REFUGEES RETURN TO POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT AND DESPAIR

Afghanistan’s labor market and the status of women

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SUMMARY

1. OVERVIEW

This study has been carried out by the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC) in cooperation with its Afghan research partner, the Afghanistan Development and Peace Research Organization (ADPRO). It provides an overview and analysis of Afghanistan’s labor market, focusing in particular on the informal sector and the participation of women in the labor force. The study is part of a larger project called “Dard Kush – strengthening livelihoods of Afghan refugees and Pakistani host communities” currently being implemented by FACES Pakistan in Lahore, together with Caritas Austria and Caritas St. Pölten. The Austrian Development Agency (ADA) commissioned the research.

Background: In the second half of 2016, Pakistan forcibly expelled more than half a million Afghan refugees, the greatest number of returnees from Pakistan since U.S. forces ousted the Taliban in 2001. This massive influx exacerbated Afghanistan’s already critical socioeconomic situation. Tens of thousands of returnees settled in and around Kabul and other major cities in eastern Afghanistan, hoping to find employment. Many however have inadequate skills to adapt to life in urban economic settings.
During the field research period, it became clear that the National Unity Government (NUG) has insufficient resources to address the proper reception of this enormous number of returnees. The absence of data and expertise about the Afghan labor market, integration of returnees and women in the labor force presented a key challenge to researchers.

2. SUMMARY OF AFGHAN LABOR MARKET CHARACTERISTICS

Of an estimated population of 30 million, 15.9 million Afghans (54.6%) are of working age (15-64 years). Approximately 6.5 million Afghans are either employed (5.2 million) or underemployed (1.3 million). Another 2.1 million people – 24% of the working age population – are unemployed. Men constitute more than 80% (5.5 million) of the workforce, while women make up under 20% (1.1 million). More than 77% of the working population (5 million) live in rural areas. There is a significantly lower rate of labor force participation in urban areas due to limited employment opportunities for women, youth and the elderly.

Afghanistan’s young and rapidly growing population, the low proportion of females in the workforce, a strong urban-rural divide, low levels of literacy and education and a high ratio of dependents to employed persons all influence the rate of participation in the country’s labor force.

2.1. Employment sectors

Agriculture is the largest employment sector in Afghanistan, providing 44% of all jobs (2.8 million people) and contributing 23% of the country's GDP. The sector has the highest prevalence of low-skilled jobs, with 87% of workers having no formal education and being unable to read or write.

Almost 20% of Afghans in the labor force (1.3 million) are engaged in the service sector. Subsectors include security (army and police), which make up 4% of total employment, education (4%) and social services (5.7%). Other economic sectors are barely visible in the employment statistics. (ALCS 2016-17, p68)

2.2. Female labor force profile

Insecurity, cultural barriers and low levels of education/literacy are the most commonly cited obstacles hindering women’s engagement in the labor market. Aside from domestic work, female employment is typically restricted to agriculture, manufacturing and services. Over 78% of workers in the clothing and textile manufacturing industries are women, while agriculture employs around 65% of the total female labor force.
Self-employment provides a vital and dominant source of income for women in the informal labor sector, particularly in areas where they are prevented from working outside their homes due to cultural norms and/or restricted mobility. Home-based economic activities range from carpet weaving, sewing, embroidery and tailoring to agricultural work, such as taking care of livestock and selling dairy products.

**Education/literacy:** Only 34.8% of Afghans aged fifteen and over are literate, with a high variation between men (almost 50%) and women (20%) and between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, over 40% of women are literate, while 66.8% of men can read and write. In rural areas over 45% of men are literate compared to 13.1% of women. Nationwide, six million women and almost four million men over the age of fifteen are unable to read or write.

**Cultural barriers:** Women face significant cultural barriers and social stigmatization if they work outside the home. Dr. Lina Abirafeh, a leading gender studies scholar and author of ‘Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention’ (published in 2009), says many Afghan men and women “view women’s employment as a reflection and reminder of their absolute poverty and destitution, an insult to men’s dignity, and a questioning of men’s ability to provide.”
Farzana, a female returnee in Barikab, a settlement near Kabul, offered a similar viewpoint: “Men feel ashamed if they see their women work outside the home. Men think this would be against their ghairat (honor) if their wives work outside the home. The man is so be ghairat that he cannot feed his wife.”

Afghan women may have been legally and politically empowered since the overthrow of the Taliban, but cultural practices affecting their status largely remain unchanged. Noorina, a tailoring master returnee from Pakistan, told researchers, “when I leave home for work, the neighbors think I have a sexual relationship with my employers”. Ms. Noorina said she has to ignore such gossip otherwise she wouldn’t be able to work.

3. SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

3.1. The National Unity Government (NUG)

“Women have been trained in the past in fruit and vegetable processing and in agriculture, but we failed to help them find a market for their products.”

Spozhmai Wardak, Deputy Minister of Women’s Affairs (MoWA)

The research team in Afghanistan conducted fourteen in-depth interviews (nine men and five women) with senior NUG officials, representatives of the Afghan Chamber of Commerce, Afghanistan’s Central Statistics Organization and various labor and craft workers unions. The following themes emerged from these interviews:

Vocational training: Not all vocational training programs were welcomed by the Afghan government. Faizullah Zaki, minister of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs & Disabled (MoLSAMD) was critical of current training trends and believes some skills taught do not match the demands of the rapidly growing younger generation for long-term employment. Mr Zaki’s ministry and its partner organizations provide training for around 38,000 Afghans, including 17,000 women, in 82 centers across the country. No data was available on the number of returnees and/or IDPs engaged in these programs.

Development aid: Since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, the international community has injected billions of dollars into Afghanistan, in an attempt to guarantee a peaceful and prosperous future for the country. Afghan officials complained that these funds were principally invested according to donor interests, rather than directed towards developing Afghanistan’s industrial, agricultural, water infrastructure and transportation sectors, which would have created sustainable long-term employment opportunities. The minor investments made in these sectors over the past seventeen years have been adversely affected by the country’s worsening security situation.
Security/Poverty: The withdrawal of NATO forces in 2014 has severely impacted both the security and economic situation in Afghanistan. Since the troops’ departure, poverty levels have risen dramatically: 55% of the estimated 30 million strong population now live under the poverty line, an increase from 38% in 2011-2012. Tens of thousands of Afghans employed by foreign forces and international organizations have lost their jobs, the Taliban have resurged and expanded their control, ISIS (Daesh) has appeared on Afghan soil and civilian casualties have reached a record high.

Returnees: In response to the overwhelming number of returnees expelled from Pakistan in the second half of 2016, three United Nations Agencies (UNDP, UNHCR, and ILO) collaborated with MoLSAMD to design the Support Afghanistan Livelihoods and Mobility (SALAM) program. SALAM aims to meet the long-term needs of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnees, especially women and youth. SALAM began in January 2017 with a pilot implementation phase in six provinces, including Nangarhar.

Khan Jan Alokozai, deputy head of Afghanistan’s Chamber of Commerce criticized the NUG and its international backers for failing to provide life-saving services to Afghans, in particular to IDPs and returnees. “The Afghan government and the international community only talk and show sympathy but in practice
there is nothing to show for their actions. People are living in tents in a desert where there is no water, no clinic, no doctor – no services,” Mr. Alokozai said.

**Women:** Many uneducated Afghan women seek employment in agriculture and non-farm activities. Both the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) specifically target women by providing vocational training programs, along with financial and technical support. In recent years MoWA has established twenty-two female-only complexes across Afghanistan comprising gardens, workshops and marketplaces; where 7000 women have been trained in fruit and vegetable processing, embroidery, tailoring and bead work.

**Government projects:** Since 2016, more than 270,000 women-headed households, marginalized poor families, physically disabled people and displaced persons with access to arable land have benefited from the support of MAIL’s Family Economy Department. Projects are carried out in both urban and rural areas and include agricultural and livestock-related projects such as saffron production, food processing, gardening, building greenhouses, beekeeping and chicken farms. In regions with minimal cultivatable land, the Family Economy Department provides women-headed households with livestock to assist them in generating an income.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), in collaboration with the Afghan government, launched an extensive women’s empowerment program in 2014 called ‘PROMOTE’, which aimed to improve the status of 75,000 Afghan women and ensure greater female representation in government, business and civil society. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported in September 2018 however that the program was a failure and a waste of taxpayer’s money.

**3.2. Development organizations, employers, trainers and experts**

“*The National Unity Government is a failed government because it promised to create jobs for people but on the contrary, even more people have lost their jobs. The NUG and foreign countries use returnees and refugees as political tools to advance their political agendas.*”

*Fatana Gilani, Director of the Afghanistan Women’s Association*

Researchers carried out fifteen in-depth interviews (ten females and five males) with representatives of several international NGOs, employers, trainers and experts. More than 2000 NGOs have registered with Afghanistan’s Ministry of Economy, primarily in the areas of social services, health, education and agriculture. The following section provides a brief overview of employment promotion programs provided by various stakeholders.
Hashim Rasuli, program coordinator for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in Kabul, believes skills alone are insufficient for returnees and IDPs to find employment. Without money to start or invest in businesses and/or connections to the Afghan elite, says Mr Rasuli, it is extremely difficult for returnees to integrate into the workforce. Bilal Zadran, Livelihoods and Food Security Coordinator for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), observed that returnees’ skills do not match the demands of Afghanistan’s labor market. According to Mr. Zadran, there is no comprehensive program to assist returnees and IDPs to find work in Afghanistan.

Various international organizations have developed programs to promote employment and integrate returnees, IDPs and women into the labor market. GIZ launched the Sustainable Economic Development and Employment Promotion (SEDEP) project across seven northern provinces in 2014. A returnee component was added in 2018 to offer assistance to the influx of Afghans from Europe and Pakistan during the previous two years.

The Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) aims to train 2800 returnees, IDPs, youth and hosting communities, and provide employment opportunities in both farm and non-farm activities.

Return Assessment and Development for Afghanistan (RADA) supports 30,000 vulnerable Afghans – youths and women in particular – returning from Europe, Pakistan and Iran with technical and vocational training programs.
Success stories: Despite the challenges facing women, female returnees are active in both the formal and informal labor sectors: as entrepreneurs, business owners, employers and employees. Sherin Akbari spent seventeen years as a refugee in Pakistan, where she worked in the carpet weaving industry. Now she employs fifty to sixty families in her own carpet and handicraft business, ‘Khaharan’ (Sisters), in Kabul. Ms. Akbari acknowledged that significant cultural and financial difficulties exist for women, but believes they could contribute more to the economy if granted greater opportunities.

Maryam Jami-ul Ahmadi runs ‘Banu Cultivation, Harvesting and Processing Food Enterprise’ in Western Herat province. Once a refugee in Iran, Ms. Ahmadi now employs thirty-one women. She too is confronted by numerous hurdles, but is determined to fight against Afghanistan’s restrictive cultural norms. According to Ms. Ahmadi, investment in empowering women through agriculture will give them control over decision making at home and beyond.

3.3. Returnees

“This is a dry place. There is no water here. There is no work for people here either. At times, we ate nothing for three days. We returned to Afghanistan hoping our life would be better than in Pakistan, but this is a poorer country, worse than Pakistan. There is no respect for girls and women here. This is a land of unemployed people. People don’t help the poor, don’t feed them because they are also poor.”
Zarsanga, female household-head, Eastern Afghanistan

Twenty-one interviews were conducted in two informal and one formal returnee settlements. Interviewees included one woman and four men in Pul-e Behsud – a camp within Jalalabad accommodating around one hundred families, seven males and one female in Gambiri – a poor rural area in eastern Afghanistan between Nangarhar and Laghman provinces, and two males and six females in Barikab, an hour drive to the north of Kabul on the border with Parwan province.

“My children now ask me why we returned to a country that has nothing to live on. No house, no water, no job,” said Azam, who was deported from Pakistan with his family in 2016 and now lives in Gambiri. The returnees in Pul-e Behsud and Gambiri shared similar frustrations: no work opportunities, no housing, no water and no provision of basic services. They felt universally neglected, stereotyped and harassed by both the provincial government and local warlords. The three hundred residents of Barikab also suffered from lack of employment, housing, medical care, water, electricity and a high school and all felt their lives had been better in Pakistan.

For many interviewees finding shelter was their main priority, as they were reluctant to leave their women and belongings unprotected to search for work.
“Housing first and then employment,” said one returnee in Gambiri. Interviewees in Barikab however were unimpressed with their decade-old, Western-style housing with no protection walls, built on dry, rocky land with financial assistance from the Australian government.

Afghan women wishing to enter the labor market are confronted by multiple obstacles: illiteracy, low levels of education, cultural, familial and societal barriers all restrict women’s participation in economic activities. The most common source of income for working female interviewees in all three returnees’ settlements is home-based carpet weaving, tailoring, embroidery, and bead work. This income however is unreliable and irregular. Women rely mainly on their ‘mahram’s (close male relative) employment for survival. Men are engaged in itinerant labor such as driving, mechanic work and teaching at a UNICEF-funded school in Gambiri.

“I regret returning to Afghanistan. My life as refugee in Pakistan was much better. I expected things would get better each year but it has been the opposite. I would not hesitate to migrate again if I ever get a chance again.”
Samar, Barikab.
4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. To development organizations and donors

- Prioritize employment sectors: Agriculture is a major sector requiring significant support and investment to ensure workers are able to earn adequate livelihoods.\(^1\)
- Establish vocational training centers in rural districts and villages: This will enable people in remote areas easy access to training centers and ensure families feel it is safe for women to attend. These centers will adapt to agricultural seasons and aim to increase the income-generating potential of both men and women.\(^2\)
- Involve village mullahs and community leaders during the planning and implementation phases of vocational training programs. Community and religious leaders have leverage to soften the concepts of ghairat and nang (honor) and can gradually sensitize their communities to the benefits of women taking on productive roles in the economy.\(^3\)
- Marketing strategy training: Many national and international organizations have provided training since the U.S. military intervention in 2001, but more instruction in the usage of technology and networking in marketing is needed.\(^4\)
- Basic literacy and numeracy classes should be provided parallel to vocational training.\(^5\)
- Offer training in marketable skills for women and youth, including instruction in design and networking for non-farm income-generating projects. Develop short-term refresher courses for women who have received vocational training in the past.\(^6\)
- Help women with financial resources: Women cannot get loans because almost all property is registered in the name of male relatives.\(^7\)
- Psychological counseling: Increase and intensify psychosocial and psychiatric counseling in provinces such as Nangarhar with large numbers of returnees.

4.2. To the National Unity Government of Afghanistan

- Develop a multi-dimensional policy to both increase the productivity of Afghanistan’s agricultural sector and create more jobs.\(^8\)

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1 Spozhmai Wardak, Deputy Minister of Women’s Affairs
2 Maryam Jami-ul Ahmadi, Founder of ‘Banu’ Harvesting, Cultivation and Processing Enterprise in Herat.
3 Ibid
4 Nafas Gul, head of Zemarai Afghan enterprise
5 Zuhal, Food Processing Instructor in Nangarhar and Fatana Gilani, Head of Afghanistan Women’s Association
6 Nafas Gul, head of Zemarai Afghan enterprise
7 Sherin Akbari, Head of ‘Khaharan’ Carpet Weaving and Handicrafts Industry
8 Maryam Jami-ul Ahmadi, founder of ‘Banu’ Harvesting, Cultivation and Processing Enterprise in Herat and Asad Ariz, owner of ‘Tabassum’ Raisin Cleaning Factory in Kabul
● Link farmers to the market by building infrastructure and the effective use of technology.9

● Improving coordination: The Afghan government must strengthen coordination at ministerial and provincial levels and establish a centralized information system.10

● Reform labor laws for women and end discrimination against women. Men are given preferential treatment over women as they 1) don’t require maternal leave, 2) are able to work longer hours, 3) are contactable at any time of day or night and 4) don’t require transport.11

● Reform property rights for women: According to the Afghan constitution, men and women have equal rights and responsibilities. Customary and cultural norms however prevent women from owning property in their own names. Owning property would help women obtain loans to fund projects which could create employment opportunities for other women.12

● The NUG must secure rights for vulnerable workers in the informal labor sector. Although this sector occupies the majority of the Afghan labor market, income is typically low and unreliable.

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9 Ibid
10 Ibid
11 Soraya Pakzad, Director of Voice of Women Organization, Latif Salehi, Head of Craftsman Union, Habiba Fakhri, Head of Gender Unit at National Labor Union, and Aqai Adz, owner of Raison Cleaning Factory.
12 Sherin Akbari, Head of ‘Khaharan’ Carpet Weaving and Handicrafts Industry.
● The Afghan government and international organizations must begin an awareness campaign involving the media about labor market opportunities and challenges.\(^\text{13}\)

● The issue of returnees and IDPs should become part of the national discourse. The war is unlikely to end soon and people will continue to be displaced, so it is crucial to organize and provide basic services wherever people are forced to live.

● Strengthen the private sector’s role in the agricultural and informal sectors by encouraging investment and promoting agribusiness.\(^\text{14}\)

### 4.3. To the Austrian Government

● Support local initiatives through the Afghan diaspora: Engaging the Afghan diaspora in Austria will deliver a longer-lasting impact on the ground in Afghanistan. The diaspora know the situation in the country and are able to effectively monitor and report on projects.

● Identify expertise among the diaspora and utilize women in particular to channel development and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

● Afghanistan is not safe: Afghan asylum seekers should not be deported to Afghanistan: The situation in Afghanistan is a humanitarian catastrophe from both a security perspective and a humanitarian aspect.

### 5. METHODOLOGY

This report is based on desk and field research conducted between November 2017 and August 2018 and attempts to understand the characteristics of the Afghan labor market, and its informal sector in particular.

The Afghanistan Development and Peace Research Organization (ADPRO) team conducted fifty in-depth interviews with key informants, including representatives of relevant ministries of the Afghan government, international organizations, potential employers, businesswomen and experts. Interviewees also included twenty-one male and female Afghan returnees who had been forcibly expelled from Pakistan and have since settled in eastern Afghanistan. All interviews were conducted and recorded in Dari and Pashto languages then translated into English, apart from one which was conducted in English.

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\(^{13}\) Sabrina Saqib, Women Rights Activist

\(^{14}\) Khan Jan Aukuzai, Deputy Head of Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce