

# SELF HELP GROUPS IN AFGHANISTAN

## Ignite Project Report

September 2023



## Overview

Afghanistan has experienced more than four decades of continuous geopolitical, civil and local conflict, which coupled with extreme poverty, climate change, and a deeply patriarchal society, has resulted in the exclusion and marginalisation of women. In response to these significant challenges and against a backdrop of increasing evidence in support of Self Help Groups (SHGs), the Ignite project was designed to re-engage women and support SHGs to resume services in Ghor province, equipping members with the necessary resources to meet their priorities. The project found that while further time and investment are needed for these nascent SHGs to put in place all the building blocks for resilience, they are already delivering significant benefits in a region where women's opportunities and rights have been severely curtailed.

## Context

- **Who:** 1,000 women whose lives were fundamentally affected by the Taliban takeover in August 2021.
- **Where:** 32 villages in the Lal-wa-Sarjantal district of Ghor province, Central Afghanistan.
- **When:** The Ignite project was implemented from August 2022 to June 2023.
- **How:** 50 women's SHGs whose activities were interrupted by the Taliban takeover were re-ignited. They were provided with accelerated support and resources so members could address their most urgent needs through collective action, including improving food security and regaining the agency and rights they had worked hard to improve prior to August 2021.
- **Partners:** [Afghanaid](#) and [The Share Trust](#), with financial support from the [Vitol Foundation](#). Afghanaid is a British humanitarian and development organisation operating in Afghanistan since 1983. The Share Trust is a US-based non-profit that supports collective action for community resilience by centering the SHG model.



## What is a self help group?

Self Help Groups are informal networks of 10-25 people who gather every week to save, grow their businesses, support each other and create change for themselves and their communities. It is a well tested and cost-effective model for delivering critical programming and services to people around the world, and in challenging contexts such as Afghanistan it offers a culturally acceptable opportunity for women to gather with their peers, invest in their own agency and build resilience.

# IMPACT

## Social capital and psychosocial wellbeing

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### ✔ Project activity: Women's SHGs were supported to resume services.

**Increased social capital and psychosocial wellbeing.** SHGs have functioning savings schemes, maintain records of loans and repayments, and all attend their groups at least once a month. Meeting and saving regularly in this way led SHG members to report an increase in social capacities (i.e. confidence, social capital, self-sufficiency and aspirations) that enable people to respond and recover more quickly when faced with a shock or stress.

- 100% of SHG members intend to continue participating in their groups, even when money is scarce.
- 100% felt that meeting in their SHG improved their wellbeing, mood, mental health, and outlook for the future (44% at baseline).
- 100% reported feeling confident always/most of the time (4% at baseline).

## Economic capital and agency

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### ✔ Project activity: SHG members received livelihood training and inputs, training in marketing and packaging skills, and linkages to market actors in local markets.

**Increased economic capital and agency.** SHG members' incomes increased, as did their savings and skill sets. These savings, as well as the diversification of livelihoods, serve as a safety net in a crisis and have allowed for spending on essential services (e.g. education for girls). Women increased their decision making power within their households through this income generation, creating more equitable partnerships with their husbands.

- 100% of SHG members reported an increase in average income.
- 87% of SHG members reported their family had enough nutritious food always/most of the time (14% at baseline).
- 96% reported they are always/mostly able to have a say in how their income is spent (14% at baseline).
- 70% reported they jointly make decisions with their husbands on how to spend their income (16% at baseline).
- 100% of men acknowledged their wives/daughters have the right to earn income (87% at baseline).

## Social agency by challenging social and gender norms

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### ✔ Project activity: Community members attended dialogue and awareness raising sessions and were sensitised to women's rights.

**Increased social agency.** Women experienced greater mobility, decreased violence, and more respect as the community became more aware of women's rights and the SHG model.

- 97% of SHG members reported they were now treated well by power holders in their family, pointing to increased respect (63% at baseline).
- 100% of SHG members reported a greater acceptance of their rights and mobility in the community.
- 100% reported improved opportunities and confidence to influence community and government decision-making (74% at baseline).

# BUILDING RESILIENCE

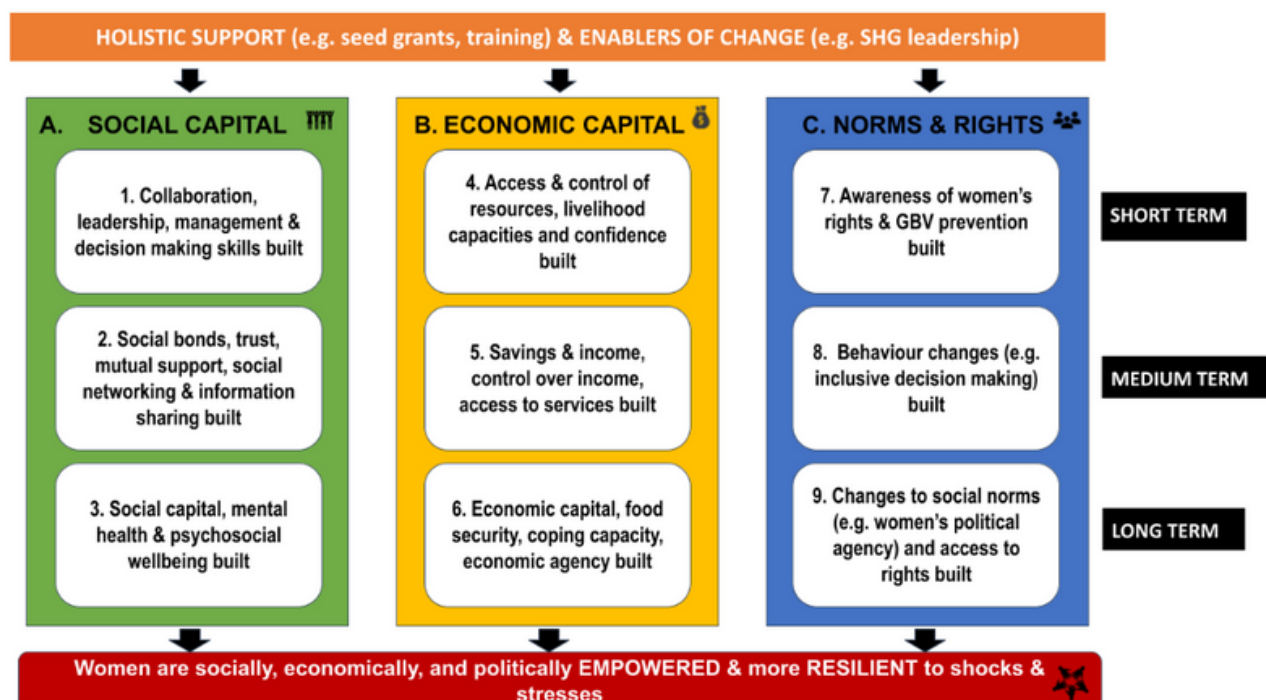
Being a member of an Ignite SHG increased women's economic, psychosocial and political empowerment. SHG members reported more resilience to shocks and stresses, attributed to economic empowerment (as a result of increased income, savings, self confidence); increased knowledge and information; increased control of resources; and improved individual and collective problem-solving abilities.

## Building blocks of resilience

The Ignite project emphasised the importance of two key elements for helping SHGs maximise their potential as a pathway towards resilience:

- **Provide holistic support to SHGs across the three pillars** (social, economic, rights and norms) ranging from grants, training on SHG management, leadership and savings, training on livelihoods and markets, sensitisation on women's rights, and ongoing support to facilitate SHG development, growth, and maturity.
- **Strengthen key enabling factors governing SHG success** including strong leadership and organisation; regular meetings; group autonomy; technical, organisational, and vocational capacity strengthening; inclusive decision-making; access to group resources such as credit and market information; and linkages with relevant stakeholders.

With this support to SHGs over time, critical building blocks are put in place, offering a pathway to women's social, economic, and political empowerment, and resilience to shocks and stresses in the long term, including in conflict affected contexts such as Afghanistan.



# NEXT STEPS

## Ignite: Phase II

The impact demonstrated through the Ignite project provides a compelling case for embedding SHGs at the centre of programming as a way to scale informal assistance to women in challenging contexts.

Therefore, a second phase of the Ignite project has been approved to further test the use of SHGs as a conduit for:

- **Supporting hard-to reach women and strengthening their resilience through collective self-help.** This builds upon a key lesson from the first phase of the project that demonstrated how SHGs contribute to building resilience and economic agency through savings, access to credit, and building social capacities.
- **Channelling cash through SHGs** to meet immediate needs and implement small-scale development initiatives for the economic and social benefit and wellbeing of more women. Surveyed SHG members had a strong preference for cash-based support to start businesses and income generating activities as well as confirming their ability to channel cash transfers to the wider community in times of crisis.
- **Cascading training, providing mentorship to women in the wider community, and self replication of the SHG model.** SHGs can have significant reach beyond their direct membership with the “cascading training model” leveraging SHG leaders as trainers and mentors which opens up avenues for the self-establishment of new SHGs. This replicable approach has the potential to magnify a project's reach, target hard to reach marginalised groups (e.g. women with disabilities, women-headed households), and secure the sustainability of SHGs well beyond a project's initial period.

The ultimate goal of Phase II is to build upon the lessons learned in the first phase of the Ignite project and to continue to increase the economic, social, psychosocial, and political resilience of women, their households, and wider community members.



Photo credit: Kobra Akbari (via Afghanaid)