



WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN AFGHANISTAN- FROM FRAGILITY TO RESILIENCE

EXPERIENCES AND SUCCESSES FROM YOUNG WOMEN
ENTREPRENEURS IN THE BALKH PROVINCE



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Experiences and successes from young women
entrepreneurs in the Balkh province

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SUMMARY OF PROJECT FOCUS

The Project '*Promoting rural youth employment in Afghanistan through Entrepreneurship education and Vocational training*' is a capacity development initiative facilitated by the ITCILO and financed by the Government of Norway under the Norway-ILO Programme Cooperation Agreement 2018-2019. Reflecting global practices in countries affected by fragility, the Project aimed to strengthen the institutional capacity of ILO constituents, social partners and other stakeholders in Afghanistan to tackle youth employment challenges through appropriate policies and programmes.

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CHALLENGES OF STARTING AND GROWING A BUSINESS AS A YOUNG WOMAN IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan has been affected by political instability, violent conflict and socio-economic crisis for decades. The conflict has had a negative impact on the economy and the livelihoods of Afghan women and men. It has contributed to poverty, unemployment and capacity constraints in supporting economic and social development. With 610,000 refugees returning home to Afghanistan in 2017 alone (IOM & UNHCR, 2017) and 400,000 people entering the labour market annually, the country's ability to meet the increasing demand for employment is limited. Particularly, youth unemployment is on the rise in Afghanistan, where, in 2017 over 42 percent of youth were not in education, employment, or training (ILO, 2019).

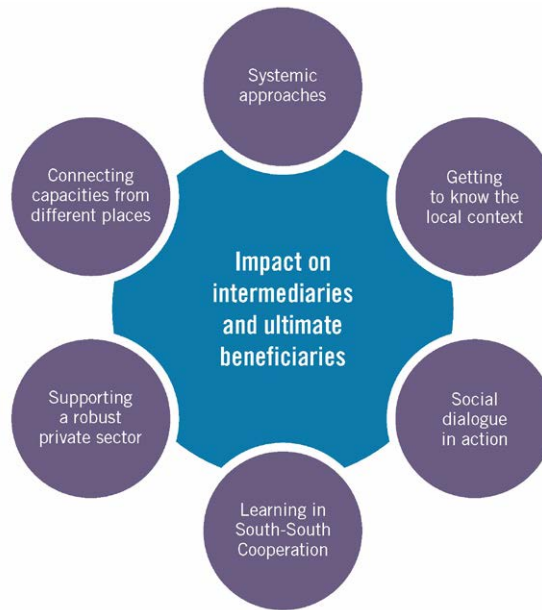
In fragile and conflict-affected situations the relationship of women and girls to institutions are often limited or mediated by family or customary structures. Lack of access to information, resources and services (together with gender stereotypes, inequalities and cultural restrictions) can make women and girls more vulnerable to shocks and stresses characteristic of fragile states (OECD, 2017). Although Afghan legislation no longer purposefully excludes women from economic and social participation, it is often cultural and societal norms of women's roles and responsibilities that contribute to the inability of women to access the labour market and entrepreneurial opportunities (European Union, 2019). Establishing enterprises outside the home is often not considered a socially acceptable career choice for women in Afghanistan.

The ITCILO Promoting Rural Youth Employment project focuses on working with ILO constituents and stakeholders in Afghanistan to:

- Build institutional capacity to develop and implement policies that create an enabling environment for private sector development.
- Offer training and coaching for entrepreneurs to support a remerging private sector.

This case study looks at the ITCILO capacity building programme and its achievements in promoting women entrepreneurs. The figure on the following page shows the capacity building elements of the project which had the strongest impact on women entrepreneurs and the enabling environment in which they operate.

Capacity building elements with most impact for women entrepreneurs



THE ITCILO APPROACH TO OVERCOMING GENDER-BASED BARRIERS TO ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

Although the environment is exceptionally challenging for young Afghan women entrepreneurs, motivated and determined women are emerging as business owners. The gender mainstreaming of the ILO's Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) programme, the Gender and Entrepreneurship Together (GETAhead) training and capacity building for constituents around women's and youth empowerment, has facilitated over a thousand women in accessing enterprise training and support.

Afghan women often do not have the same physical and social mobility and access to productive resources and services as Afghan men (ILO, 2019). This fact has an impact on content and delivery of ITCILO enterprise education programmes. The ITCILO project has worked to ensure that the situation of women entrepreneurs is taken into consideration in facilitating access to entrepreneurship development activities.

The project ensured gender-based barriers to participation were considered in all its training activities. For example, in the Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) training cycle women were encouraged to become certified trainers and actively sought out to participate in the training of entrepreneurs. This active inclusion led to 60 percent male and 40 percent female participation in ILO SIYB training of trainers activities, and 44 percent male and 56 percent female in business coaching courses.

“The SIYB Training showed me who I am, what my abilities are and what I can do for people”.

Yalda Bari, SIYB participant

The enterprise training packages used by the project not only contained technical skills to generate a business idea and to start a business but also aimed to develop beneficiaries’ ‘soft skills’, for example, in communication and negotiation. These skills boosted women entrepreneurs’ self-esteem and confidence, which were key in empowering the trained women to negotiate with their families, as well as in their businesses. All the seven women interviewed for the case study felt they would not have been able to run their businesses without the assistance received through the skills training. The training and coaching gave them the necessary confidence to start their business and negotiate their way through strict gender norms.

In a more systemic approach, the project also worked with ILO constituents to build their institutional capacity to design and implement gender responsive policies and programmes that create an enabling environment for private sector development. In a 1-year, 8 module, ITCILO capacity building programme for constituents a one-week session on “gender and labour towards empowering women in fragile states” built the capacity of ILO constituents and other project partners to better develop and implement strategies to support women’s entrepreneurship and gender equality.

The constituents’ involvement in the 1-year ITCILO capacity building programme not only meant they benefited from training in gender equality, but also, from being exposed to the experiences from the Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA) in India during a South-South exchange component. This new knowledge has meant that constituents are increasingly speaking with one voice on gender equality in entrepreneurship and have gained a more in-depth understanding of women entrepreneurs’ needs. Thus, they are in a better position to offer more tailored enterprise support. For example, once trained young women entrepreneurs in Balkh Province are actively supported by both single sex and mixed sex business networks by the Balkh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI). The Chamber has improved its support to women through linking them to markets, finance, and ongoing business coaching. As a result of their improved outreach and service offering, women’s membership at BCCI has increased by 100% between 2018 and 2019.

AFGHAN WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS: THE IMPACT OF THE ITCILO PROMOTING RURAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

The stories of these 3 women entrepreneurs illustrate the impact that the SIYB training, and follow on Business coaching, has had on their personal resilience, livelihoods and ultimately in employment creation in Afghanistan.



In 2017, twenty-three-year-old Najima Yaqobi had many business ideas but was at a loss as to how to develop them into viable projects. She was contacted by the CEO of the BCCI who told her about the ILO's Start Your Business (SYB) training. SYB helped her to generate a business idea, and "following SIYB to the letter", gave her the confidence to start up. With 1,000 USD Najima established Amu in 2018 and has built it into a successful local online store, selling Afghan jewellery, imported bags and clothing. She has recently expanded sales into Kabul.

Najima had to find a business idea that would be accepted by her family, as they objected to her trading in person. The SYB training gave her the confidence to negotiate with her family and after exploring different business ideas she developed an online shopping business that allowed her to trade remotely (and thereby not defy her family). With less support at home, she relies heavily on the BCCI to assist her business, gain relevant skills, market information and benefit from their mentorship opportunities. As the business has grown, her confidence has increased as well along with her ability to negotiate more freedom of movement; she now can join networks to grow her business. She employs two people full time and has additional associates that assist where necessary ensuring deliveries are made within 24 hours. From being unsure where to start, Najima now dreams of "a branch of Amu in each country and to sell Afghan women's handicrafts to the world".

Ms. Parasto Babor runs a confectionery processing unit in the centre of Mazar-i-Sharif, and today trades both as a wholesaler and retailer. However, she has had to overcome hurdles in starting and running her business. She has had to bounce back from her start-up capital for equipment being stolen from her by an unscrupulous intermediary and negotiate



with an unsupportive family. In addition, mobility and social constraints resulted in economic isolation and gaps in her business skills. After participating in SIYB training in 2017, she learned how to research the market and identify opportunities, which is how she selected her current business. “SIYB was the main driver behind my business – because of it I did the planning and learnt to budget”. After she saved up enough start-up capital, she established her business and after several months, the demand for her products started to increase. Mobility was a primary problem for her, so she became a supplier to a similar business owner to avoid the need to travel and network. As her business grew, so did her confidence and it was not long until she employed more people to support businesses expansion. She has now started to sell directly to the public and to local stores. Ms. Babor now employs 4 women graduates in her business to ensure that she can keep up with demand. She is now using the skills she learnt in SIYB and is developing a business plan to establish a coffee shop so that customers can enjoy a coffee alongside her products. Although her family was initially very reluctant to let her go into this type of business in the city, they are now very proud of her achievements and support her.

Ms. Yalda Bari came to SIYB training in 2017 interested in starting her own business. Yalda affirms “SIYB guided me to do it (start a business) easily and perfectly”. As an economics graduate and with the support of her family, she was identified by the ILO as a potential SIYB trainer. After certifying, she soon realised that to be a good trainer, she too should have the experience of running her own business. SIYB gave her the belief that she had the ability to start her own business. And with new skills in communication, she has become more assertive in negotiations for accessing and leveraging resources for her business. This, together with developing a business plan, allowed her to seize an opportunity to buy a franchise of ‘Search Path’, an international placement agency, forming Bari Search Path. Her business tackles the challenges of skills development and job placement in Afghanistan, and she has an interest in assisting women to enter the job market. Yalda’s business is growing quickly. She employs 3 full-time staff (2 women and 1 man) and 25 people working part-time. She now sees herself as someone who will not simply accept that ‘things must be done as they have always been done’. She aims to be a role model for herself and other women in Afghanistan and dreams of expanding her business and empowering other young women and men.



WHERE TO FROM HERE...

The female SIYB graduates in Afghanistan require further support. Addressing the barriers to enterprise sustainability and growth for SIYB graduates requires a sustained effort targeted at both women entrepreneurs and business development service providers. SIYB is actively empowering women to change gender norms, one family at a time. However, developing a critical mass of women trainees will further influence the wider economic status of women and how society views women's roles and responsibilities.

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List of interviewees:

- Ms. Parasto Babor
- Ms. Massoma Sultani
- Ms. Nilab Bakhtari
- Ms. Yalda Bari
- Ms. Rowaida
- Ms. Zainab Attai
- Ms. Najma Abed

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The ITCILO provides training and related services that develop human resources and institutional capabilities contributing to achieving the ILO's goal of decent work for women and men.

Visit our website if you want to find out more on how the ITCILO works to contribute to peace building, national reconciliation and social cohesion through employment generation and decent work opportunities for women and men in conflict-affected and disaster prone countries.

INFO

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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