

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT HAS RIPPLE EFFECTS FOR THE WHOLE NATION

• STORIES OF CHANGE SERIES

Owning and running your own business as a woman is a challenge in any country. In Afghanistan, where women face staggering levels of violence, entrenched discrimination, restrictions and harassment, simply earning and controlling your own money is an extraordinary challenge.

Atefe Mansoori knows this firsthand. Back in 2001 when she decided to support herself financially by teaching other women how to read and write, her own family tried to talk her out of it. Using her savings she organised the first exhibition for saffron producers in Herat province, the success of which allowed her to begin marketing saffron herself.

Success, however, brought its own complications, including death threats from extremists opposed to women being out in the markets.

Women's economic empowerment is one of the essential pillars in achieving gender equality. Whether it's simply earning an income, making decisions on how to spend it, or owning and running a successful business, economic empowerment not only helps pull women out of poverty, the independence, confidence, knowledge and skills it fosters can also help them stand up to violence and discrimination.

Enabling women to create and take advantage of economic opportunities relies on a complex web of support, training, networks, mentoring and education for women and girls of all ages, in order to foster ambition, creativity and innovation at all levels. It also requires eliminating additional barriers such as violence and harassment at home and in the workplace.

At this stage, putting these foundations in place requires

## UN WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

**Location:** Office in Kabul, active country-wide

**Programme sectors:** Normative support; violence prevention and protection; national planning; economic empowerment; leadership and participation.

**Key donors:** The governments of Belgium, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

**Livelihoods, Entrepreneurship & Employment:** UN Women activities include supporting women entrepreneurs to have better access to markets, and rural

women to undertake livelihood development activities.

**Survivors Empowerment Journey:** This programme takes a holistic approach to empowering women survivors of violence through survivor-centric protection services and economic empowerment, while also fostering an enabling environment for community-level prevention and legal reform.

the combined dedication and support of the Afghanistan Government, local and international NGOs, UN agencies and donors, providing essential funding and support that ensures organisations can support women like Atefe, as well as the girls who will follow in her footsteps.

Now 52 and the director of Abdullah Muslim Company, Atefe was one of the entrepreneurs who received support from UN Women to attend the November 2015 International Trade Fair Exhibition in New Delhi, India. This gave her the opportunity to learn about the different aspects of running a business and attracting new customers, as well as a chance to meet other businesspeople from across the world.

Not only did she earn considerable profits at the exhibition by selling saffron, she also signed two international contracts to export saffron.

“It is not an understatement to say that this tour was a revolution in my business life. It completely changed the way I was thinking about developing my business.”



PHOTO: UN Women/ Hamayoon Sediq

“Despite the challenges, I never gave up because I knew the only way to eliminate violence against women is to help women become economically independent and empowered.”

Atefe Mansoori, entrepreneur

UN Women built on the trade fair by holding a workshop for more than 120 female entrepreneurs and businesswomen from across Afghanistan, giving them the opportunity to share their stories and learn from each other.

Supporting women like Atefe not only helps their personal development, but also has ripple effects for their communities and the nation. It provides women and girls with role models to aspire to, it often provides direct employment and training opportunities for other women, and it helps propel women into leadership positions across the board.

Atefe, for example hired other women to work in her company and organised training sessions for women on leadership, management and marketing skills to help them establish their own businesses, and in turn hire yet more women.

“Despite the challenges, I never gave up because I knew the only way to eliminate violence against women is to help women become economically independent and empowered. With this in mind, I worked hard and struggled to help women to learn, work and earn. And this worked.”

# 17%

The overall literacy rate for women in Afghanistan. In some rural areas the rate can drop to under 2%.<sup>1</sup>

# 19%

of women in Afghanistan participate in the labour force. Women often face restrictions, harassment and discrimination when trying to enter the workforce.<sup>2</sup>

# 64%

of Afghans think that women should be allowed to work outside the home. A majority agree with this in all but three provinces.<sup>3</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/kabul/education/enhancement-of-literacy-in-afghanistan-ela-program/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2016/02/25973259/afghanistan-systematic-country-diagnostic>

<sup>3</sup> <http://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2015-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/>

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