Involving Women for Social Change (IWSC) in Chitral, Pakistan

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Objective

If women hold half the sky, they also make half of society’s backbone. Without their involvement and opinion, it is hard to make any development work a success. Keeping this in mind, the program inspired by Human Centered Design – a concept designed by IDEO- aimed to give a mindset to the female participants to think about their local problems as opportunities. The 5 days training session that comprised of different workshops was attended by 19 female youths from all over Chitral. Different workshops in the training pushed the participants to think creatively, innovatively, and positively about their local problems. The program also gave a platform to the participants to work collaboratively with people of different abilities and present their ideas to representatives of different organization in order to get their support in implementing their solution.

Project Details

The project was titled Involving Women for Social Change and it invited female youths between the ages of 20 – 25 years from all over Chitral. The program was held from August 11th to 15th 2014. Chitral is a district in Northern Pakistan and it is geographically, politically and economically isolated from rest of the country. Being from Chitral, I realized that the absence of female participation in many important decisions is a reason for the lack of development in the region. Since the state government is not actively involved in Chitral, it is important to encourage local people to take their own stand and find innovative solutions to their own problems.

The program was organized in a local hotel in Chitral town. Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP), which is a local organization but part of the larger international Aga Khan Development Network, helped in identifying the participants through their Local Support Organizations and Women Organizations in different villages of Chitral. The original plan was to bring 20 participants, but some participants could not come due to personal reasons arising at the last moment. It should be mentioned here that in Chitral female mobility is not an easy thing and it is challenging to convince families to send their daughters and sisters to stay in a hotel for 5 days in Chitral town. It was a big responsibility on my shoulders to make sure that the female participants felt safe in the hotel and that the local people should not get a point to say anything that could harm the image of my project or AKRSP. But the program went very smoothly and all the participants had a great time of learning, innovating and making new friends.

The 19 participants formed 4 groups of five people. Only one group had four people. The groupings were done randomly and each group had participants from a diverse geographical and educational background. Such a setting provided opportunity to the participants to learn from each
other about their ideas and their personal lives and regions. In the evening, all the girls would sit in the hotel garden and reflect on the day’s training and workshop. Each participant shared her rose (what they liked), bud (what they want to improve for the next day) and thorn (what they did not like during the day).

The first day participants arrived to the hotel. Some of them came late because either they were coming from far-flung areas travelling for six hours or they could not find a vehicle to get to the hotel. Two participants, having no choice, travelled on logs of trees loaded in a vehicle for 3 hours. Many participants were tired but despite that they were excited to meet new people and start the training. We started off with icebreakers and the participants became comfortable and friendly with each other. It is also the effect of Chitrali culture that if you are going to work with someone, you quickly consider them to be your friend and sister. Later during the day and following on day 2, we covered the basics of Human Centered Design. The participants learned that in order to make a design challenge they need to see it through three main lenses: desirability, viability and feasibility.

On the second day of the training, we also had a psychologist visit us to talk about mental health issues that are on rise in Chitral. Many women and Chitrali youth are committing suicides because there are no counseling or psychological assistance available. The participants found the presentation to be very informative and they also talked to the psychiatrists individually to get some advice. Later on, each participant thought about and designed their individual design challenges. Participants came up with different issues that they deemed important in their communities. Among the individual design challenges there were different topics covered such as developing reading habits in children, spreading awareness about pollution, preventing females suicides, convincing parents to let their children follow career of their choice, convincing parents to send their daughters to school and to admit their children in schools at an early age. Each group then rated the design challenges of their group members. The rating was done based on different questions about the design challenge.

On day 3, each of the four groups voted for one design challenge for their group to work on. These design challenges were:

(1) How might we develop habits amongst community members to reduce pollution in their area?
There are no local efforts made to curb the spreading pollution problem in Chitral. Local government representatives do not prioritize pollution eradication. This challenge aimed to make people aware and educate them about pollution and its prevention.

(2) **How might we spread awareness in a community about child abuse?**

Many people in Chitral do not know about child abuse. A lot of children drop out of school when their teachers beat them. Financially unstable families send off their children to work and have no awareness about child rights. Female children are married off early. This challenge’s solution was to establish SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now) Association Chitral as the first organization to work on Child Abuse.

(3) **How might we support university students who face financial problems in their education?**

Financial constraint is a major factor for students to leave their education unfinished. Many students from Chitral go to other cities in Pakistan for further studies. Being away from family and having no financial support, a lot of these students often have mental problems. This challenge was answered by designing the first ever-counseling center for students in Chitral with the aim of providing financial and mental counseling to students.

(4) **How might we design a sustainable sewing skill center for women in a community?**

Many uneducated females often stay idle at home. There are no opportunities available for them to learn new skills and become financially stable. This challenge was faced by a participant who tried to mobilize resources such as sewing machines from government and NGOs, but was unable to do so. Through HCD she was able to work with her team to design a sewing center where she would rent local sewing machines and set up a solar panel to provide electricity to run the sewing skill center. She hopes to actualize the model soon.

Further on, each group worked on four important questions about their individual design challenges. These questions were: What we know? What we do not know? What we need to know? Whom we can ask? This brainstorming activity required the participants to think meticulously about their design challenge. Each group made presentation to other participants about their research and learning about their design challenge. An important thing in HCD is fieldwork, where participants go out in the field to interview relevant people and organizations about their design challenge. Since the participants were in a hotel and they could not go out to talk to people in the
surrounding areas, they either interviewed people who were staying or employed in the hotel or they conducted mock interviews where a group member became a character and the rest of the team interviewed her. The idea of this exercise was to give the participants an experience of how to design survey questionnaires and how to conduct interviews with different stakeholders relevant to their design challenge. For example, the group working on designing a sewing center wanted to interview the local head of the village known as the qazi. Since the team could not go to the village to interview a qazi, one of the team members became the qazi and the other his wife. Both the team members knew the qazi and his wife well enough to act out in their characters. The other team members then interviewed them about their view on setting up a skill center for women.

The teams then compiled their interview notes and took out the important points they learned from interviewing people. These notes were ‘gems’ that the teams formed into clusters and titled these clusters in a way that they were able to utilize them in their solution design. The solution designing and discussions took some time, but the teams were actively involved in the process. Once every team had decided their solution to their respective design challenge, they started to prototype. They used boxes, chart paper, clay, and different colors to make models as prototypes to visualize their solution ideas (see the pictures section at the end of the report). All the teams worked very hard on their prototypes and they really enjoyed an active teamwork situation. They then prepared their presentations, which they were going to present the next day to a group of local representatives and fellow participants.

On the last day, participants woke up early to rehearse their presentations. I also listened to each presentation and gave them feedback. Since the presentation day was right after the Independence Day of Pakistan and many invited guests had gone home for holidays, there were not as many guests as we had expected. Despite that there were representatives from AKRSP, and the Aga Khan Health Services and some participants families who came to listen to the presentations.

All the participants presented their solution ideas very nicely and I was very happy to see that those participants who were shy on the first day were now confidently speaking in front of the stranger guests. The guests really enjoyed the presentations and they gave their valuable feedback. Some even said that they would help the participants to execute their ideas since they were clearly presented and well prototyped. Certificates were distributed among the participants at the end of the program.

It was very hard to say goodbyes for me and for the participants as well. I was very satisfied that I was able to provide thinking tools to these participants who would then go back to their communities to implement their ideas and spread the innovative mentality in their respective communities.
There were definitely challenges on the way while conducting the training. We would start the training at 9am and then go on until 4pm with an hour lunch break in between. I was conducting and facilitating the workshop myself so at the end of the day I would get very tired. I held the workshop in both Urdu and Khowar (Chitral’s local language), but some presentation material was in English and it was still hard for some participants to understand it. For that, I repeated my words in Khowar so each participant felt included and the group members were also helping each other to diminish the language barrier as much as possible.

Overall, the workshop was a great success for the participants and myself. The participants were excited to go back to their communities and implement their ideas. Especially the sewing center and the child abuse organization named SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now) that was made as a result of the 5 days training. I would like to thank all the participants and their families for being part of the training. My family for their constant support and encouragement, AKRSP for their support in identifying the participants, IDEO for sending me the HCD toolkit to use as a reference for my teaching curriculum, Catherine Collins from MiddCore for her guidance in designing the curriculum and the Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship for giving me valuable advice and funds to do the training.
Participants on Day 1 listening to the basics of Human Centered Design.

Participants working in groups to brainstorm on their chosen design challenges.
Guest and local organization representatives asking participants about their design prototypes.

Prototype showing SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now) organization’s operation plan.
Prototype showing how pollution preventing habits and awareness will be spread in a community.

Prototype showing sewing (Hunar Ghar) skill center set-up.
Prototype showing counselling center for students who face financial and mental problems.

Sitting with participants in the evening to reflect on the day’s training, sharing their rose, bud, and thorn.