in terms of litter collection.

Chapter 12

Impact of war

Many young people we interviewed referred to the impact of war on their lives and, as outlined earlier in the report, the problems they face as a result. Below are just some of the ways in which young people refer to their experience of the war.

'Because of the war Afghanistan is one of the most backward countries in the world. I'm studying in Grade 10 but I should have finished university.' (Young man, Mazar)

'Many in my family died.' (Young man, Jalalabad)

'When we fled, our old homes in Afghanistan were destroyed or they just fell to pieces untended for so long.' (Young man, Mazar)

'It was so hard returning here. There's absolutely nothing whereas there, we had so much.' (Young woman, Mazar Shrine)

Annex 1

Guidelines for Group Discussions and interviews

(March 2005)

Background information

Location

Is this group girls, boys or mixed?

Ethnicity

Note down ages

Questions should always be followed up with WHY?

Before attempting any of the questions below, ask:

- **What do you want for yourself in Afghanistan?**
- **What do you want to be?**
- **What do you look forward to?**
- **What do you worry about?**

Education

Did you manage to go to school? If yes, how?

Are you in school or college now?

Is your family supportive?

What do you want education to do for you?

Do you think young people should have a say in their education? Does this happen at the moment?

Tell us stories

Radio listening

How do you get information: TV, radio, internet, newspapers, word of mouth?

Do you listen to the radio?

Do you listen alone, with friends, or with family members?

What time of day do you listen?

What time of night do you listen?

If you don't listen to the radio, why not and would you like to?

Which radio stations do you listen to?

What programmes do you like best?

Are there enough programmes for youth on the radio?

What kind of radio programmes would you like to hear on the radio?

What sort of subjects?

- news and current affairs
- music
- fashion
- about young people's health
- comedy
- about colleges, universities, skill training
- about work opportunities
- about relationships, emotions and feelings
- about how to deal with boredom and depression
- about Afghanistan, its geography, history and environment
- panel discussions with young people
- views of experts
- weather

Friendships and feelings

What do you do when you're bored?

What do you do when you get depressed?

Do you have friends who are not the same ethnic group as you?

Do you have friends who are boys/girls?

What makes you happy?

What makes you angry?

What makes you sad?

Where can you go

Which places can you visit by yourself?

Which places do you have to be accompanied?

Dealing with problems

Do you ever get into trouble?

Do you confess if you've done something wrong?

Do you say sorry if you've upset someone?

Do you try and make things right?

Do you discuss a problem with a teacher?

Who would you talk to if you had:

- A general problem?
- A health problem?
- A personal problem?

Is your family supportive of you?

Do you feel included in decision-making in your family?

Have you ever been hit?

Have you ever hit anyone?

Have you ever been verbally abused?

Have you ever used bad language and abused someone?

Have you ever been the victim of bad gossip?

Have you ever gossiped about someone?

About work

Are you working?

How does your pay contribute to your family situation?

If you give money to the family do you keep something for yourself?

Do you think young people should have a say in when they go to work?

Do you worry about getting a job?

Marriage – for those who are

At what age did you get married?

How much did your family spend on your wedding?

Did you help decide in your marriage?

Do you think young people should have a say in whom they marry and when they marry?

At what age do you think men should marry?

At what age do you think women should marry?

Do you know the legal age for marriage in Afghanistan?

Do you know what rights you have in the marriage contract?

Good and bad marriage stories

Marriage - for those who aren't

At what age would you be ready to marry?

Who decides when you should get married?

Should you have a say in who you marry?

What kind of a husband/wife would you like to have?

Would you expect to marry someone who is already married?

Would you expect to marry an older/younger man/woman?

At what age do you think men should marry?

At what age do you think women should marry?

Do you know the legal age for marriage in Afghanistan?

Do you know what rights you have in the marriage contract?

Good and bad marriage stories

Drugs

Do you know what drugs are?

Have you ever met someone who uses drugs?

Have you ever been tempted to use drugs yourself?

What do you feel about drugs?

Why do some people want to use drugs?

The Elections

At what age do you think you can vote?

Do men and women have equal rights to vote?

Do you know how to register for voting?

Would you vote for someone who is of a different ethnic group?

How do you expect leaders and politicians to behave?

How do you expect Afghanistan's police to behave?

How do you expect international peace-keeping forces to behave?

How do you expect the army to behave?

What do you expect from other authorities?

Environment

How many names of wild animals do you know?

Do you have wild animals in this area?

Do you have forests in your area?

Do you think forests and animals should be protected?

How can forests and wild animals be protected?

Sports

What sports do you play?

What sports would you like to play?

Music

What music do you like listening too?

Literature

Have you ever read a story book?

What kind of stories do you like?

Film

Have you ever watched a film?

Have you ever watched a film about Afghanistan?

Where did you see this film?

What kind of films do you like?

Impact of war

How have your lives been affected by the war?

Have you ever felt afraid?

Is it difficult to return to Afghanistan if you've been a refugee?

Are there returnees in your school/village?