TECHNICAL PAPER

AFTER RETURN: REBUILDING LIVELIHOODS FOR AFGHAN WOMEN

UN WOMEN

FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

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About Samuel Hall

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Our research connects the voices of communities to changemakers for more inclusive societies. With offices in Afghanistan, Kenya, Netherlands and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, we are based in the regions we study. For more information, please visit www.samuelhall.org.

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AFTER RETURN: REBUILDING LIVELIHOODS FOR AFGHAN WOMEN

UN Women Afghanistan

FOREWORD

By Susan Ferguson, *Special Representative, UN Women Afghanistan*

Every day, Afghan women and girls return to Afghanistan after leaving their lives in Iran or Pakistan behind. Many have been forced to leave their homes, livelihoods and communities abruptly, returning – without resources, assets or support – to a country already facing a deep economic crisis and where opportunities for women to work or build their skills are extremely limited.

For many, return means not only displacement, but the loss of networks, income and support systems – increasing their vulnerability at an already fragile moment.

The scale of this crisis is immense. Since 2023, more than 5.5 million Afghans have returned, adding to the pressures on a country already grappling with humanitarian, economic and climate crises. In just two years, this influx has increased Afghanistan population by an estimated 12 per cent.

While urgent humanitarian needs must continue to be met, it is equally important to invest in longer-term solutions as women rebuild their lives. Without access to livelihoods, financial services and markets, Afghan women returnees face a higher risk of poverty, exploitation and harmful coping strategies.

These women arrive with a determination to restart their lives and support themselves and their families. Some bring skills and experience they can build on; others require more sustained support to develop new income opportunities. With the right investments – in women's livelihoods, women-led enterprises and local women's organizations – women can rebuild with dignity and agency.

When women are able to earn an income, start businesses and access markets, the benefits extend far beyond the individual. Families are supported, communities become more resilient and local economies begin to recover.

At a time when Afghan women's rights are under unprecedented pressure, supporting women's economic participation is one of the most practical and impactful ways the international community can stand with them. Afghan women have always been central to their communities. Supporting their economic opportunities today is essential – not only for their survival, but for Afghanistan's recovery, stability and future.

This report highlights the challenges and opportunities facing women returnees as they seek to rebuild or develop their livelihoods. It offers practical recommendations to strengthen programmes that support women's economic integration and long-term livelihood opportunities.

Susan Ferguson
Special Representative, UN Women Afghanistan

ACRONYMS

AFN	Afghan Afghani (Currency Code)
AWCCI	Afghanistan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DoLSA	Department of Labour and Social Affairs
DSWG	Durable Solutions Working Group
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FHOH	Female Head of Household
HOH	Head of Household
ILO	International Labour Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SHG	Self-Help Group
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
STFA	Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
RCO	Resident Coordinator's Office
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WLO	Women-Led Organization

TERMINOLOGY

Durable solutions	A durable solution is achieved when displaced persons: 1) no longer have protection and assistance needs related to their displacement, 2) have access to their rights without discrimination based on their displacement.
Ecosystem approach	A conceptual framework that maps the environment and layers of actors surrounding an individual or group, to provide elements or entry points to support them. Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological sytems theory, and used widely in Samuel Hall's return and reintegration studies, the ecosystem approach provides a lens centred on the individual but expanding to the layers of the environment surrounding them upon return, including the household, the community and the structural levels.
Intersectionality	The idea that overlapping social identities (e.g. gender, race, class) interact to create unique and multiple forms of discrimination or disadvantage.
Repatriation	The process whereby refugees or displaced persons return to their country of origin. It may be voluntary, and conducted under conditions of safety and dignity.
Return (forced, voluntary)	Voluntary return: return based on free will and informed decision, without coercion. Forced return: return compelled by legal, physical or other pressures, not freely chosen.
Silma-dozi	An Afghan decorative embroidery style used on modern or formal Afghan and Punjabi dresses, characterized by shiny, metallic thread that creates a reflective, embellished finish.
Charma-dozi	A traditional Afghan embroidery technique, often using distinctive charma thread in yellow and white, commonly found on cultural garments.
Khamak-dozi	A fine hand-embroidery technique that creates small, often intricate patterns. It is traditionally used to decorate men's clothing, shawls, and in some regions, women's garments.
Gol-dozi	A style of embroidery featuring floral and ornamental designs, using either hand or machine techniques to add colourful patterns to clothing.
Mora-dozi	A decorative technique involving beadwork, used to embellish dresses and garments with small beads.
Qurs-dozi	A type of traditional hand embroidery and delicate needlework. It is mainly applied to women's clothing, including the yoke, sleeves, and hats. Using specialized threads and needles, this art form creates different, floral, and traditional patterns on garments.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2023, Afghanistan has faced an unprecedented increase in returnees from Iran and Pakistan, many of which have taken place under coercive or involuntary conditions. Women are a significant share of these flows and are increasingly affected, particularly through the rise in family deportations, often returning to a context marked by the collapse of economic opportunities, restrictions on women's work, and a sharp contraction in local markets.

This study on the economic reintegration of Afghan women identifies structural barriers to their economic participation and formulates context-sensitive and evidence-based programme options to improve their access to livelihoods and strengthen the recognition of their role in families and communities after return to Afghanistan. Many returnee women, despite being eager to contribute economically and possessing valuable skills, face immense structural barriers that prevent them from securing employment and achieving economic stability. The report suggests actionable recommendations to enhance women returnees' economic absorption within the Afghan economy, and to reinforce social cohesion with host communities.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a mixed methods approach combining:

- **A quantitative telephone survey** of 582 women who recently had returned from Iran and Pakistan;
- **In-depth qualitative interviews** with 80 focus group members, key informants and case study participants.
- **Participatory workshops with market actors** for local market scans. This triangulation allows for the cross-referencing of data, lived experiences and the perspectives of local economic actors.

The fieldwork was conducted across urban, rural, and peri-urban locations in three key provinces—**Herat, Nangarhar and Kabul**—representing the main return corridors and contrasting socio-economic environments. Herat was selected due to its significance as a primary hub for women returning from Iran. Nangarhar served as a crucial location for women returning from Pakistan. Kabul was included as a mixed return location, notable for the presence of women's networks that significantly influence participation. This multi-provincial approach ensured the capture of diverse experiences and perspectives across different return corridors and socio-economic contexts.

Key areas for further research

The study acknowledges several limitations that may affect the generalizability and interpretation of its findings. The representativeness of the survey is limited to the population frame of the existing dataset, potentially excluding returnee women without phone access or those in highly restrictive households. Data on critical economic indicators like monthly earnings are derived from a small sub-sample, which constrains the statistical generalizability of these specific financial findings.

Data was collected at a single point in time, limiting the ability to track the evolution of reintegration over longer periods. As a result the authors encourage implementing organization to continue tracking the lived experiences of women's economic reintegration over time. Additionally, the research focuses on women's experiences rather than a market assessment, meaning sector viability is not exhaustively assessed and should be completed by local market analyses.

KEY FINDINGS

The report's findings underscore several critical aspects of women's economic experiences post-return to Afghanistan:

1. An almost-total collapse in women's employment after return to Afghanistan

Despite many women returning with strong motivation and skills acquired in exile, only 17 per cent of women who have returned are working after their return. A substantial majority of those who worked in other countries - 77 per cent of those from Iran and 64 per cent from Pakistan - find themselves unemployed upon return . The vast majority of remaining opportunities are informal, irregular and low-paid jobs. Structural barriers lead to widespread unemployment or relegation to low-paid, irregular home-based work. The report indicates that 92.1 per cent of women's employment, compared to 79.6 per cent of men's, is classified as vulnerable.

2. Non-absorption of skills, rather than a lack of skills

Nearly 40 per cent of women report having unused skills, including in technical, educational or digital fields. However, these skills do not translate into employment due to a structural mismatch between the supply of skills and a narrow, informal labour market constrained by restrictions imposed on women's participation.

3. Capital and tools are the main bottleneck affecting economic reintegration

The dominant obstacle for this group of women is access to productive resources: 77 per cent of women have no tools to generate income; only 9 per cent have the equipment they need to carry out their activities. Additional training, in the absence of capital, has a marginal impact. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge about available services and job opportunities compounds these issues.

4. Significant decline in income and increased vulnerability of women-headed households

The economic impact is severe, with the median monthly income for returnee women estimated at approximately 1,100 AFN (USD 17). 57 per cent earn less than they did in exile, only 8 per cent earn more. Households headed by women (approximately 18 per cent of the sample) are particularly vulnerable to income stagnation, debt and food insecurity. Their income generally fares worse than men-headed households and often declines or stagnates over time.

5. Location matters more than country of departure

Women's economic opportunities and mobility vary more according to the province of return than by whether they returned from Iran or Pakistan. Kabul province offers a relatively more permissive environment, while Nangarhar province combines official restrictions on women's rights and movement, weak markets and restrictive social norms.

6. Real but limited sectoral opportunities

The most accessible sectors remain manufacturing and home-based production, particularly for women who may lack formal education. These sectors can offer women an opportunity to leverage skills they acquired prior to their return including:

- Home-based manufacturing and craft production (tailoring, embroidery, food);
- Small-scale agriculture, livestock farming and food processing.

Without access to markets, these activities can trap women in low-income work.

7. Fragile social cohesion between host and returnee women

Returnee and local women work in the same sectors, in contexts shaped by economic decline, climate shocks, and other pressures. However, returnee women may introduce new techniques or ideas learned abroad including on how to best

utilize online channels. Integrated initiatives (joint work, shared workshops, mentoring) show strong potential for reducing tensions and improving economic outcomes.

The report adopted a "what works" lens to highlight what is possible and what can be realistically done to support Afghan women – host and returnees alike – to build a collective action –, solidarity -based approach to local economic development. The report highlights the following four examples of "what works":

- Safe spaces and women-only workshops
- Women's exhibitions with an international reach
- Institutional support
- Cooperative and self-help groups as informal foundations for sustainable reintegration.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The study shows that the economic reintegration of Afghan returnee women with previous livelihood experience is hampered not by a lack of skills or motivation to work, but by the absence of enabling conditions that would allow them to mobilise their skills. There is a structural mismatch between their capabilities and the realities of the Afghan labour market. Interventions must move beyond fragmented approaches and adopt a multi-dimensional logic, simultaneously targeting the economic dimension (access to productive assets, markets, social networks and safe spaces), while strengthening the social dimension of reintegration (social cohesion with host communities).

To address these issues, the report puts forth several key recommendations:

1. Shift from further skills accumulation to activation of existing capacities through productive assets

Evidence from the report shows that a large proportion of returnee women possess marketable skills acquired while in Iran or Pakistan—particularly in digital work, teaching, agriculture, food processing, tailoring and handicrafts—but are unable to generate income due to lack of tools, capital, and inputs. Additional training, when not paired with assets, has limited impact.

In an informalized economy, assets—not training—are the primary gateway to income. Asset-based support enables women to convert skills into livelihoods without increasing exposure to debt, surveillance by family or community members, or exploitation.

Recommendations

- **Reorient livelihood programming toward asset-based activation,** ensuring that women who already possess skills can immediately apply them.
- **Prioritize graduated asset packages**, ranging from basic start-up kits (e.g. sewing machines, food-processing equipment) to more advanced shared machinery for women with higher skill levels. Tailor the assets provided to sectors with proven demand (tailoring, food processing, crafts, small-scale livestock farming), taking into account mobility and home-based work constraints.
- **Combine asset provision with light-touch technical refreshers** focused on quality control, adaptation to Afghan market preferences, and safe business practices.
- **Prioritize in-kind transfers** to reduce the risk of support being diverted for other household needs and protect women's access to livelihoods.
- **Favour grant over credit mechanisms in the current environment;** using small, non-repayable grants that acknowledge the structural impossibility of predictable income generation under restrictions.

2. Strengthen women's economic networks and structured mentoring

Evidence shows that returnee women experience an acute loss of social and professional networks, particularly those who had worked or run businesses in Iran or Pakistan. In Afghanistan's relationship-based economy, this isolation is a critical barrier to market entry. UN Women and stakeholders are encouraged to support platforms that connect experienced businesswomen with returnees, building market access. This includes developing structured mentorship programs focusing on market navigation and customer development, and establishing business platforms for sectors like handicrafts and tailoring to facilitate information sharing and bulk purchasing.

Under restrictive conditions, social capital can help to substitute for institutional support. Women-centred networks reduce isolation, amplify collective voice, and create safer pathways into markets that could otherwise remain inaccessible.

Recommendations

- **Establish structured mentorship arrangements** connecting returnee women with trusted local entrepreneurs, producers, or trainers. Ensure mentorship is practical and focused on:
  - » Navigating local restrictions and informal rules in an evolving context,
  - » Identifying viable buyers and intermediaries,
  - » Managing risk and unpredictability.
- **Support sector-specific women's networks** (e.g. tailoring, food processing, handicrafts), including informal (physical or virtual) groups focusing on:
  - » Information sharing,
  - » Group purchasing of inputs,
  - » Pooling of market opportunities.
- **Encourage peer mentoring among returnee women**, recognizing that women returning from Iran or Pakistan often bring advanced techniques, work discipline, and business exposure. This would help to ensure skills acquired in other countries can be leveraged as shared resources among women, acting as a bridge between host community groups and returnees.
- **Where possible, link networks to existing women-led institutions** to enhance legitimacy and sustainability.

3. Create and support safe, women-only workspaces

This research points to a consistent finding across provinces: the absence of safe and socially acceptable workspaces prevents women from working even when skills, assets, and demand exist. Individual home-based work often remains remains isolating and economically inefficient. Safe spaces are not optional add-ons but structural enablers. Collective environments increase productivity, reduce isolation, and offer protection that individual women cannot secure alone.

Recommendations

- **Pilot women-only economic hubs** that allow collective production while minimizing individual visibility and risk.
- **Design these hubs as multi-functional spaces**, combining production, practical training, mentoring and economic socialization, including:
  - » Shared equipment,
  - » Production space,
  - » Peer learning and mentoring,
  - » Childcare services where possible,

    - » Discreet market linkages and direct links to buyers.
- **Anchor these spaces in existing local structures** to maximize social acceptance by locating hubs strategically in areas with relatively higher tolerance for women's activity, and embedding them within community-approved structures.
- **Use phased models**, beginning with small groups and expanding cautiously to avoid backlash.

4. Strengthen links between returnee and host women by designing inclusive programming that strengthens social cohesion

This research shows signs of early tension between returnee women and host community women, fuelled by the scarcity of opportunities and resources. Targeting exclusively returnee women would exacerbate these dynamics.

Economic interventions cannot succeed if they deepen social fragmentation. Inclusive approaches strengthen acceptance, sustainability, and collective resilience.

Recommendations

- **Design inclusive livelihood interventions** that deliberately include both returned and host community women.
- **Promote collective and cooperative models** that promote economic solidarity and reduce perceptions of competition, where income gains are shared and competition is reduced.
- **Use shared work**—training, production, and mentoring—to strengthen social cohesion, not just economic outcomes.
- **Strengthen the role of local women** as economic and social mediators. Engage women leaders, women's organizations and community actors to mediate perceptions of fairness and legitimacy.
- **Monitor social dynamics closely** to adapt programming and avoid reinforcing stigma against returned women.

5. Strengthen links with local, national and regional markets

This report shows that most women are confined to low-value, oversaturated local markets, resulting in declining returns even when production is possible. Market access—not production—is the primary constraint to income growth. The report emphasizes the need to build connections to existing domestic markets and explore export opportunities, especially for high-quality products like traditional clothing. Specific actions include mapping and connecting women producers with established markets and forging partnerships with chambers of commerce in neighbouring countries to create formal market linkages for women producers with clients such as hotels, retailers, and diaspora buyers.

Without diversified market access, many women could remain trapped in subsistence economies. Even modest improvements in market linkage can significantly raise incomes without expanding women's public exposure.

Recommendations

- **Support aggregation and collective sales models** that allow women to pool production and access larger buyers.
- **Facilitate access to higher value-added domestic markets**, particularly urban, tourist or institutional markets.

- **Work with trusted intermediaries**—including women-led businesses—to connect producers with urban, institutional, or humanitarian procurement markets.
- **Explore low-risk and indirect export opportunities through formal intermediaries**, diaspora networks and diaspora-linked buyers, or regional traders and partnerships, while minimizing women's exposure to border or regulatory risks.
- **Invest in value addition**, including packaging, branding, and quality consistency, rather than increasing production volume alone. Women require support in improving product packaging, branding and standardization.
- **Support digital or remote sales channels** where feasible, especially for women with prior experience in online work.

6. Tailor interventions to provincial and regulatory variations

Evidence from the report demonstrates the province of return shapes women's autonomy and economic options more than country of departure. Uniform programming risks irrelevance or harm. Context-sensitive programming maximizes impact while minimizing risk. Adaptation is essential in a fluid and highly constrained environment.

Recommendations

- **Conduct regular provincial risk and opportunity assessments** to track changes in enforcement, norms, and market conditions.
- **Develop province-specific livelihood pathways**, reflecting:
  - » Degrees of mobility restriction,
  - » Dominant local sectors,
  - » Household structures.
- For example:
  - » **Herat:** support skilled production and artisanal hubs with stronger market linkage. Capitalize on high technical skills through micro-workshops and market linkages.
  - » **Kabul:** support higher-value activities and models, discreet home-based or digital livelihoods compatible with childcare burdens.
  - » **Nangarhar:** prioritize home-based activities, focusing on low-visibility activities with intermediary sales mechanisms and doorstep support
- **Maintain flexibility** to adjust interventions rapidly as restrictions tighten or loosen.

Overall, the report advocates for effective economic support that prioritizes integration into existing women-led businesses, fosters shared opportunities with host communities, and establishes practical market linkages, moving beyond standalone interventions that might inadvertently isolate returnees from the broader local economy. The insights gathered are intended to guide context-sensitive, evidence-based programming that directly responds to the needs and aspirations of returnee women.

FIVE JOURNEYS, ONE REALITY: WOMEN RETURNING AND REBUILDING AMID CONSTRAINT

Across Kabul, Herat, and Nangarhar provinces, the lived experiences of returnee women trace a shared story of determination shaped by limited capital, restricted mobility, and shrinking opportunities.

Zohra*, a widow in her fifties and long-time tailor, manages a workshop where host and returnee women work side by side. She trains other women—many of whom returned with nothing—and sees daily how equipment shortages, cramped spaces, and lack of electricity limit how far their skills can take them. Yet she also witnesses solidarity: women helping women, introducing each other to work, and creating small pockets of stability in a harsh economic landscape. Zohra said:

"If I had a larger space and better equipment, I would immediately include more women in my workshop."

Shahrose*, 22, returned from Iran after her family's documents were cancelled. She works now in a small tailoring business with her sisters and cousins. Everything she has achieved—sewing, weaving, and earning for the family—comes from her father's encouragement. Sharose said:

"Everything I have done has been because of my father's encouragement."

Maryam*, 25, is trained in *Silma-dozi,* a decorative embroidery style used on modern or formal Afghan and Punjabi dresses, characterized by shiny, metallic thread that creates a reflective, embellished finish. After years of hardship in Pakistan and a forced return, she became a master of the craft, only to find that markets are too limited for specialized embroidery. She dreams of using her skills to build something bigger for herself and other women. Maryam said:

"I want to learn every skill."

Nadia*, 26, deported from Iran with her two young sons, has lost the devices such as a sewing machine, nail files and dust collector etc., that she depended on to earn a living. She brought back years of acquired skills—tailoring, makeup, nails, beauty work—but without tools, networks, or a safe space to work from, she cannot rebuild her business. Nadia said:

'THEY DID NOT LET US BRING ANYTHING BACK, NOT EVEN THE DEVICES I WORKED WITH.'

Noori*, 42, once a camerawoman for a TV channel in Kabul, now feels "like a woman in a cage." Multiple migrations—to Iran, then Pakistan, then Afghanistan—have stripped her and her family of assets each time, leaving her without equipment to restart her camerawork.

These five stories – further elaborated as case studies later in this report – reveal what the data shows: Many women are skilled, motivated, and eager to work, but lack capital, tools, safe spaces, and institutional pathways to do so. Their experiences demonstrate both the structural constraints shaping return and the possibilities that can emerge when even modest, well-targeted support reaches them. The case studies highlight what these women would like to see.

* Name has been changed to protect identity.

1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT

Afghanistan has experienced many forced returns from Iran and Pakistan, with demographic and geographic implications. While return trends have fluctuated over time, the scale and composition of returns have shifted in recent years. The most pronounced surge has occurred since 2023, driven by large-scale returns from Pakistan, followed by a sharp increase in returns from Iran in 2024 and 2025. These movements have included a growing proportion of women, children, and entire households, many of whom return with limited assets, as well as disrupted livelihoods and reduced access to social networks.[1]

The returns of 5.5 million people from Iran and Pakistan since 2023 has placed a strain on the Afghan economy.[2] In 2025 alone, over 2.6 million individuals returned to Afghanistan - 1.8 million from Iran and 850,300 from Pakistan. Approximately half of these returnees were undocumented.[3] This large-scale and abrupt influx has resulted in a sudden loss of remittances, increased pressure on the domestic labour market, and the potential for cyclical migration.[4] As a result, livelihoods, particularly in the agricultural sector, are increasingly vulnerable to declining remittance flows.[5] Increased returns projected for 2026 necessitate identifying and supporting sustainable livelihoods for women. The present research is also situated in a moment of targeted effort to assist more women in Afghanistan, despite sector-wide funding constraints and challenges. STFA funding is available to reinforce the response in the West and the North.[6]

Since 2021, there has been a drastic reduction in women's employment, as women have been barred from most jobs and faced increasing restrictions on their movement.[7] In 2023, the World Bank reported that only 5.1 per cent of working-age women participated in the labour force, compared to 69 per cent of men.[8] In this context, Afghan women participate in micro and home-based businesses in response to job restrictions. This explains the four-fold increase in the number of women's businesses from 2021-2025 recorded by the Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industries (AWCCI).[9] The quality of employment also differs significantly: women's work tends to be less stable than men's. As a result, 92.1 per cent of women's employment, compared with 79.6 per cent of men's, was classified as vulnerable.[10] Women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas, face highly gendered challenges: lack of capital, lower education and business-oriented strategic training, and limited decision-making authority in business contexts.[11]

These three factors – rising returns, often under pressure, economic strains, and women's restricted participation – are at the heart of this study, which seeks to understand the role that Afghan returnee women can play after return, including their well-being, confidence, and ability to gain financial

1. UN Women, Afghan Women Returnees face Poverty and Exploitation Risks, August 2025.
2. UNHCR, UNHCR seeks support for solutions as 5.4 million Afghans return since late 2023, February 2026.
3. UN Women Asia Pacific, Gender Alert: Returnees from Pakistan and Iran: June 2025, July 2025
4. UNAMA, UN special representative calls for urgent international action amid unprecedented Afghan returns, July 2025. World Vision / Samuel Hall (2026), Compounding Returns: A study on Remittance Loss and the Cost of Deportations.
5. FEWS NET, Afghanistan: Key Message Update – Likely Atypically Low Winter Food Stocks Threaten Food Access through Early 2026, August 2025.
6. Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan, The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan - Annual Progress Report 2024, 2025.
7. Haidari, Adila, Gendered Labor Rights Under Taliban Rule: Addressing Employment Inequality in Post-2021 Afghanistan, 2024.
8. Ibid.
9. ACAPS (2025) Afghanistan Barriers and Enablers to Self-Employment for Women
10. World Bank, Afghanistan Gender Landscape, 2022.
11. Samandar and Wardak, Gender-specific Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs in Rural Afghanistan, 2025.

independence and support themselves and their families.[12] To "formalize a role that women are eager to play," the aid community is encouraged to create "platforms to foster information exchange, social support, mentorship, and job placements."[13]

Many returnee women from both corridors experience the compounded effect of different barriers against employment. Restrictions on women's mobility, work, and public life pose a clear challenge to employment. In 20 per cent of areas of high return surveyed by UN RCO Afghanistan, women and girls avoid public spaces due to safety concerns.[14] For those without family in the area of return, being disconnected from community and social ties results in difficulty securing employment.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This research seeks to capture women's perspectives on economic reintegration and their broader societal roles following return. It is not a market assessment, but rather an analysis of lived experiences and priorities from the perspective of women themselves. The findings offer UN Women, the members of the Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG), local and international partners an opportunity to develop operational, practical interventions that are informed by the experiences of multiple actors. By adopting a bottom-up approach, these insights can guide context-sensitive, evidence-based programming that responds directly to the needs and aspirations of returnee women.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a mixed-methods approach to examine and inform strategies for strengthening the economic reintegration of Afghan returnee women. The study combined a phone-based survey with in-depth qualitative fieldwork to capture both the scale and the lived experiences of economic reintegration. The research builds on existing evidence and addresses identified information gaps in relation to the research questions. The research was conducted in four phases: inception; data collection; analysis, reporting, and validation; and dissemination.

FIGURE 1
Research sub-objectives

12. UNHCR. 2025. Afghanistan Protection Landscape: Returnee Women and Girls. ReliefWeb. Accessed October 16, 2025.
13. UNHCR. 2025. Afghanistan Protection Landscape: Returnee Women and Girls. ReliefWeb. Accessed October 16, 2025.
14. United Nations & NGO Partners in Afghanistan, "Integrated Response Plan for Afghan Returnees from Pakistan, 2025," UN RCO (2025).

TABLE 1
Research themes and questions

Research Questions		Tools
Theme 1. Comparative Return Experiences		
1.1	How do economic reintegration experiences differ for women?	Survey, Case Studies
1.2	How do factors like age, family situation, or education shape differences?	Survey, Case Studies
Theme 2. Social Cohesion and Host-Returnee Dynamics		
2.1	What are perceptions of returnee women's economic roles among returnees and hosts?	FGDs, KIIs
2.2	What community or institutional mechanisms exist to support or mediate reintegration and cohesion?	KIIs
Theme 3. Economic Reintegration Pathways		
3.1	What sectors offer opportunities for returnee women in 2025?	KIIs, FGDs
3.2	What barriers or enablers shape returnee women's access to opportunities?	Survey, Case Studies, KIIs

Research locations

Fieldwork was conducted across urban, rural, and peri-urban locations to capture the diverse experiences of returnee women in Herat, Nangarhar, and Kabul provinces.

- **Herat** was selected as a key hub for women returning from Iran,
- **Nangarhar** served as the key location for women returning from Pakistan,
- **Kabul** was included as a mixed return location, with the presence of women's networks that shape participation.

Research limitations

Representativeness. The survey uses stratified random sampling from UN Women's random dialler dataset. The findings are limited to the population frame of this existing dataset, which may not fully capture all returnee women, particularly those without phone access or those in highly restrictive households. The data on critical economic indicators, such as monthly earnings and income trends is drawn from a small sub-sample, which limits the statistical generalizability of these specific findings, especially when compared to the total survey sample.

Cross-sectional survey design. Data was collected at a single point in time which limits the ability to capture how reintegration evolves over time. Subjective values. All data collected in this study is self-reported, which introduces recall or social desirability biases. These factors can compromise the reliability and validity of the findings, as the reported information may not fully reflect actual behaviours, attitudes, or outcomes. The research focuses on women's experiences rather than a full market assessment, as a result, sector viability cannot be assessed exhaustively. Given the context, sensitive topics may be under-reported by the women who were part of the study.

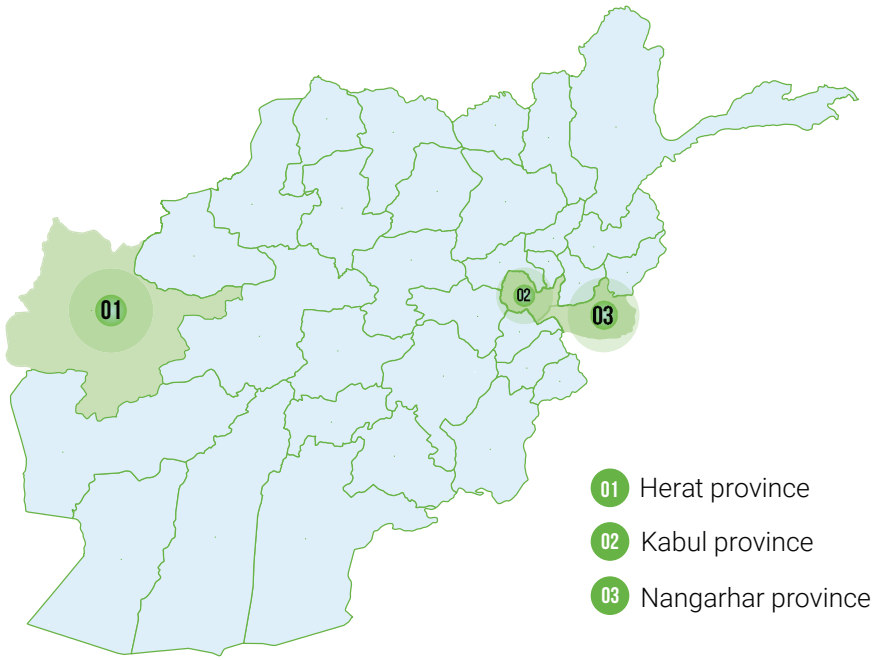
TABLE 2

Quantitative and qualitative tools, and sampling strategy

Research Tools	Target	Total
Phone-Based Survey	Returnee women from Iran and Pakistan	582 (281 from Iran and 301 from Pakistan)
FGDs	Returnee and host women	9 FGDs, mixed returnee/host (3 per province) 2 women, 1 men
KIIs	Employers, chambers of commerce, CSOs, local authorities	15: 5 per province
Case Studies	Different profiles of returnee women	9 case studies – 3 per province
Local Sector Scans	Based on KIIs, data analysis and observations of local markets	3 scans
Total Sample	**700 research participants**	

FIGURE 2

Map of Sampled Locations



2

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES OF RETURN

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EXPERIENCES OF RETURN

Key findings on women's economic experiences of return

- **Location matters more than the country of departure in determining reintegration pathways for women:** provincial restrictions shape women's work options more than whether they returned from Iran or Pakistan.
- **Manufacturing and home-based production** are the consistently viable pathways accessible even without formal education.
- **Women return motivated and many are work-ready**, but structural barriers push most returnee women interviewed into unemployment or low-paid, irregular home-based work.
- **Employment collapses after return:** Only ~17 per cent of returnee women are working post-return; 77 per cent (Iran) and 64 per cent (Pakistan) of those who worked abroad are now unemployed.
- **Skills and employment mismatch:** Approximately 39 per cent of women report unused skills, regardless of return corridor.
- **Capital and tools deficit:** 77 per cent lack any tools to earn income; only 9 per cent have adequate tools.
- **Income decline:** Median monthly income is ~1,100 AFN (17 USD), with 57 per cent earning less than they did abroad and only 8% earning more.

BEFORE RETURN: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES, SKILLS, AND ASSETS

In 2025, some 1.9 million Afghans returned from Iran[15], and in 2026, over 330,000 have already returned in 2026[16], with women being most likely to return from Tehran, Fars, and Sistan and Baluchistan provinces.[17] This figure outnumbers return flows from Pakistan in the same period. Returnees from Iran are travelling primarily through Islam Qala, Herat province, and Milak-Zaranj, Nimroz province. On the Pakistan side, Afghans returning from Pakistan are mostly undocumented, less educated, and nearly half are women and girls.[18] Sixty per cent of total returnee inflows from Pakistan are aged under 18 years.[19] A total of 74 per cent of women returnees in this year were from either Baluchistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.[20]

15. UNHCR, Iran–Afghanistan Returns Emergency Response, 28–31 March 2026.
16. IOM, Afghanistan Returnee Border Response Dashboard, data accessed April 2026
17. UN Women Asia Pacific. 2025. Gender Alert: Returnees from Pakistan and Iran (June 2025). July 2025.
18. Ibid.
19. UNHCR. 2024. "Afghan Returnees Rapid Needs Assessment (ARRNA) May 2024." UNHCR Data Portal.
20. IOM DTM Afghanistan, "Flow Migration Survey," 2024

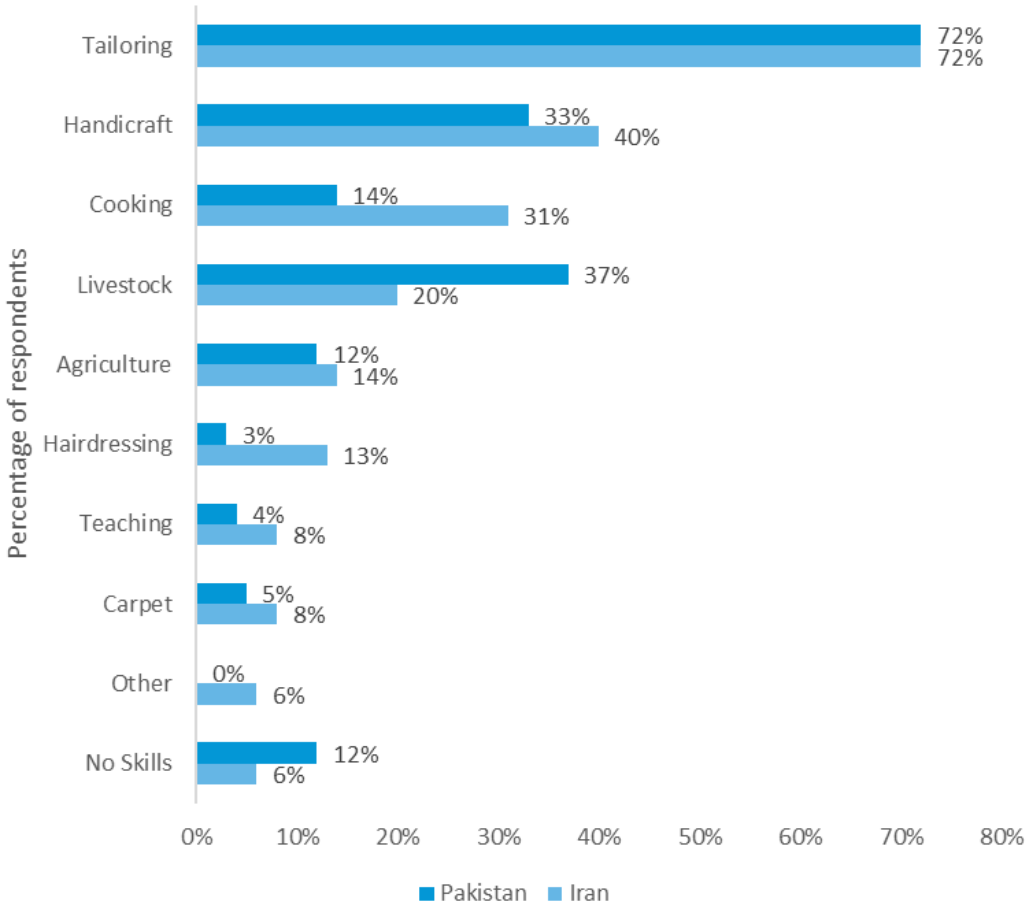
Women's work experience and skills

Life for Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan is characterized by legal and social restrictions, particularly for those lacking documentation. Yet, many women accessed regular work in tailoring, home-based production, online activities, or informal services.[21] Women in Nangarhar reflected on their time in Pakistan: 'I did not sit idle or waste my time,' shared one tailor. They took on leadership roles: 'I was a tailoring instructor there and had students. My business was good.'[22] Others processed walnuts or cleaned fish.[23]

Returnee women from Iran are more likely to have worked abroad. Fifty-six per cent of respondents returning from Iran had worked, compared to 34 per cent for Pakistan returnees.[24] Returnees continuing the same work following arrival in Afghanistan are overwhelmingly tailors and manufacturers. Women returnees from Pakistan are three times more likely to continue (23 per cent) than those from Iran (8 per cent).

FIGURE 3

Top 10 skills women arrive with



Source: UN Women - Samuel Hall phone survey data, 2025

21. Case study with a former tailor conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
22. Case study with a former tailor instructor and tailor conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
23. Case study with a former tailor instructor and tailor conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
24. Phone survey conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.

Women's skills learnt in Iran and Pakistan

Returnee women bring a range of skills to Afghanistan from Iran and Pakistan.

Returnee women from Iran possess diverse skills, shaped by exposure to Iran's labour market including :

- **Vocational and semi-industrial skills** in tailoring, sewing, embroidery, carpet weaving, and handicrafts.
- **Advanced machinery uncommon** among local women.[25]
- **Home-based food processing**. Skills mentioned in qualitative interviews in Herat and Kabul included cooking, cake and cookies, jam and pickles, tomato paste, drinks, candy, and paper.[26]
- **Agriculture and gardening.** Women in Herat, after observing roadside flower sellers in Iran, began to sell flowers along the road, leading to the opening of nearby women-led flower shops.[27]
- **Cosmetics and makeup services, midwifery, elderly care, and health-related roles.**[28]
- **Skills in sales and shopkeeping, online work and content creation, camerawork, driving, and translation.**
- **Work across industrial sectors**, highlighting familiarity with mixed-gender workplaces and formal work systems.[29]

Returnee women from Pakistan present a mixed skills profile shaped by varied access to education and livelihoods. While many participants describe a substantial proportion of women as illiterate and lacking marketable skills,[30] others report:

- **Traditional production skills.** These include carpet-making, tailoring, bead-weaving (*Mora-dozi*), quilt-making, Sermeh embroidery (*Silma-dozi*), leather stitching (*Charma-dozi*), and traditional clothing production such as qors dozi. Women earned steady incomes from tailoring while in Pakistan.[31]

TABLE 3

Quantitative data overview of pre-return skills statistics

Category	Iran Returnees	Pakistan Returnees
Level of Education	37% have no schooling	67% have no schooling
Dominant skill types	Cooking (31%), handicraft (40%), hair	Livestock (37%), more with "no skills"
How skills were acquired	4× more likely to have formal training	Very limited formal training
Worked abroad	56% worked abroad	34% worked abroad

25. FGD with returnee men and women, and key informant interviews with employers, conducted in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
26. FGD with returnee men, participatory workshop and key informant interview with employers, conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
27. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
28. Interviews conducted in Herat, Nangarhar, November 2025.
29. Workshop and interviews conducted in Herat and Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
30. FGD and key informant interview with employers, conducted in Herat and Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
31. FGD and key informant interviews with returnee women conducted in Herat and Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

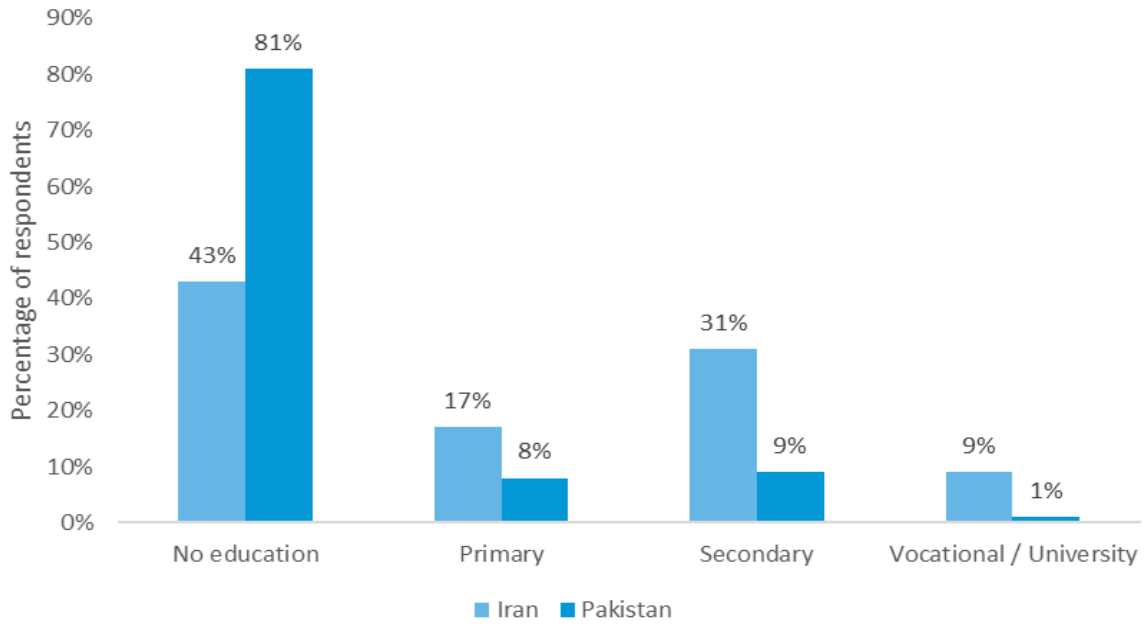
- **Agricultural skills.** In rural contexts, women are described as highly capable agricultural workers, often cultivating crops alongside male household members, particularly saffron.[32]
- **Food preparation**, including baking sambosa and other foods. However, persistent lack of start-up capital limits their ability to commercialize these skills.[33]
- **Education and language skills.** Unlike other returnee groups, women from Pakistan are more frequently reported to possess formal education and language skills, particularly in English and Urdu. Some shared that they now teach these subjects in local educational centres or from home, as well as engaging in madrasa-based religious instruction.[34]
- **A few women pointed to their underutilized skills** in computer literacy, midwifery training (though uncertified), makeup, and administration.[35]

Beyond tailoring

Women return with less common skills, even though tailoring often dominates discussions. Returnee women with these more rare skills are younger and far more educated, yet still struggle to find work. For example, computer-skilled women (all from Iran) and construction-skilled women (all from Pakistan) mostly worked abroad, but almost none are employed upon return. Women with shopkeeping skills are most likely to be employed, though the numbers are small and few with experience have relevant tools. The few multi-skilled women (10) interviewed are largely unemployed. Teaching skills are common but underused: 18 per cent of teachers

FIGURE 4

Education level by country of return



Source: UN Women - Samuel Hall phone survey data, 2025

32. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
33. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
34. Workshop and FGD with returnee and host women conducted in Kabul and Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
35. Focus group discussions, key informant interviews conducted in Kabul and Nangarhar Afghanistan, November 2025.

work. Thus, despite potential in other contexts or circumstances, unusual skills and higher education do not improve employment outcomes in the current Afghan labour market.

Education status has little bearing on returnee women's employment prospects. Stark educational disparities were observed within the sample, with a significantly higher proportion of Pakistan returnees (67 per cent) having no formal education, compared to 37 per cent of Iran returnees. Conversely, Iran returnees showed higher rates of secondary (19 per cent) and university education (4 per cent). This is not associated with significant differences in employment rates. The lack of strong association bolsters the overarching finding that skills are not effectively in use.

BOX 1

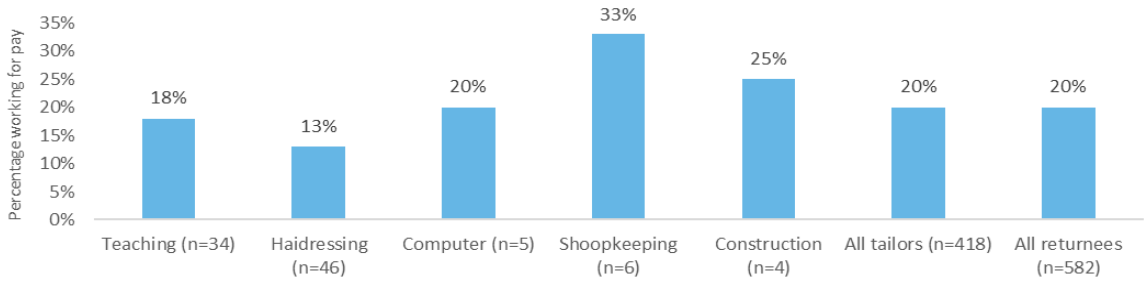
The employability challenge of skills beyond tailoring

Women with skills beyond tailoring are younger and far more educated, yet still struggle to find work. The most important challenge is aligning these skills with existing markets, which often bar women returnees.

- **Computer-skilled women (all from Iran) and construction-skilled women (all from Pakistan)** mostly worked abroad, but almost none are employed now.
- **Shopkeeping** shows the highest employment among less common skills, though numbers are small and most lack tools.
- **Teaching skills** are common but underused; only 18 percent of teachers work.

FIGURE 5

Employment rates by skills type



Source: UN Women - Samuel Hall phone survey data, 2025

CASE STUDY 1:

'THEY TOOK MY DEVICES, BUT NOT MY SKILLS.'

My name is Nadia*. I live in Herat now, in Bagh Dasht. We pay 3,000 AFN (46.74 USD) rent and live with my mother-in-law. I have two sons, one is ten years old and the other is eight years old. My husband is a day labour worker. I studied until the 8th grade in Iran many years ago. I was a migrant for many years, then came back to Afghanistan for six years, and went back to Iran through the smuggling route. I lived there for four years until the Government of Iran deported us. They did not let us bring anything back, not even the devices I worked with.

In Iran, I worked in tailoring and manufacturing, and I also learned nail implants, makeup, lip shading, microblading, eyelash extensions, and hair braiding. I learned these while I was a janitor. In Ekbatan town, I asked to join tailoring training but could not pay the 4 million Iranian Toman (26 USD) fee. I worked and cleaned for a week until the manager felt sympathy and allowed me to learn. When I told the teacher I was tired from the long route and my small children, she let me sit behind the machine. They gave me a *mantoo (long, loose-fitting outer garment or coat)* to sew; I sewed it neatly, ironed it, and gave it to her. She became happy and told me to come to work. I stayed there for a year, sewing dresses, coats and veils. I also learned beauty work from from other women working there: everything from nails to hair colouring. One friend even bought me a nail device to use at home.

I WORKED IN SECRET AT HOME, BECAUSE WITHOUT DOCUMENTS I COULD NOT OPEN A SHOP.

Some Afghan neighbours and friends from far away came to me for nail work, makeup and extensions. I always charged half the normal price.

THE SECOND MIGRATION EXPERIENCE WAS VERY HARD.

I went through the smuggling route for six days with two small children. I lived in people's houses for three months, crying and without money. Iranians insulted us, calling us Afghani. They refused to sell us bread. We couldn't go out. My husband was afraid of being caught and always wore a suit so no one would recognize him. They said Afghans made everything expensive. Only the women who trained me in beauty work treated me well. They eventually caught my husband early in the morning and demanded documents. He didn't have any, so they brought him home and took us all to the Sefidsang detention center. We were deported with nothing, my carpet, stove, TV, and my work equipment all left behind. They told us the UN would help; they gave us a card and never called us. Since returning, I have been depressed.

* Name has been changed to protect identity.

Still, I have used my skills. For two months after returning, my cousins came to me. I put nail extensions on them, filed and designed their nails, coloured their hair, and did makeup whenever there was a wedding. I also do hair braiding for my sisters-in-law and fix my own hair. But I had no equipment, so I did not earn. The reason I cannot work now is financial. I need investment to open a shop and buy devices: a nail device, ironing device, sewing machine, scissors. I tried to find work; I went to salons, offered to partner with them, told tailoring shops I wanted work. They all said no. At home there is no space. I live with five brothers-in-law, two sisters-in-law, my mother- and father-in-law. People here say, "Why did you return? You became miserable by coming back. You had a better life there."

They say this because they know how difficult it is for me in this crowded house. Since returning, I have not received any help from anyone, neither community nor institutions.

MY ASPIRATIONS ARE CLEAR. WHAT I WANT IS TO CONTINUE MY PROFESSION. I WANT TO LEARN MORE, IMPROVE STEP BY STEP AND INVEST IN MY CHILDREN.

I was never a woman who sat at home; I was a woman of work, a woman who wanted to be independent. If I have a shop, I will see myself at my peak in one year. In three years, if I rely on myself, I can improve more. In five years, if I have a class and continue my skill, it will be good. I don't have fear, only financial problems. If I had support to open a shop, a place to work, devices to start with, I could rely on myself. If I had a small grant and a trusted female mentor, the first thing I would do is open my shop – tailoring or makeup – and then rent a house so I don't have to live here anymore.

I WANT TO STAND ON MY OWN, CONTINUE MY CHILDREN'S EDUCATION, AND USE THE SKILLS I WORKED SO HARD TO LEARN.

Women's assets

In addition to skills, a critical asset returnee women bring is energy and a high motivation to earn and contribute to their families. They are described as being as passionate about having jobs and participating in society as men.[36] In particular, women returning from Iran are seen as 'motivated', 'open-minded' and 'business-minded'. According to a male community member in Herat, returnee women 'encourage their fellow Afghans to think globally.'[37] Returnee women from both Iran and Pakistan seek to invest in their community and serve as role models for girls and other women. 'Yes, I can definitely train others,' a returnee from Herat shared, when asked about her aspirations for her sewing skill. 'The girls, my aunt, my sister-in-law, my daughter, my sister-in-law's daughter, they all come to me to learn.'[38]

Work abroad was more frequent for Iran returnees (56 per cent vs 34 per cent). However, post-return continuity is rare for both groups. Of those who worked abroad, 77 per cent (Iran) and 64 per cent (Pakistan) are now unemployed. Only a small fraction continue the same work (8 per cent Iran, 23 per cent Pakistan). Table 4 presents a comparative overview of the survey findings on women returnees' employment outcomes following return.

This drive is often contingent on having the necessary funding, materials, and environment. In Nangarhar, a teacher shared that she cried 'all day and night' when she was told she could no longer work. One participant noted: 'But if someone has no resources, they cannot do anything.'[39] Despite readiness to continue work in sewing, factories, cooking, and handicrafts, many lack proper equipment or placement.[40]

AFTER RETURN: EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

UNHCR in 2025 highlights that, over time, income of women-headed households – representing about 18 per cent of the returnees – was generally worse than the income of male-headed households, upon return from Pakistan.[41] This difference in income only grew over time, with women's income falling or remaining stagnant, while men's income gradually

TABLE 4

Quantitative data overview of post-return employment statistics

Category	Iran Returnees	Pakistan Returnees
Continuity after return	8% continue same work	23% continue same work
Not working now, after working	77% not working	64% not working
Unused skills	~39% unused	~39% unused
Current employment rate	~17% working	~17% working
Income	Median 800 AFN (12.45 USD); mean 2,003 AFN (31.18 USD)	Median 1,500 AFN (23.37 USD); mean 2,399 AFN (37.38)

36. Key informant interview with a women's employer conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
37. Participatory workshop with male employers and TVET instructors conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
38. Case study interview conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
39. FGD with returnee women and men conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
40. Ibid.
41. UNHCR, Rebuilding lives: How return duration shapes income generation and reintegration dynamics for Afghan returnees.

Women business owners gather at a UN Women-supported Multi-Purpose Women's Centre in Parwan province, eastern Afghanistan. Support is needed to pilot other women's work hubs offering integrated services including skills training and access to tolls and equipment, to maximize the economic participation of returnee women. Photo: UN Women/Ali Omid Taqdisyan

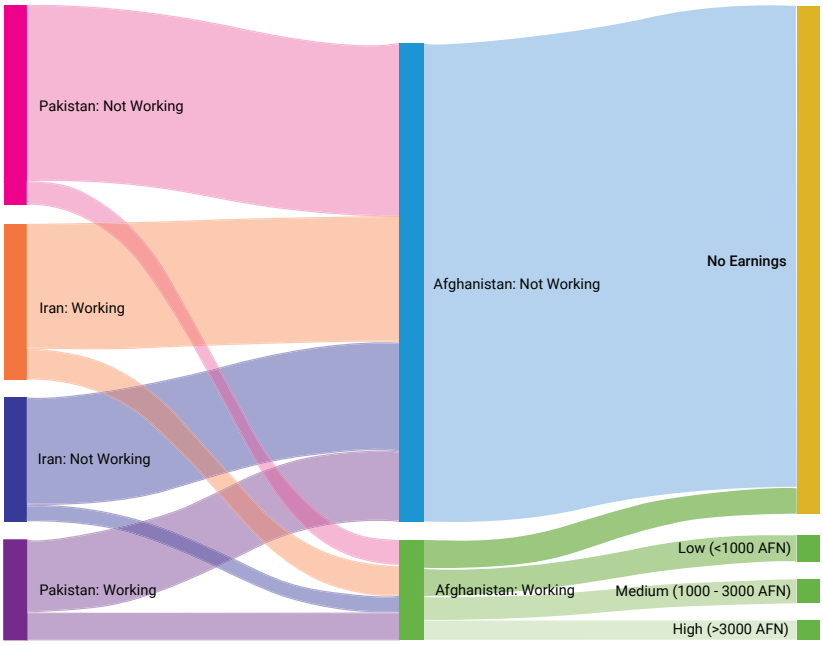
increased with reintegration. This source also noted that debt and food insecurity were often tied to longer time spent back in Afghanistan, suggesting reliance on short-term strategies and limited access to dependable income upon return. UNHCR credits this disparity with "a gradual withdrawal from the labour force" and "a shift into lower-paid or more precarious activities."[42] The report also suggests that women-headed households tend to be smaller, which may be linked to lower incomes due to having fewer working-age members. These households often lack working-age males. Finally, expectations of domestic work also inhibit labour and further contribute to this disparity.

Returnee women are working harder – more hours, more jobs, for example – to earn similar or lower incomes.[43] Compared to men, women have lower incomes and more difficult access to capital. Many returnee women also lack knowledge on what services were available. This may, by extension, lead to a lack of information on job opportunities. Returnees from Pakistan were marginally more semi-skilled than the host community in the area of return.[44] Women's skills included tailoring and handicrafts, and they expressed a need for equipment to continue these trades in Afghanistan.[45]

42. UNHCR. Rebuilding lives: How return duration shapes income generation and reintegration dynamics for Afghan returnees (August 2025)
43. Samuel Hall and ADSP. "Durable Solutions Analysis: Herat (Research Brief, July 2025)." July 2025.
44. UN/OCHA. 2025. "Integrated Response Plan: Afghan Returnees (Pakistan Border Response and Reintegration Response Areas – Return).
45. UN Women, Gender Alert, July 2025.

FIGURE 6

Work and income pathways for returnee women from Iran and Pakistan to Afghanistan



Source: UN Women - Samuel Hall phone survey data, 2025

Figure 6 illustrates a key finding of this study: return fundamentally reshapes women's economic trajectories. Regardless of whether they were employed abroad, the majority of women enter unemployment upon return.

Those who are employed in Afghanistan are concentrated almost exclusively within the lowest income bracket.

The visualization underscores a structural mismatch between the skills women possess and the labour market's limited capacity to absorb them.

Skills do not translate into work

Women who returned from Iran report fewer restrictions compared to those returning from Pakistan, exhibiting greater mobility, autonomy, and acceptance of work. However, provincial location is the key factor. In our sample Kabul, Takhar, and Balkh are the most permissive provinces, while Nangarhar is the most restrictive. Mobility is much higher in Kabul (78 per cent) than in Nangarhar (53 per cent), and this gap is about twice as large as the difference between returnees from Iran and Pakistan. This means a woman in Kabul possesses nearly double the autonomy of a woman in Nangarhar, regardless of her country of return. Across all three provinces of study, husbands primarily make decisions regarding work. Employed women, however, demonstrate slightly higher levels of autonomy.

Stories of women with diverse return profiles and pathways show that limitations on work are shaped by current location, not the country of return. For example, 77 per cent of returnee respondents have no tools to earn a livelihood, and only 9 per cent have the tools required. As a participant in Kabul reflected: 'We have skills in our mind, but without capital a person can only know what they can do, not more.'[46] Women returnee respondents in Nangarhar advocated for receiving tailoring supplies and classroom materials to teach girls, especially English.[47] Those from Herat require tailoring and food production

46. FGDs conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
47. FGDs and case study with a former teacher conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

equipment, emphasising more advanced techniques.[48] Finally, returnees from Kabul mentioned tailoring with more advanced techniques, such as stones embellishment, and zigzag stitching, and poultry.[49]

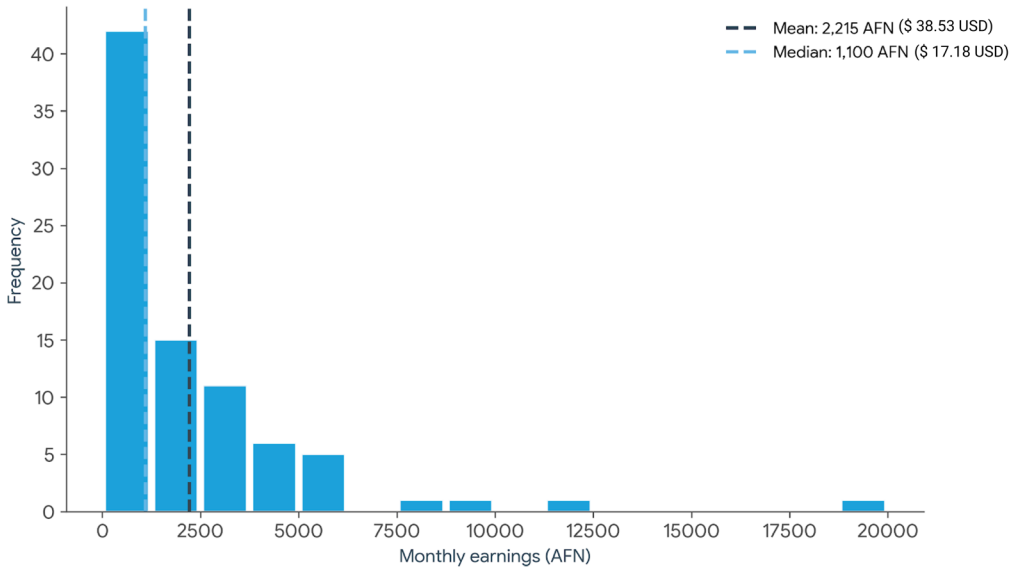
Most working women returnees are not employed (76-78 per cent), with a small percentage (5-7 per cent) engaged in unpaid family work. Among the 17 per cent who are employed, the majority (72-75 per cent) work in manufacturing and crafts; tailoring; and food processing. The majority of these employed women are self-employed (65 per cent), home-based (82 per cent), and work in crafts or agriculture. Currently, women returnees' job opportunities are mostly informal and low income. These figures reveal that work type, not skills or education, is the primary determinant of income. This means there is significant misalignment between skills and opportunities. Hours are often irregular (avg. 24/week), and earnings are low. For example, the median income is 1,100 AFN (17.06 USD), and 1 in 10 work unpaid. Of the survey's participants, 57 per cent earn less today in Afghanistan than they did abroad, while only 8 per cent earn more. Figure 7 displays women's monthly earnings. Figure 8 visualises the proportion of lower post-return incomes.

Despite a strong skills base, women returnees often lack the necessary activation conditions, such as capital, tools, and market access to generate livelihoods. Home-based work is the expected norm immediately after returning, and the associated loss of income and security creates psychological strain. Some institutional support is available from de facto ministries, UN agencies, and NGOs.

Employment participation rates are nearly identical across women returnees from Iran (16.7 per cent) and Pakistan (17.6 per cent), despite differences in income levels and settlement patterns. Women returnees from Pakistan report higher median incomes, largely reflecting their greater

FIGURE 7

Monthly earnings distribution (N=84)

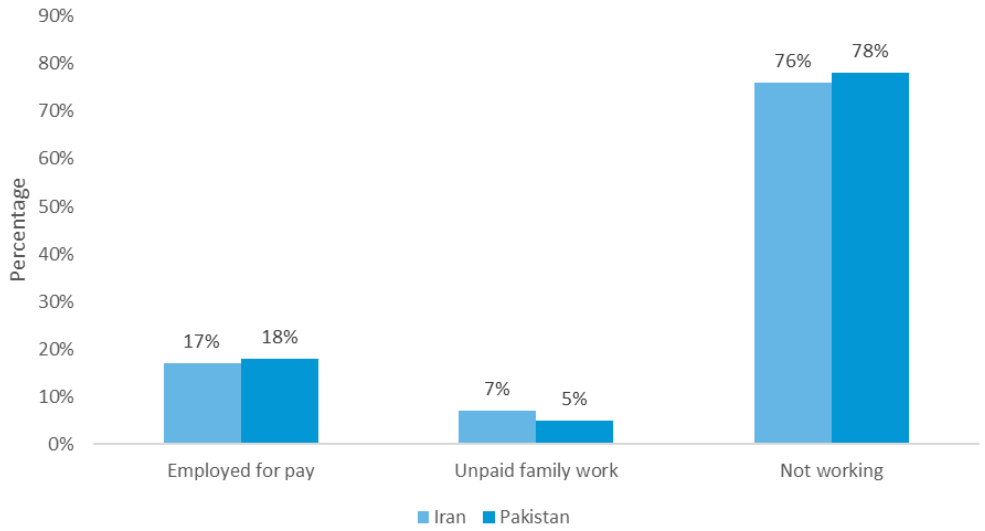


Source: UN Women - Samuel Hall phone survey data, 2025

48. Key informant interview conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
49. FGDs conducted in Herat and Kabul, and key informant interview in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.

FIGURE 8

Monthly earnings distribution by type of work (N=84)



Source: UN Women - Samuel Hall phone survey data, 2025

concentration in urban areas, rather than differences in sectoral engagement or labour market attachment.

WOMEN RETURNEES' JOB SEARCH

Key lessons from successful returnees

Reintegration and economic success for women returnees in the Afghan economy are primarily driven by four factors:

1. **Practical manufacturing skills:** Manufacturing skills are a significant game-changer, as 54 per cent of economically successful women are employed in this sector (e.g., tailoring, handicrafts).
2. **Prior work experience abroad:** 73 per cent of successful women have worked abroad, which provided them with practical skills, confidence, and strong work habits, particularly where returning to the same sector is possible.
3. **Informal skills training:** the most common and effective pathway, with 37 per cent of women acquiring their skills from family or friends, often combined with self-teaching.
4. **Network based job-seeking, as formal sectors and spaces continue to exclude women:** One returnee woman from Herat shared: 'We went to the market for two days until late evening but could not find a job.'[50] Mobility restrictions and security concerns limit women's ability to search for opportunities and reduce the range of methods they use, often pushing them to rely only on family networks. 'For men it is not as difficult as for us… the bazaar is risky.'[51]

50. FGD with returnee women conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
51. Ibid

BOX 2

Returnee women are searching for opportunities in context-sensitive ways:

- **Around half of non-working women are actively searching for work**, mostly through family networks.
- **Job search efforts are limited:** most women rely on just one method, and very few approach employers directly.
- **Age, marital status and education shape strategies:** younger and unmarried women use social media more; middle-aged and married women rely almost entirely on family.
- **Restrictions reduce the likelihood and range of methods for searching**, pushing women toward family-only channels.
- **Iran returnees search slightly more and use social media more**; Pakistan returnees use local shops and markets more.

Success among Afghan women is not limited by age. In our sample, 46 per cent of women who were successful in finding jobs are young (under 30), 32 per cent are middle-aged, and 22 per cent are older (40 plus), with older women leveraging experience and reliability while younger women rely on energy and adaptability. Education, while helpful, is not essential for livelihoods, as 51 per cent of successful women have no formal schooling. Vocational training can compensate for limited education, while higher education correlates with higher earnings.

Many Afghan women returnees had settled in areas affected by the eastern Afghanistan earthquake of 31 August 2025. Six months later, many are still unable to rebuild their homes and are living in tents with their families. The earthquake disproportionately impacted women, their livestock and their livelihoods, leaving many women – particularly those heading households – with no income or a way to feed their families. Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

CASE STUDY 2:

'BECOMING THE MASTER OF SILMA-DOZI: ASPIRING TO WORK, TEACH, AND ONE DAY EXPORT.'

My name is Maryam*. I am 25-years-old. We left Afghanistan when I was a child and moved to Karachi, Pakistan, but life there was also full of hardship. People treated us badly. They called us names and blamed us for things. I had dreamt of becoming a doctor, but I could not study because I had to care for my brothers and as my uncles believed women should not go to school. We lived in poverty throughout our time in Pakistan. My mother worked in people's houses, my father did daily wage labour when he could.

During the winter, we were deported. The police entered our house and told us to leave immediately. We had no money for the journey and left with only the clothes we were wearing. My mother's earrings and all our belongings were left behind or looted. It was cold, I got pneumonia, and when we crossed into Afghanistan, we did not know where to go. We lived in a tent and still have no proper shelter.

After returning, Save the Children came to survey women for skills training. I explained our poverty and neighbours supported my request to be included. I was selected for *Silma-dozi* (Sermeh embroidery) training. At first my husband did not allow me to attend, but my mother-in-law convinced him, saying that he himself had no work and that I should learn something.

I ATTENDED THE COURSE EVERY DAY.

We received 1,500 AFN (23.37 USD) per month for transport, but I often walked and used the money for my two small daughters at the time and left them with my elderly mother-in-law, who struggled to look after them.

My younger daughter became malnourished because she was not fed on time while I was away. I returned from the centre each day to do the household chores.

I LEARNED SILMA-DOZI VERY WELL. MY TRAINER WORKED HARD, AND I BECAME SKILLED ENOUGH TO CALL MYSELF A MASTER.

I joined another three-month Silma-dozi training. But even in these opportunities, there were problems: our trainer asked each trainee for 2,000 AFN (31 USD) as a bribe to stay on the list, and she brought

* Name has been changed to protect identity.

many of her relatives into the programme. There were 50 trainees in my cohort, each received 12,000 AFN (187.15 USD) but we had to pay the trainer to keep our place. After completing the training, I began using my skill. But *Silma-dozi* is expensive, and very few people can afford it, so sometimes I only receive one order in an entire month. When someone brings me a dress, I charge less than the proper price because of poverty: my own and theirs. Markets already have their chosen tailors, so someone like me has no chance of getting a contract. Meanwhile, in our neighbourhood, there are many tailors competing by lowering prices for basic sewing. I want to continue working and learning tailoring, carpet weaving, and other forms of embroidery. I want to learn every skill.

I ALSO DREAM OF HAVING A BIG BUSINESS AND A TRAINING CENTRE WHERE I CAN TRAIN OTHER WOMEN, AND SEND OUR HANDICRAFTS ABROAD. I AM CONFIDENT I CAN TRAIN OTHERS. I WANT TO SERVE PEOPLE.

But the reality is difficult. We live in a tent with no space to work. I do not have a machine or the tools needed to run a business. Every business requires money, and I have none. My husband used to sell vegetables in Pakistan, but here he cannot find work. Without capital, we cannot start anything.

Returnees also face stigma. People say that because we returned, food and house rent prices went up, and that we brought dengue fever. This makes life harder and creates tension with the locals. If the government or an organization support me with a machine, a work table and basic tools, with a small grant and a trusted female mentor, I would start a business from home, train and help other women.

I CAME BACK TO AFGHANISTAN WITH A SKILL. WITH SUPPORT, I COULD BUILD A LIVELIHOOD, AND HELP OTHER WOMEN DO THE SAME.

Intersectionality and returns

Constraints to employment were examined by profile, including age, (dis)ability, social status, and ethnicity, to understand intersectional experiences. According to qualitative interviews, age and ability factor into perceived employability. In Kabul, men and women shared that younger women are seen as more employable.[52] **Community members drew attention to the additional hurdles some persons with disabilities face to obtain livelihoods, such as limited mobility or increased medical costs.** According to UNHCR's Post-Return Monitoring 2025 data, returnee women younger than 30 are more likely to depend on daily wage labour compared to returnee women above 30.[53]

Mothers, widows, and women heads of households also face challenges. Though many work purely out of necessity, communities appear to cast judgement upon working women for "choosing" between employment and family duties. Employment is presented by men in Kabul as impossible for women with young children.[54] For example, a host community member observed that a returnee woman in her workplace was spending long hours at school and assumed she had young children who were likely left hungry at home.[55]

Her fellow community member hopes to solve this challenge one day by opening a safe childcare centre.[56] Furthermore, returning women with larger households must stretch resources even further.[57] UNHCR in 2025 revealed that women-led returnee households often shoulder excessive workloads more often than men, and most still suffer from food insecurity, irrespective of location or time of return.[58]

Due to present housing shortages, many women also shared the socio-emotional strain of having to stay in cramped or temporary settings, imposing on relatives and neighbours, or living with uncertain tenure. One returnee even shared that she has been living in a makeshift shelter of branches for the past three months.[59] As is well documented in the literature, women, especially returnees, cannot access housing as easily as men.

Throughout qualitative interviews, when asked about other types of identities and their impact on employability, ethnicity-based or social class issues were not mentioned. A few respondents noted that economically vulnerable people are more likely to be deported from Pakistan and Iran than Afghans with wealth.[60] Location, rather than origin, determines the nature of the restrictions women face. People report more freedom of movement in Kabul (78 per cent) than in Nangarhar (53 per cent) — a much bigger difference than the gap between those returning from Iran and Pakistan. Location, not return route, determines autonomy.

Most returnee women, even those who worked abroad, do not enter the labour market after returning. Figure 6, at the start of this section, shows women's return pathways from pre- to post- return, with their work status in Afghanistan being represented in the middle, and earnings ranges on the right. At a glance, it is clear a strong majority of pathways represented here funnel directly into "Afghanistan: not working."

Many women return with skills and experience, but the Afghan labour market cannot absorb them. The present report will endeavour to explain why, and what can be done to improve economic absorption.

52. FGDs with returnee women and men conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
53. UNHCR, Post-Return Monitoring (Kabul: UNHCR, 2025).
54. FGD with returnee men conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
55. FGD with host community women conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
56. FGD with host community women conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
57. FGD with returnee men, conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
58. UNHCR, 2025. Afghanistan Protection Landscape: Returnee Women and Girls. ReliefWeb. Accessed October 16, 2025.
59. FGD with returnee women conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
60. FGD with returnee women conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

Return corridor and other intersectionalities shaping employment outcomes

Across the dataset, employment outcomes among women returnees are shaped far more by the intersection of gender, care burden, and location than by return corridor. While return from Iran or Pakistan is often treated as a key analytical distinction, the data show that this factor explains very little variation in women's economic participation.

By contrast, employment outcomes vary by more than 26 percentage points when gender is examined in combination with caregiving responsibilities and place of return. This difference is nearly thirty times larger than the variation associated with return corridor alone.

Women returning to urban areas with fewer care responsibilities have the highest employment rates (26.1 per cent), while rural women with similar responsibilities have the lowest (8.8 per cent), highlighting the importance of local labour markets and access to opportunities. High care burdens reduce employment across settings, but do so unevenly, interacting with location to shape both the feasibility and acceptability of paid work.

An important exception emerges among rural women-headed households, which report the highest employment rate observed in the sample (35 per cent). This pattern suggests that economic necessity, combined with greater decision-making authority, can override some structural constraints, albeit often at the cost of precarious or informal work.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the country of destination is a weak predictor of women's economic outcomes when compared to intersecting factors related to caregiving roles and local opportunity structures. Programmatic approaches that focus primarily on Iran–Pakistan distinctions risk overlooking the much larger variations generated by gendered responsibilities and spatial context.

TABLE 5
Intersection of gender, care, and location with employment rates

Research Tools	Group	Employment
Return Corridor	Iran returnees	16.7%
	Pakistan returnees	17.6%
	Variation range	0.9 pp
Gender + Care + Location	Urban + Low care burden	26.1%
	Urban + High care burden	18.7%
	Rural + Low care burden	8.8%
	Rural + High care burden	12.8%
	Variation range	26.2 pp

3

BARRIERS TO, AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR, WOMEN'S ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION

ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION PATHWAYS

Key findings on economic reintegration pathways

- **Economic reintegration is constrained** by a narrow, informal, low-capital and network-based economy, not by women's capabilities. Ninety-one percent of returnee women interviewed rely on family networks and only 10 per cent directly contact employers.
- **Home-based livelihoods are the entry point,** but without market linkages, they can trap women in low-income work.
- **Capital is the universal barrier.** Eighty-nine per cent of returnee women interviewed cite lack of start-up capital as the primary barrier, dwarfing all other constraints.
- **Beyond access to capital, limited demand, and socio-cultural and institutional barriers constrain women's opportunities.** Among these, mobility restrictions for younger women, documentation challenges, and childcare constraints are most acute among those aged 26–35. University-educated women report the highest mobility constraints, while women with lower secondary education face the widest range of barriers.
- **Mobility varies by province:** Women's freedom of movement ranges from 78 per cent in Kabul to 53 per cent in Nangarhar, a gap larger than Iran vs. Pakistan differences.
- **Two interlinked gaps are evident:** first, the lack of formal inclusion of returnee women in labour market structures, and second, the absence of institutionalized safe working environments for women.
- **Opportunities lie in:**
  - Trusted mentors, setting up of groups, safe spaces and workshops, reliance on family and male relatives' support, and on women's home-based production.
  - Integrated approaches work best: combining livelihood support with social cohesion (e.g., mixed host–returnee training, self-help groups (SHGs), mentoring). Similarly, the combination of capital, tools and market access is more important than training alone.
  - Sector concentration: Among working women, 75 per cent are in tailoring, handicrafts, or food processing; 82 per cent work from home and 65 per cent are self-employed.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION

Capital is the universal barrier to earning income. Almost all women report lacking the tools or start-up funds needed to earn an income, including through entrepreneurship. In fact, if 'lack of capital' were included among the employment constraints in Figure 9, its disproportionately high value would overshadow all other variables. Figure 9 focuses on variations among other barriers to securing income.

Beyond capital, the non-financial constraints vary by profile: training gaps, mobility, childcare, and lack of documentation. Another prominent difficulty is market-driven: limited demand. Qualitative interviews reflect this finding, with strong concerns over the oversaturation of tailors.[61] This assessment of barriers places women in a dual-constraint structure: all women face capital deficits, and secondary constraints differ by age, education, marital status, and location.

Returnee women face social barriers that limit their ability to access livelihood opportunities, even with relevant skills and existing market demand. Returnee women reported experiencing the compounded effect of multiple barriers against employment, creating intersecting disadvantages that are difficult to overcome individually.

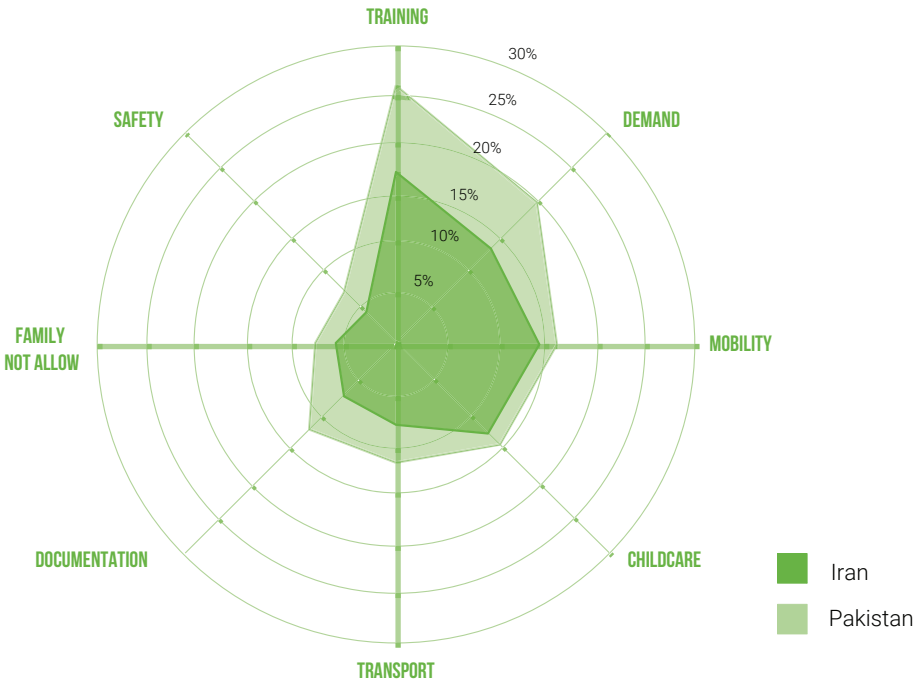
Livelihood restrictions for returnee women

Women aged 36-45 experience the highest training constraints (28.4 per cent) and demand-side barriers (22.4 per cent), suggesting **skills mismatch or obsolescence among mid-career returnees.** Younger women (18-25) report greater mobility restrictions (19.2 per cent) and documentation challenges (14.0 per cent), likely reflecting weaker legal and social standing and more restrictive family norms. Childcare constraints peak among women aged 26-35 (16.2 per cent), reflecting the age at which many women have young children.[62]

Educational attainment further differentiates barriers, with university-educated women reporting no training constraints but facing the highest mobility (31.2 percent) and transport (25 percent) barriers, pointing to social and normative restrictions rather than skills deficits. By contrast, women with no

FIGURE 9

Non-financial employment constraints: Iran vs Pakistan returnees



Source: UN Women - Samuel Hall phone survey data, 2025

61. Participatory workshop with women-led business owners, TVET instructors, and employers conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.

62. Phone survey conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.

formal education report high training needs (28.3 per cent), while those with lower secondary education face the broadest range of constraints, with training, transport, and documentation barriers all exceeding 16 per cent.[63]

Skills restrictions

The clearest divide emerges by skills status. Women with no skills cite training as their primary constraint (45.3 per cent), whereas skilled women identify lack of capital as the dominant barrier (92.4 per cent). This suggests two distinct groups: one requiring foundational skills development, and another ready to engage economically but unable to access start-up resources. Notably, women with no skills report lower capital constraints (54.7 per cent), likely because they have not yet reached the stage of attempting income-generating activities.[64]

Approximately half of non-working women surveyed actively search for employment; however, 91 per cent rely primarily on family networks, while only 10 per cent directly contact employers. The most frequently reported barrier is lack of capital (89 per cent), followed by training gaps, low labour demand, mobility restrictions, childcare responsibilities, and documentation issues. Constraints vary by demographic profile: married women are most affected by childcare, younger women by mobility and documentation limitations, uneducated women by training needs, and educated women by transport and mobility barriers.[65]

Market and institutional restrictions

The labour market is narrow, home-based and requires low capital. For example, many Iran-trained tailors say their styles/designs do not fit Afghan market needs. Women returnees from Iran report stronger skills but weaker market networks, limiting uptake. In contrast, working in the livestock or poultry sectors feel "natural" to Pakistan returnees – but women depend on men for market-facing tasks. Pakistan returnees describe arriving into more conservative environments, limiting their use of skills. This emphasis on livestock knowledge is blocked by gendered task division. In sum, Iran returnees often have stronger skills but weaker networks; Pakistan returnees face more conservative environments and higher constraints.

BOX 3

Mariam - The resilient widow from Pakistan

Mariam, a 38-year-old widow from Kabul earns 2,000 AFN (31 USD) monthly in the manufacturing sector, a median income for her region. Despite having no formal education, she leveraged work experience in manufacturing gained while in Pakistan, to secure her current employment in Kabul. Her determination, combined with the greater opportunities available in the capital, has enabled her to successfully support herself as a widow.

Geographic restrictions

Women returnees from Pakistan are more likely to engage in agriculture (16.4 per cent compared to 10.4 per cent of Iran returnees), while those from Iran are more likely to engage in informal home-based production (4.5 per cent, which is exclusive to Iran returnees). Domestic work is slightly more common for Iran returnees, who also work in more salaried roles and with small employers.

Geographic differences reinforce these patterns: among the five largest provinces in the sample, Nangarhar exhibits the highest training gap (29.2 per cent) and documentation challenges (12 per cent), consistent with its concentration of returnees from Pakistan. Kabul shows the lowest capital constraint (83.8 per cent) but the highest childcare burden (19.1 per cent), reflecting greater urban opportunities

63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.

With the support of UN Women, this local women's organization in Herat provides tailoring classes for vulnerable women, including returnees. Photo: UN Women

tempered by care responsibilities. Herat and Baghlan display very high capital constraints (94.6 per cent and 97.1 per cent) alongside relatively low training needs, indicating that women in these provinces often possess skills but lack the financial resources to put them into practice.[66]

Most common barriers to economic reintegration

Market unfamiliarity and lack of networks

A critical constraint is returnees' lack of market knowledge and business networks in Afghanistan. Returnee women often struggle with not being familiar with the local environment and not knowing the business culture of Afghan communities after years abroad.[67] For those without family in the area of return, being disconnected from community and social ties results in difficulty securing employment.

The absence of social connections prevents employment and business development. One returnee with beauty salon skills explained she has no customers because no one knows her locally.[68] Another described how family members were denied factory employment because they did not know anyone there.

Returnees attempt to build networks through active outreach. One tailor described going door to door, sharing her number with neighbours and relatives to find tailoring work. She went to Amini Market, Herat, and now receives occasional calls to sew garments; however, such efforts reach only

66. Phone survey conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.
67. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
68. Focus group discussion conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.

the immediate geographic and social circles. The lack of market knowledge also leads to problematic business duplication, particularly in accessible sectors like tailoring and food production. Starting the same type of business creates oversupply and very low demand.[69]

Cultural and social restrictions on women's mobility and work

Deep-seated cultural norms constrain women's economic participation, operating independently of – and often reinforcing – official restrictions. In 20 per cent of areas of high return surveyed by the UN Resident Coordinator's Office Afghanistan, women and girls avoid public spaces due to safety concerns, limiting their ability to access markets, training, and employment opportunities.[70]

Community surveillance and social stigma also create deterrents to women's work outside the home. When women work outside their homes, they are often subject to negative scrutiny, which acts as a powerful barrier to engagement in the labour market.[71] Widows face heightened social condemnation; in Pashtun communities, for example, widows working externally are gossiped about. Male family members prevent women from accessing economic opportunities even when skills and markets exist. One key informant described a Pashtun woman skilled in the beadwork technique known as *'Mora-dozi'*, who makes excellent clothes but is not permitted by her father-in-law to sell her products in the market or exhibitions.[72]

Institutional barriers represent systematic constraints on returnee women's economic participation, rendering many skills and opportunities entirely inaccessible regardless of demand or capability. These barriers include the absence of safe workspaces, official restrictions on women's work and education, and, subsequently, fear of detention and harassment.

Absence of safe workspaces and supportive infrastructure

A critical institutional gap is the absence of formalized, secure, and gender-appropriate infrastructure that enables women's economic participation. There is a lack of institutional mechanisms, such as dedicated workspaces, women-focused enterprise hubs, or adaptive services, designed to support returnee women, women from host communities, or women with disabilities.[73]

This infrastructure gap is compounded by the lack of institutional safeguards addressing security and mobility. In the absence of formally recognized women-only workspaces, families assume responsibility for managing risk, often by restricting women's movement. Participants reported that even when informal employment opportunities exist, such as private tailoring businesses, the distance and lack of protection prevent women from participating.[74]

Key informants highlighted that **returnee women possess skills acquired in Iran and Pakistan that are well aligned with local market needs.** However, the institutional ecosystem required to translate these skills into livelihoods is largely absent.[75] **In addition, financial constraints are also present:** while financial support is necessary given widespread poverty, it is insufficient in isolation. Humanitarian actors may be positioned to deliver financial assistance, but they face constraints in addressing the more fundamental institutional deficits, namely, the creation of legitimate employment pathways and protected work environments for women under current conditions.[76]

69. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
70. United Nations and NGO Partners in Afghanistan, Integrated Response Plan for Afghan Returnees from Pakistan, May 2025.
71. Focus group discussion conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
72. Focus group discussion conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
73. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
74. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
75. Key informant interviews conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.
76. Workshop conducted in Nagarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

Official restrictions on women's work and education

Official restrictions constitute a primary structural barrier to women's economic participation. Even where women invest capital, they are prohibited from overseeing operations, effectively stripping them of control over productive assets.[77] These restrictions eliminate women's visibility in local markets and force reliance on male intermediaries, undermining business viability.

The ban on women's secondary and tertiary education entrenches these exclusions by severing the pipeline between skills acquisition and employment. Participants consistently identified education as the prerequisite for labour market participation, yet school closures and training restrictions prevent women from qualifying for available roles. This has immediate system-level effects, including labour shortages in essential sectors such as healthcare.[78]

Reports of detention, harassment, and violence against women working without a male guardian, or *'mahram'* present, alongside mobility controls, deter women from accessing workplaces and markets even where economic opportunities exist.[79] The cumulative effect is the institutionalization of exclusion: women's skills remain underutilized while markets lose their productive capacity, and household economic resilience is further eroded.

According to a phone survey conducted in November 2025, the 80 per cent unemployment rate among skilled women points to demand-side constraints (lack of customers, market access, capital) rather than just supply-side issues (tools, skills).[80] In addition, interviewees also reported lack of documentation, equipment and capital shortage, and a risky investment environment as logistical constraints.

Documentation and land challenges

Lacking tazkiras (national identification document) is one of the most prominent problems for returnees.[81] The absence of national identification documents prevents access to formal employment, business registration, financial services, and government support programs. This documentation gap is a direct consequence of displacement, as many families left Afghanistan without securing identity papers or lost documents during migration.

Land access also constitutes a critical logistical constraint. Returnees interviewed emphasized: 'Here in Afghanistan we don't know anyone, we don't have land to cultivate.' One returnee's land is mortgaged without the means to release it. Participants urged the de facto authorities to take action: 'The government should use its unused land to build companies and create job opportunities for the people.'[82]

Equipment shortages

Women face limited access to capital and infrastructure, which prevents them from turning skills into income. Gaps extend beyond start-up finance to include access to essential machinery and adequate physical space. Even in low-entry sectors such as tailoring, missing inputs – specialized sewing machines, electricity, or workspace – limit women's ability to meet market demand. Inadequate housing further constrain home-based enterprises, while unreliable power supply disrupts production across sectors. The absence of shared facilities, training spaces, and basic equipment creates a cycle in which women cannot generate income, invest in assets, or expand their businesses, resulting in persistent economic exclusion.[83]

77. Focus group discussions conducted in Kabul and Nagarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
78. Focus group discussions conducted in Kabul and Nagarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
79. Focus group discussions conducted in Kabul and Nagarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
80. Phone survey conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.
81. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
82. Workshop and focus group discussion conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
83. Case studies and focus group discussions conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.

Risky investment environment

Even those with potential access to capital are deterred by the uncertain economic and political environment. People who have enough money to start a business are unwilling to invest under the current circumstances.[84] Fear of authorities confiscating investments or prohibiting operations makes borrowing highly risky. One woman explained that she does not dare take out a loan - if she invests in a tailoring workshop and equipment, she may find she has no customers, or risk losing everything if authorities shut her business down. This risk aversion creates a poverty trap where those with potential access to credit cannot utilize it, while those without access have no pathway to acquiring productive assets.

Women returnees will continue to face additional challenges in rebuilding their lives and supporting their families, including further internal displacement driven by environmental shocks and economic pressures. Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

84. Focus group discussions conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.

CASE STUDY 3:

‘EVERYTHING I HAVE DONE HAS BEEN BECAUSE OF MY FATHER’S ENCOURAGEMENT.’

My name is Noori*. I live in Kabul with my family. I studied up to 12th grade in Iran. I was 6-years-old when we went to Iran with my mother because of the war in Afghanistan. My father joined us later.

I married in Iran and had two children there. Later, we returned to Afghanistan. My daughter was seven years old and my son was one year old when we came back. I went to a TV channel and started working there as a camerawoman. I was talented and they contracted me, telling me my camera work was great. They invited me to every conference and event. I was even invited to Pul-e-Charkhi prison to shoot a film. I recorded it well, presented it to them and received a lot of appreciation. I worked there for about two and a half years. After that, I stayed home for a while, taking my children to school and kindergarten.

SINCE RETURNING THREE MONTHS AGO, I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO USE MY SKILLS FOR INCOME. WE ARE JUST THINKING ABOUT BASIC NEEDS.

We do not have carpets, dishes, or appliances. Making a new life from nothing is difficult. We have immigrated many times, but we are financially incapable of starting a business; we do not have the budget. My husband was also a professional cameraman and editor for wedding ceremonies. He used to have good opportunities, but since we returned from Pakistan he has been struggling just to get a computer so he can work again. Now he takes very low-paid work just so we can survive.

I feel people are at zero. Everyone I talk to – friends, relatives – is in a horrible economic situation, mentally and financially. Among our acquaintances there is only one woman who still does videography at weddings. She complains about mistreatment and not being paid well. I know some women who are tailoring and doing embroidery from home, but I stay at home and don’t have strong connections anymore. People are not like before; they don’t talk openly about everything.

Despite all this, I still see my skills clearly. I know camera work, and I know beadwork. I have experience in TV and in filming events, and I used to weave luxury bead pieces for weddings and engagements.

I believe that if I had a camera, I could go back to working at wedding ceremonies. The income from that is good. Or I could restart my beadwork, making necklaces and sets for special occasions. With enough support, I could even open a course to train other women in these skills.

Education has always mattered to me. I studied in different schools in Kabul and later took English classes at Kateb University. I also learned tailoring through an organizational course about three years ago. Before that, when I was still in primary school, I learned carpet weaving from my neighbour without any payment. Even as a child, weaving carpets alongside school was a way for us to earn some income. My family does not have land, so home-based skills were the only option.

* Name has been changed to protect identity.

ENABLERS TO ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION

Despite the significant structural, institutional, and logistical constraints, **women do not disengage from economic life. Instead, the women interviewed described a range of informal strategies** through which they sustain their households and pursue reintegration in the absence of formal opportunities.

- **Informal livelihoods sustaining households:** Women's informal economic activities often sustain households after men's return. In several cases, women's home-based production, such as carpet-making, was the only reliable source of income, covering daily expenses during periods of unemployment or reintegration stress. *'The women in our family do carpet-making, and their work is the only thing helping us manage our daily expenses.'*
- **Trusted mentors as catalysts for reintegration:** Across groups, participants emphasized that access to a trusted mentor (someone who provides guidance and planning support) significantly improves reintegration outcomes for both women and men. *'Encouragement and boosting morale are the best kinds of support.'*
- **Family support enables women's economic entry:** Family encouragement, particularly from husbands and sons, emerged as a decisive enabler of women's economic activity. Male relatives often facilitate market access by selling women's products, overcoming mobility and security constraints; however, they can also play a key role in involving women in economic opportunities. *'If my family encourages me, I can do this.'*

A woman learns new tailoring skills at a local women's organization in Herat that runs classes for returnees and other vulnerable women, with the support of UN Women. Photo: UN Women Afghanistan

CASE STUDY 4:

‘EVERYTHING I HAVE DONE HAS BEEN BECAUSE OF MY FATHER’S ENCOURAGEMENT.’

My name is Shahrose*. I am 22-years-old and live in Dasht-e-Barchi. There are eight people in our family: my father, my mother, my four sisters, my brother, and me. I completed my education up to grade 11, but after 2021, I could not continue my studies. I have skills in sewing and carpet weaving, and these skills have helped me support my family since our return.

We migrated to Iran and lived there for three years. My father had gone first for work, and later we joined him. We went legally with passports and visas. In Iran, work opportunities were better, especially for sewing. At first, we lived in a village and wove carpets. Later, when we moved to the city, I worked in a sewing factory. I had learned basic sewing in Afghanistan, but in Iran I learned to sew suits by observing and practicing in the factory. We were paid based on the number of pieces we completed. The factory was owned by Afghans and employed women and men in separate spaces. I worked with other women, and the income helped our family survive. My dream was to continue my education and become a teacher, but this was not allowed.

We returned to Afghanistan because the authorities wanted to deport my father and brother. When we came back, for the first month, I did not have work. As it was summer and tailoring work was limited, we returned to carpet weaving. Later, I started working again in tailoring.

Today, I work in a small tailoring setup owned by my uncle. My sisters, cousin, and I all sew pre-cut clothes. If we had enough money for machines and a shop, I could start my own business, but for now we work with what we have. My younger sisters learned sewing from me, and we take turns working.

Family support is what has made this possible. After we returned, my father could only work for three weeks and then became unemployed. My brother, who was a mechanic in Iran, shares a small workshop but does not have many customers because of his age. Whatever money I earn, I give to my father, and he manages the expenses. This is how we survive. My father has always encouraged us. His belief is that his daughters should stand on their own feet and have their own source of income, even after marriage. Everything I have done has been because of his encouragement.

There are challenges. After return, wages in carpet weaving decreased, and tailoring work requires machines we did not have at first. But we worked around these limits. Carpet weaving was easier because it could be done at home. Over time, my uncle was able to buy more machines, which helped us continue tailoring. I did not face barriers from my family. The biggest barriers are lack of capital and fear that restrictions might stop women from working altogether.

I WANT TO CONTRIBUTE MORE TO MY COMMUNITY.

I have already trained a few women in carpet weaving, and I see this as a service. My goal is to expand our tailoring work so that more women who are unemployed can join us. In five years, I want to have my own tailoring workshop. I am happy that I can work now, despite all the challenges. What I want most is for families and communities not to suppress women, but to support them, because many women have skills and only need encouragement and opportunity to stand on their own feet.

* Name has been changed to protect identity.

The barriers and enablers present in women's livelihoods in Afghanistan cut across different layers of the ecosystem – from the structural to the household level. **The key finding is that barriers are not primarily at the individual level (e.g. skills) and require more interventions across all layers of the ecosystem.**

SECTORS AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

The livelihood landscape for returnee women across Afghanistan is characterized by narrow, home-based opportunities that reflect both their skill profiles and social, institutional, and logistical constraints. Among the small proportion of working women (~17 per cent), economic participation is heavily concentrated: 72 to 75 per cent work in manufacturing and crafts; 16 to 19 per cent in agriculture; approximately 10 per cent in elementary jobs; and only 1 per cent in professional roles.[85] This distribution reveals a labour market that is low-capital, informal, and predominantly domestic, closely mirroring the limited options available to women under current restrictions.

Kabul overview

Kabul presents the most diverse range of sectors for returnee women, though opportunities remain concentrated in traditional, home-based activities. Carpet weaving emerged as a significant employer in some areas, with one factory reportedly operating 70 looms employing 4-5 women per loom, including both returnees and locals.[86] Tailoring and garment production represents the

TABLE 6

Barriers and enablers of women's livelihoods by ecosystem layer

Level	Barriers	Enablers
Structural	**Spatial and regulatory constraints:** Distance to workplaces, mobility restrictions, and uneven provincial enforcement limit women's ability to access employment outside the home, regardless of skills. These constraints disproportionately affect returnees who lack local networks.	**Home-based and proximate work modalities:** Home-based production, neighbourhood-level workshops, and flexible work arrangements mitigate mobility constraints and enable income generation under restrictive conditions.
Social	**Weak social integration and competition:** Tensions between host and returnee communities—driven by scarce jobs, housing pressure, and aid competition—reduce trust and limit access to customers, suppliers, and informal job referrals.	**Collaborative economic spaces:** Joint host–returnee activities (e.g. shared workshops, collective production, skills-sharing) reduce social friction and improve market access by embedding returnees in local economic networks.
Economic	**Demand-side constraints and market isolation:** Local markets are saturated and low-income, limiting demand for women-produced goods. Skills acquired abroad do not translate into income without capital, tools, and market linkages.	**Linkages to external and higher-value markets:** Connections to urban, regional, or wholesale buyers; aggregation mechanisms; and value-chain integration increase returns to women's labor beyond subsistence-level sales.
Household	**Restrictive household norms and risk aversion:** Family control over women's mobility, income use, and time – often intensified after return – constrains business expansion and limits engagement with markets outside the home.	**Household-level support and endorsement:** Male and elder approval, shared caregiving, and acceptance of women's income-generating roles significantly expand feasible livelihood options and sustainability.

85. Phone survey conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.
86. Focus group discussions and case studies conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.

most frequently cited livelihood opportunity across all focus groups conducted in Kabul. Participants emphasized strong market demand. One woman surveyed said, "Tailoring work is currently in high demand because handmade Afghan clothes are very popular.' The sector ranges from home-based embroidery – khamak bafi, mora-dozi – to factory-grade production.[87] An organization named Istanbul Manufacturing, for example, employs a workforce that is half women, with one-third of female workers being returnees - described by one of the company's representatives as 'particularly skilled and experienced.'[88]

Participants interviewed also mentioned food production as a sector that offers considerable potential, particularly in products that can be made at home and have a stable demand (e.g., pickles, cookies and cakes, jams, tomato paste, and local alternatives to imported children's snacks).[89] Related to this, agriculture and dried fruit processing represent a growing export-oriented sector.[90] One businesswoman described working in food processing and international sales of dried fruits, with teams purchasing flowering fruit trees (e.g., juniper, mulberry) seasonally, then drying, processing, and packaging for international markets.[91] However, border tensions with neighbouring countries have

WHAT WORKS 1

Safe spaces and women-only workshops where returnee and host women work side-by-side

A women-run sewing workshop in Kabul provides income-generating opportunities for returnee women from Iran and Pakistan, specializing in traditional needlework on a range of fabrics and supplying both domestic and international orders. Key products with demonstrated market demand include winter jackets (with export potential), hijabs, baby blankets, silk scarves, and bags. However, participants also highlighted several challenges: hand embroidery increasingly competes with lower-cost, computer-designed alternatives, and the sewing skills of Iranian returnees are not always fully transferable or utilized due to differences between Iranian and Afghan market preferences.

One of the participating women explains: "I have seen a lot of cooperation between host community women and returnee women. These days, almost everyone in the country is facing financial problems, and people who have even a somewhat stable life try to help those who are poorer. Women often come to us asking for work or training, and community members introduce them to our workshop. I come to work at seven in the morning and sometimes stay until eight at night, and during this time I have witnessed a great deal of solidarity and cooperation. Many women are helping one another as much as they can. If I had a larger space and better equipment, I would immediately include more women in my workshop. I would also start literacy courses, because many women were deprived of education at a young age. With proper tables, sewing machines, electricity and tools, we could train more women and help them earn a livelihood. Supporting businesswomen is one of the best ways to support returnee women, because when one woman's business grows, many others can work with her. With even small financial support and trust, women like us could do much more for ourselves, for returnees, and for our community."

87. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Afghanistan, November 2025.
88. Key informant interview conducted with an Istanbul Manufacturing representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
89. Key informant interview and workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
90. Samuel Hall and UNICEF, Study on Building Livelihood Opportunities for Afghan Adolescents, 2025.
91. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.

disrupted fruit exports, creating oversupply and low prices domestically, highlighting the need for stronger domestic markets or diversified export routes.[92]

Livestock and poultry were repeatedly cited as viable income-generating activities for women with access to land and water. A key informant reported: 'A few days ago, I met a woman who told me that she had only one cow, and from the income it generated, she was able to cover all her household expenses.'[93] Dairy production, including milk, yogurt, butter, cheese, *Quroot* (dried yoghurt) and *Chaka* (strained yoghurt), was also noted as a primary field for women entrepreneurs.[94]

Handicrafts have become increasingly popular among women entrepreneurs out of necessity, as noted by a woman interviewed in Kabul: 'In the current year, the handcrafted goods are the most popular items... Many women are in this sector out of necessity, because currently there are no opportunities to learn or enter other technical professions.'[95] Women demonstrated innovation, creating jewellery from water bottles and flower pots from small stones.[96] Other growing areas include leatherwork, resin dishes (using imported raw materials from Iran and Thailand), and miniature carved figures sold at venues such as Babur Garden in Kabul.[97] Gem-cutting and gemstone engraving, particularly for emeralds and lapis lazuli, were also mentioned by interviewees as representing specialized skills among returnees with identified market demand.[98]

Online and home-based businesses have expanded significantly, with the Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry reporting increased women's participation in online sales of handicrafts through social media.[99] Over 80 per cent of women-led businesses operate from home due to official restrictions and a lack of capital to rent commercial space.[100]

For these activities, geographic concentration matters. Makroryan, Khaer Khana, and Dasht Barche were identified as the Kabul districts where women work, and where employed returnee women move more freely.[101] In terms of declining or non-viable sectors, key informants mentioned products with no market demand (such as suits) and handmade decorated vases. Participants also expressed concern about competition from low-cost imports from China and Iran undermining local production, particularly affecting knitted products.[102]

Herat overview

Herat hosts a large number of returnees from Iran, many of whom have relatively higher levels of education.[103] **Primary data indicates a strong alignment between returnee skill sets and local livelihood opportunities; however, participants emphasized that persistent shortages of start-up capital often force women to work in sectors outside their areas of expertise.** Tailoring remains a primary sector (e.g., masks, hats, gloves, and jackets), with returnees bringing experience from Iran.[104] Agriculture and livestock were also mentioned as presenting significant opportunities, as well as women's involvement in dairy production and plant nurseries.[105] Saffron cultivation, flower production, and mushroom growing were identified as promising livelihood options,

92. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
93. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
94. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
95. Key informant interview conducted with an Istanbul Manufacturing representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
96. Key informant interview conducted with an Istanbul Manufacturing representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
97. Key informant interview and workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
98. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
99. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
100. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
101. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
102. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
103. Samuel Hall and UNICEF, Study on Building Livelihood Opportunities for Afghan Adolescents, 2025.
104. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
105. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.

with the latter becoming particularly popular or widely adopted compared to the others.[106] One key informant articulated a compelling vision for import substitution:[107]

> 'IF I HAD THE MEANS, I WOULD WORK IN THE FOOD PROCESSING SECTOR TO PRODUCE LOCALLY RATHER THAN IMPORTING FROM IRAN AND PAKISTAN. WE HAVE THE BEST PRODUCTS OURSELVES, THE BEST COWS — SO WHY IMPORT MILK FROM IRAN? WE HAVE THE BEST TOMATOES — SO WHY IMPORT TOMATO PASTE FROM IRAN? WE HAVE THE BEST FRUITS — SO WHY IMPORT JAMS FROM IRAN? ALL OF THESE CAN BE PRODUCED LOCALLY IF WE INVEST, AND IT WOULD CREATE JOBS FOR THE PEOPLE.'

Handicrafts and traditional goods have experienced a notable revival, with a reported trend toward traditional over commercial products: 'Women are showing more interest in traditional bags, such as hand-woven bags, over modernized luxury bags. This is a new source of income and is brought by those who have open minds and have seen the world.'[108] Identified opportunities include beadwork, glasswork, crafting tasbih (prayer beads), and jewellery production.[109]

Emerging sectors unique to Herat include shoemaking workshops established by women, tissue production, and textiles with stone work, embellishment and pressing.[110] In addition, ICT and other digital skills present significant potential in Herat, particularly for educated returnees from Iran, given the strong local and international demand for such services. The possibility of remote work further enhances this sector's inclusivity for women, allowing participation despite mobility and social constraints.[111]

Solar panel production was also specifically mentioned as an opportunity: 'Most of the people use solar panels and it is good for us to be engaged in making the solar panels, not only for men but also for women.'[112] Returnees have introduced new business models inspired by practices observed abroad, including roadside flower sales that led to the establishment of a number of flower production shops in Sadaf Tower, and the production of luxury wooden jewellery boxes using simple materials and equipment.[113]

A significant finding from Herat is the proliferation of women-led micro-enterprises. Women dismissed from government and office positions have pivoted to entrepreneurial activities and are now working on embroidery, cooking, and

106. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
107. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
108. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
109. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
110. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
111. Samuel Hall and UNICEF, Study on Building Livelihood Opportunities for Afghan Adolescents, 2025.
112. Focus group discussion conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
113. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.

selling food. Importantly, most buyers remain within Afghanistan, with only a small number of women reaching international customers.[114]

Sectors largely inaccesible to women include shopkeeping (cultural restrictions persist), in-person education (replaced by online learning), beauty services (completely banned), technical fields like mechanics and architecture, and all formal employment in government offices. One participant observed a gendered division: women make products at home (sewing, dairy, handicrafts), but men sell them.[115]

CASE STUDY 5

Fatima*, the young entrepreneur returning from Iran

Fatima, a 24-year-old single woman from Takhar, Afghanistan who has returned from Iran, represents a successful pathway for reintegration. She attained a lower secondary education (grades 7-9) and acquired agricultural skills from both family networks and her work experience in the agriculture sector while in Iran. By applying these learned skills in the local Afghan context, she has secured work in agriculture as a secondary income activity, now earning 4,000 AFN (62 USD) monthly with regular payment. This is four times the median for successful returnees, with key success factors being her practical skills from family, work experience abroad in the same sector, and the ability to apply those learned skills locally.

TABLE 7
Potential reintegration pathways for women returning from Iran

Description	Profile	Current activity	What could they be doing?
Young, skilled women (Herat or Kabul)	Tailoring/hairdressing/ embroidery skills learned in Iran workshops; moderate mobility.	Home-based tailoring for neighbours; irregular income; struggling to find customers.	Working in small women-only workshops, training other women, or producing higher-value garments for subcontracting if linked to markets and given sewing tools.
Middle-aged, experienced women (Herat peri-urban)	Strong sewing/food-prep skills; high childcare load; limited mobility.	Mostly not working; or small home-based food/ embroidery orders for relatives.	Group-based food processing or embroidery collective at a nearby safe workspace with shared childcare.
Educated woman with a rare skill (Kabul city)	Teaching/computer/beauty skills; confidence from having worked abroad; no tools now.	Skills underused; doing craft work at home or informal tutoring.	Digital tutoring, home-based teaching circles, admin/online tasks if provided devices + safe digital workspace + training refresh.
Entrepreneurially minded women (Herat or Kabul)	Wants to run a workshop; sometimes already informally coordinating other women.	Micro-business from home; cannot expand due to licensing, rent, and DFA restrictions.	Managing small women-only production units (tailoring, beadwork, food processing) with seed capital + licensing support + market access.

114. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
115. Workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
* Name has been changed to protect identity.

Nangarhar overview

Nangarhar presents the most constrained opportunity landscape, with participants repeatedly noting limited viable sectors beyond traditional activities. Interviewees report that the provincial context is characterized by acute documentation challenges, education restrictions, and geographic remoteness that severely limit women's economic participation.

Tailoring and embroidery remain primary options, with women working in *'Silma-dozi'*, Khamak, Gol-dozi embroidery, and mirror work, though market penetration remains 'slightly weak.'[116] One participant expressed the potential: 'If I were to receive assistance, such as the necessary machinery, irons, solar panels, and batteries for electricity, I would be able to expand my tailoring work and train more students in this field.'[117] In addition to tailoring and embroidery, poultry and livestock emerged as the most frequently cited opportunity, with multiple focus group discussion participants repeating calls for capital to establish poultry farms or livestock operations as sustainable income sources.[118]

Beekeeping was identified as a strong livelihood opportunity due to the current reliance on imported honey from Pakistan, suggesting clear potential for local production to meet domestic demand. In addition to its income-generating potential, local honey production was seen as environmentally beneficial and supportive of promoting locally produced goods.[119] Teaching was also mentioned by focus group participants as a complex sector for women, particularly returnees, due to the lack of documents (e.g. *tazkira*, diploma) and mass layoffs following the education ban.[120]

Labour-intensive and green industries are likely to gain traction over the longer term, particularly with coordinated support from key stakeholders, including national authorities, the private sector, and development partners. Sectors such as agri-processing and small-scale farming offer gender-adaptive entry points for women, with small-scale farming being especially suitable for unskilled workers, including returnees from Pakistan and other vulnerable women.[121]

Participants highlighted that small-scale commerce offers limited opportunities, as women who operate downtown shops or engage in tailoring are typically those with higher levels of education or access to investment capital. As one focus group participant observed, 'women who have jobs, receive remittances from abroad, or run shops are in a better situation.'[122] Emerging sectors such as water processing, solar panel businesses, the soft drinks trade, restaurants, hotels, and precious stone processing remain dominated by men, with minimal participation by women.[123]

COMPARING DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC REINTEGRATION

Where perspectives converge:

- **Capital/tools as the defining barrier:** Returnee women, host women, and employers identify lack of start-up tools as the universal constraint.
- **Market saturation:** Host and returnee women describe tailoring and basic home-based work as oversupplied; employers confirm weak demand.

116. Key informant interview conducted with Eastern Zone Chamber of Commerce representative in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
117. Focus group discussion conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
118. Focus group discussion conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
119. Key informant interview conducted with CSO representative in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
120. Focus group discussion conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
121. Samuel Hall and UNICEF, Study on Building Livelihood Opportunities for Afghan Adolescents, 2025.
122. Focus group discussion conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
123. Workshop conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

TABLE 8

Profiles and current activities of women returnees

Description	Profile	Current activity	What could they be doing?
Young, skilled woman (Nangarhar)	Livestock/poultry + simple tailoring; conservative norms; high mobility limits.	Poultry or livestock care at home; no direct income (men handle sales).	Small-scale poultry/dairy enterprise with women-only extension support and guaranteed buyers.
Middle-aged, experienced woman (rural Nangarhar/Kunar)	Very low education; large household; limited access to training.	Unpaid family work or low-paid home sewing; unable to search for work.	Doorstep vocational training + provision of simple tools to produce embroidery or food goods for local women's markets.
Young woman with cooking/food-prep experience (Jalalabad)	Practical kitchen and food-processing skills; motivated; lacks capital.	Occasional home orders (*bolani*, pickles, sweets) if any; often idle due to equipment costs.	Supplying packaged food items to shops or NGOs if equipped with basic tools + packaging + hygiene training.
Skilled tailor from Pakistan (urban Nangarhar)	Good tailoring, but enters a saturated market ('a tailor in every alley').	Very low, irregular earnings; competing on price; unable to scale.	Specialized stitching/stone embellishment/finishing for shops, or joining production chains that subcontract to women at home.

- **Mobility restrictions:** Women across all provinces cite mobility, safety, and surveillance barriers; employers and community leaders recognize these as structural barriers rather than personal choices.

Where perspectives diverge:

- **Returnees vs hosts:**
  - » Returnee women see their skills (tailoring, food processing, embroidery, agricultural work) as valuable assets that could benefit the community.
  - » Host women view the same skills through a lens of competition, given scarce demand and limited purchasing power.
- **Returnees vs employers:**
  - » Returnees emphasize skills and motivation.
  - » Employers emphasize lack of networks and lack of documentation as primary reasons women are not recruited.
- **Returnees vs authorities:**
  - » Returnees describe barriers linked to restrictions and fear of enforcement.
  - » Authorities acknowledge constraints but frame them as "contextual conditions" rather than institutional obstacles.

These triangulated insights strengthen existing findings by making visible that:

- **Skills exist across all groups**, but market entry points do not.
- **Every group recognizes capital deficits**, but hosts and employers additionally highlight saturation.
- **Network gaps affect returnees uniquely**, explaining why similarly skilled host women may still access opportunities.

TABLE 9

Potential sectors for returnee women in 2025*

Nangarhar	Herat	Kabul
High-potential sectors		
• **Tailoring & embroidery** (home-based) • **Poultry** • **Small livestock** • **Leather sewing** (needs tools) • **Beekeeping** • **Teaching** (home-based Qur'an/ *madrasa*) • **Rural shopkeeping**	• **Dried fruit cleaning** • **Agriculture & livestock** • **Food production** • **Solar-powered workshops** • **Tissue production** • **Underground beauty services** • **Textiles** (tech-enhanced) • **Glassware**	• **Carpets** • **Tailoring** • **Embroidery** • **Teaching** (*madrasa*) • **Jewellery & gem cutting** • **Domestic work & cleaning** • **Food processing** (pickle, jam, tomato paste) • **Agriculture** (fruit, flowers) • **Online handicrafts** • **Remote work possibilities**
Why these sectors?		
• **Skills supply:** Tailoring 80%, handicraft 55%, carpet weaving 35%. • **Household economy:** Wage labour dominant (66%) — does not absorb women. • **Women's aspirations:** Tailoring often combined with livestock/ trade. • **Top barriers:** Capital 92%, training 29%, low market demand 17%.	• **Household economy:** Wage labour 60%, aid/remittances 12%. • **Employment gap:** 20% employed. • **Skills:** Tailoring 66%, handicrafts 49%, hairdressing 37%. • **Women's preferences:** Tailoring + handicraft combinations. • **Top barriers:** Capital 95%, mobility 12%, demand 14%.	• **Household economy:** Wage labour 50%, trade/business 19%. • **Employment gap:** 27% employed (highest of sample). • **Skills:** Tailoring 58%, handicrafts 53%, hairdressing 21%. • **Women's aspirations:** Tailoring + teaching. • **Top barriers:** Capital 84%, childcare 19%, training 15%.
Labour market fit		
• **Strong skills** but massive employment gap (20% employed). • **Requires capital + market linkages** for home-based micro-production.	• Similar to Nangarhar but **stronger hairdressing base.** • **Aid-dependent households** need home-based work with low mobility.	• **Most diverse economy** with more trade/business openings. • **Childcare is a constraint** especially for Kabul women.

* Note: The identified sectors are based on a triangulation of secondary data, study, a TVET study and UNICEF in 2025, and primary data.

WHAT WORKS 2

Women's exhibitions with an international reach

The 4th Imam Abu Hanifa National and International Exhibition was held in Kabul at the National Exhibition Center in 2025. The expo brought together national and international businesses, including a delegation from Iran. A total of 800 booths were showcased, with 200 allocated to women entrepreneurs. The exhibition aimed to promote Afghan products, strengthen market linkages, and create visibility for small and medium enterprises across the country.

Women's visibility in the exhibit was significant, occupying around one-quarter of all booths. Participants came from multiple provinces, including Kabul, Nangarhar, Balkh, and Jawzjan. Many of these women were invited or supported by organizations such as UN Women and ACTED, enabling them to travel to Kabul and present their products to broader markets. Types of products included : handicrafts, tailoring and clothing production, jewellery/artistic crafts, painting/visual arts, and carpet weaving.

Insights gathered from conversations with participating women revealed the inclusion of returnee women from Iran into several tailoring businesses in central, northern and eastern provinces. Returnee women from Pakistan, especially in Nangarhar, were reported to be few. Participants noted that only a small number of women returnees from Pakistan are currently engaged in handicraft-related work.

Building on this model, future exhibitions could set clearer inclusion targets and outreach pathways for returnee women (from both corridors), alongside Afghan women who already sell across provinces and internationally (including through diaspora buyers and online channels). Practical measures—such as reserved booth allocations, travel and accommodation support, accompaniment mechanisms, and pre-expo matchmaking with wholesalers, diaspora traders, and regional buyers—could ensure exhibitions function not only as one-off showcases, but as structured market-entry points that broaden who gets seen, who gets connected, and who can scale beyond local, saturated markets.

4

SOCIAL COHESION AND HOST-RETURNEE DYNAMICS

SOCIAL COHESION AND HOST-RETURNEE DYNAMICS

Key findings on social cohesion

- **Social dynamics directly affect economic reintegration** in relationship-based markets; exclusion limits access to jobs, networks, and customers.
- **Competition outweighs collaboration** due to scarcity of livelihoods and aid, even where skills complementarities exist.
- **Informal solidarity exists but is fragile,** constrained by widespread poverty among host communities themselves.
- **Joint host–returnee economic spaces** show promise in reducing tension and improving outcomes when deliberately facilitated.
- **Low perceived cohesion:** Only 17 per cent of returnees report that host and returnee women work together frequently; 56 per cent report working separately.
- **Host community fatigue:** 57 per cent of hosts do not believe returnees bring new skills that benefit the community.
- **Stigma and blame:** Returnees are frequently blamed for higher rents, job competition, and disease, particularly in high-return areas.
- **Gendered exclusion:** Returnee women are significantly less likely than men to report positive host-community relations (as low as 6 per cent in comparable IOM data).

SOCIAL COHESION

This research adopts an ecosystemic approach, recognizing that social dynamics are a significant factor in market dynamics. In the provinces of study, return migration has brought about noticeable changes to society and daily life. In Afghanistan's relationship-based markets, social dynamics matter. They can underpin women returnees' potential access to livelihoods.

Interviews with host communities and returnee women in diverse settings of Herat, Kabul, and Nangarhar reveal a range of perspectives on social and economic integration of returnees. **Experiences range from welcoming to exclusion:** communities say they view returnees positively, but daily interactions show that some hosts harbour mistrust, resentment and competition. Local communities claim to view returnees positively, but their actions reflect a lack of capacity to absorb them in such large numbers, leading to fatigue and exasperation, while host communities struggle to meet their own basic needs.[124] This finding confirms secondary literature; returnee women interviewed by IOM in 2025 were considerably less likely to report very

124. Key informant interviews with a general manager of a tailoring company and a member of the AWCCI in Nangarhar, conducted in November 2025.

good relations with the host community (6 per cent) compared with male-headed households (42 per cent).[125]

Qualitative interviews in all three contexts affirm that life after return is challenging for all family members. Limited housing, food, education, documentation, and livelihoods is commonplace. These issues compound mental health struggles many returnees already deal with following disruptive and forced return journeys.[126] Men expressed frustration at the difficulties they, too, face when seeking daily wage labour. According to a returnee man in Herat, for every 100 to 150 people who gather daily to seek work, only two or three are selected, usually friends or relatives. His friend added:

> 'IT BECOMES LIKE A BUZKASHI[127] MATCH. EVERYONE RUNS AFTER HIM, SAYING, 'TAKE ME!'[128]

For women, this competition is less visible, with tailors often mentioning a lack of customer orders or requests.

Competition

Competition is evident between host and returnee women. The majority (57 per cent) do not believe that returnees come with new skills that help the local community. Those who do believe that they do (29 per cent) mainly mention carpet weaving, tailoring, handicrafts, cooking and hairdressing as the skills that returnees return with. However, according to qualitative interviews, other hosts perceive the skills of returnee women, particularly in tailoring, as superior to their own.[129] Some local women spoke of returnee women's skills positively, hoping to find ways to uplift each other. In Nangarhar, for example, local employers expressed praise for returnees' work experience:

> 'OUR OWN EXPERIENCE IS LIMITED, BUT THEIR EXPERIENCE CAN COMBINE WITH OURS.'[130]

Host community women tend to have the advantage of stronger social networks. Returnees believe that hosts have easier (39 per cent) or about the same (38 per cent) access to work opportunities. Only 15 per cent believe it is harder for hosts to access work with no major differences by country returned from.

Host communities describe competing with returnees for resources like jobs, services, aid and programming. They also perceive returnees as benefitting more from services, but returnees note large gaps in service delivery.[131] The resource scarcity leads to self-interest, as a host community member in Nangarhar observed: Everyone says, I need help the most.'[132]

Host community members also point to the high costs of living and unemployment, blaming returnees.

125. International Organization for Migration (IOM), DTM Returnee Resilience Overview September - October 2025 (Kabul, Afghanistan: IOM, December 2025).
126. UNHCR (2024). Protection Interventions for Afghan Returnees from Pakistan: April 2024 to December 2025. April 2024.
127. A traditional sport in which horse-mounted players attempt to place a goat or calf carcass in a goal
128. FGD with returnee men, conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
129. Key informant interview with a manager of a tailoring workshop conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
130. Key informant interview with a general manager of a tailoring company in Nangarhar, conducted in November 2025.
131. Key informant interview with a representative of AWCCI conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
132. FGD with host community women conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

Exclusion – stigma and mistrust

Before making gradual connections over time, returnees may face stigma and mistrust from host communities. Hosts sometimes may resent returnees, whom they blame for 'increased rent,' and 'spreading illness.' Some returnees report facing unprovoked criticism from neighbours for leaving and coming back. A returnee man in Herat shared that women in his company's saffron cleaning department blamed the returnee women for driving down wages.[133] Returnee women sometimes struggle accessing services due to locality-based exclusion. In Nangarhar, a returnee man noted: 'Clinics do not provide medicine to them because they are not from that locality.'[134]

This tension between groups may explain limited workplace collaboration. According to the survey, 56 per cent of returnees report that host and returnee women in their communities work separately, showing low levels of social cohesion. Only 17 per cent report that host and returnee women work together frequently, and 27 per cent report that host and returnee women sometimes work together. Women returnees clearly face obstacles to their livelihood opportunities from different levels of the social ecosystem, from the household, to the community. For example, from within their own microsystem, families can give or withhold permission for women to leave the home to pursue livelihoods. According to employers in Kabul, it is families – especially mothers-in-law – who often restrict training and work.[135] Despite layers of social and institutional exclusion, however, returnee women are building their own businesses and pursuing livelihoods. Workspaces that integrated both groups have demonstrated mutual benefit.

Solidarity and informal support

Support from host community members exists, but resource shortages limit its longevity. Informal support for returnees can be observed on a small scale, mostly through small, personal donation initiatives. For example, local women in Kabul shared that they taught returnees to sew,[136] and introduced them to job markets,[137] while some in Herat donated household items.[138] Neighbours, to the extent possible, welcome returnees with food or help on arrival in Nangarhar, alleviating the shock of return: 'When we arrived, the village elders came to welcome us. Our hearts felt at ease, as if we had not been on a long journey at all.'[139] Other returnees noted small acts of kindness, like shopkeepers lending goods on credit, or neighbours sending home-cooked meals.[140]

Organic relationships between returnees and the host community also form over time. Some returnees expressed receiving community support on a household level upon arrival. Host community members occasionally fill gaps left by lack of institutional support, such as a Kabul doctor providing free care for returnees.[141] In Herat, returnee women shared that their daughters were encouraged by the community to continue their education through religious schooling.[142] Over time, returnee men in semi-urban Nangarhar shared that they slowly began to feel like part of the community. Employers took note, with one saying: 'Local women introduced the returnee women to us – that is how we hired them.'[143]

133. FGD with returnee men, conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
134. FGD with returnee men, conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
135. Participatory workshop with women-led business owners, TVET instructors, and employers conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
136. Key informant interview with a women's employer and FGD with host community women conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
137. Key informant interview with an employer conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
138. Ibid.
139. FGD with returnee men, and key informant interview, conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
140. FGD with returnee men, and key informant interview, conducted in Kabul and Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
141. Key informant interview with CSO representative, conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
142. Key informant interview with local authority representative, conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
143. FGD with returnee men, and key informant interview, conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

REINTEGRATION AND COHESION SUPPORT MECHANISMS

Support modalities for reintegration and cohesion exists, with a potential disconnect between what services are available, and what communities request.

Community-led initiatives

Local civil-society organizations (CSOs) are showcasing leadership by offering programming for women's livelihoods, including returnees. In Herat, employers mentioned CSOs that provide income-generating activities such as free computer and English courses.[144] In Kabul, the women's Chamber of Commerce registers mostly returnee women for its educational programmes.[145] One respondent's organization connects women in the environmental sector with girls to promote climate change awareness and build sustainable livelihoods.[146] A respondent's sewing factory in Kabul employs 10 people with disabilities.[147] In Nangarhar, a community member spearheaded a Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) initiative for both men and women, securing formal permission and the Department of Labour and Social Affairs (DoLSA) support. Women participants received two days of weekly tailoring training, 700 AFN (10.86 USD) per month, and a certificate.[148] An employer from Nangarhar noted that returnees who receive

TABLE 10
Potential reintegration pathways for women returning from Iran

Actors	Mechanisms
National Authorities	• Ministerial programming • Coordination with humanitarian ecosystem • Limiting women's work
Local Authorities	• Department-based livelihoods programming
Chambers of Commerce	• Providing TVET • Supporting business registration • Facilitating exhibitions
Community Leadership	• Dispute resolution • Network-based informal support
Private sector	• Provides employment • Blocks
UN Agencies and NGOs	• Humanitarian coordination • Livelihoods programming • Protection programming
CSOs	• Building collectives • Fostering networks • TVET and skills-sharing • Providing employment

144. Participatory workshop with women-led business owners, TVET instructors, and employers conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
145. Key informant interview with CSO representative, conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
146. Ibid.
147. Participatory workshop with women-led business owners, TVET instructors, and employers conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
148. Key informant interview with CEO conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.

training and resources are eager to give back. For example, her fellow TVET trainers are, themselves, graduates of that particular course.[149]

Self-help groups (SHGs) can also play an important role in economic resilience.[150] Women returnees in Kabul mentioned participating in Self-help groups (SHGs), a practice they carried over from Iran.[151] To a room of fellow businesswomen, one entrepreneur from Kabul shared:

'WHAT IF WE, AS WOMEN-LED INSTITUTIONS, COULD ESTABLISH A PROPER COUNCIL AND CREATE A SAVINGS GROUP? WE COULD ENSURE EASIER ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR RETURNEES. HOW LONG SHOULD WE WAIT TO BE SUPPORTED?'[152]

In Herat, women interviewed shared that no Self-help groups (SHGs) were available or accessible.[153] Motivation for self-sustainability and collective organizing can be harnessed.

Institutional support initiatives

De facto ministries offer livelihoods support for communities, within limited sectors and where resources permit. These programmes facilitate training, materials, land, and job opportunities.[154] For example, the de facto Department of Commerce arranged an awareness-raising seminar in Kabul.[155] Some programming even targets women, including widows, women with disabilities, and those with low levels of education. In Herat, the de facto Department of Martyrs and Disabled Persons is active, along with MoLSA, which provided TVET programming in 2025.[156] A women's support centre was also established in Herat's DoLSA.[157]

After being denied access to the formal economy, women are adapting by creating their own businesses. The authorities sometimes support women's businesses[158] that adhere to certain narrow prescriptions, such as mahram or home-based requirements. This operating environment is complex, but not impossible to navigate. From Herat, a director of a workshop shared: 'I know women who make pasta, jam, and pickles at home and sell them at the bazaar. Women are sewing and making clothes to sell in stores.'[159] 'In the Injil district, a woman has started a workshop with her daughters and nieces. They design and repair eyeglasses.'[160]

149. Key informant interview with women's employer, conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
150. Samuel Hall and Afghanaid, Self-Help Group Model Technical Study in Afghanistan, 2026.
151. Key informant interview with local authority representative and focus group discussion with returnee women, conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
152. Participatory workshop with women-led business owners, TVET instructors, and employers conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
153. Focus group discussion with returnee women conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
154. Key informant interviews with AWCCI and a case study with a tailoring trainer, conducted in Nangarhar, Afghanistan, November 2025.
155. Key informant interview with a Women's CSO representative conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
156. Key informant interview with a local authority conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
157. Key informant interview with a local authority conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
158. ICG. A Precarious Lifeline? Women-led Business in Afghanistan. Asia Report N°352. Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 17, 2025
159. Key informant interview with a male director of a tailoring workshop, conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.
160. Key informant interview with a female director of a CSO, conducted in Herat, Afghanistan, November 2025.

WHAT WORKS 3

Institutional support for women's economic reintegration

Institutional support for reintegration tends to prioritize livelihoods over addressing issues of social cohesion. To strengthen both at once, participants suggested bringing together host and returnee women as trainers and trainees to share skills. Some initiatives are already embracing this approach.

The Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI) is the only partial government organization that supports women entrepreneurs, women traders, and businesswomen. Its services range from registration of business, to collaborative TVET programming, to SME support.[161] It works with international partners such as the ILO, UNHCR, UN Women, to reach markets through exhibitions and online business platforms. Its strength, according to higher-level officials, is fostering solidarity by exchanging unique skill sets and sharing motivation: 'Local women often say that if they are supported, they will support returnee women by hiring them.'[162]

International partners provide programming as well, but respondents noticed decreases in availability since 2021. Shortcomings in access, transparency, and relevance impact existing partner-led TVET programmes. For example, across provinces, women reported no available livelihood training or support – demonstrating a critical lack of reach or awareness.[163] **Some mentioned programming from before 2021, provided largely by NGOs, but these, they shared, are no longer active.** This concerning lack of availability points to a major gap: despite sharp increases in population, programming has indeed scaled down.[164]

Respondents shared constructive criticism of past programming. For example, TVET instructors and business leaders hailed a project for physically bringing women to market visits, for those whose families expressed permission, and provided a safe working space for those whose families did not allow entry. However, this project failed to include women who lacked documentation, or accommodate language barriers, which excluded some returnee women.[165] TVET instructors in Kabul noted a lack of coordination or information-sharing mechanisms between actors conducting similar programming, leading to duplication.[166]

TRIANGULATED VIEWS: RETURNEE, HOST AND BUSINESS LEADER PERSPECTIVES

This study convened participatory workshops with market actors in each province to provide local market information. Participants included employers, trainers, manufacturing managers, traders, representatives from educational centres, and specialists in solar energy, marketing, and coordination roles. These actors observe firsthand how returnee women navigate markets on a daily basis. They offered perspectives spanning handicrafts, manufacturing, education, market access and home-based production, reflecting the breadth of actors who observe and shape women's economic lives in the community.

161. Key informant interview with a AWCCI representative conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
162. Key informant interview with a AWCCI representative conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
163. Case study with a returnee who is an aspiring entrepreneur conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
164. Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan, The Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan - Annual Progress Report 2024, 2025.
165. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.
166. Workshop conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan, November 2025.

What participants shared in Herat: small economic efforts women are already making

Participants spoke of the skills women bring from Iran and Pakistan and how these skills are still in demand in neighbourhoods after return. One participant summarized it as: "Women tailor, embroider, do beadwork, make *tasbih*, jewellery, flowers, even shoemaking. Some have started workshops."

Others described how home-based food production has become a steady, if modest, source of income: "They dry fruits, make jams and pastries, even dairy products, and package them neatly with their own brand." Many women sew everyday clothing for neighbours or small shops, stitching coats and scarves whenever they can.

Participants highlighted the creativity women bring to difficult circumstances. One man said:

'SELLING FLOWERS AT TRAFFIC LIGHTS CAME FROM IDEAS WOMEN BROUGHT BACK FROM IRAN.'

Another man explained how women once employed in offices now run improvised food businesses: "Some sell food from cars — more than 50 cars in Herat." Several stories showed how a single tool or small investment can transform a woman's situation. One participant shared: "A woman said, 'I am a carpet weaver but I don't have tools.' Someone invested and she started working, now she employs others." Participants also repeatedly emphasized that returnee women often bring new perspectives shaped by their years abroad: "Women who came from Iran are more motivated… they have seen bigger markets and new designs." In some areas,

More than three-quarters of Afghan returnee women lack any tools to earn income, according to this report. Lack of capital is one of the greatest barriers to the economic participation of Afghan women returnees. Photo: UN Women Afghanistan /Ali Omid Taqdisyan

this has led women to begin teaching others, setting up small training circles for tailoring, beadwork or embroidery.

While the workshop was not explicitly framed as a solution-design session, many recommendations surfaced:

- **Provide tools, not temporary aid:** "If a woman has a sewing machine or the tools she knows, she can stand on her own."
- **Support online work and digital skills:** "The internet is a very good window for women… they can work for companies abroad from Afghanistan."
- **Open pathways for small exports:** Participants stressed the need for safe, legal channels for sending handmade products abroad - "If institutions help with export routes, women's work can grow immediately."
- **Recognize and strengthen women-only markets:** These were seen as essential safe spaces for selling goods.
- **Facilitate small home-based production units:** "Packaging, pickles, dried fruits, tailoring — these can be grown with very small support."
- **Bring vocational training closer to women:** "If their transport and course fees are covered, women will participate."

Acknowledge returnees' specific challenges

Lack of housing, tools, familiarity with local markets, and customer networks were confirmed as barriers. Discussions with AWCCI, ACCI, and local business representatives converged around a shared assessment: returnee women are actively engaged in the same economic sectors as host community women, particularly tailoring, handicrafts, food processing, home-based production, and small online businesses, but face barriers in accessing markets, networks, and start-up capital.

In Herat, AWCCI emphasized a practical, market-based entry point. Workshop discussions highlighted that many women-led businesses and training centres are already legally registered, operational, and connected to customers. AWCCI proposed that these existing businesses could take on returnee women as interns, employees, or partners, with AWCCI prioritising such businesses in its programmes and supporting them through introductions to donors. This approach was framed as a faster and more sustainable alternative to creating new, parallel structures.

In Kabul, workshop discussions reinforced the importance of working through established women entrepreneurs. Returnee women were described as often re-entering the economy without local networks or familiarity with market dynamics, while existing women-led businesses already navigate these systems. Pairing returnee women with established entrepreneurs was seen as a way to reduce start-up risks and accelerate income generation.

A key informant in Kabul echoed these observations, noting that returnee and host community women are largely engaged in the same activities, with differences emerging mainly in skills and exposure rather than sectoral participation. As the informant explained:

> 'RETURNEE WOMEN AND LOCAL WOMEN DO THE SAME ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES MOST OF THE TIME. THE DIFFERENCE IS THAT SOME RETURNEE WOMEN BRING NEW TECHNIQUES OR IDEAS LEARNED ABROAD, AND ARE MORE MOTIVATED TO USE ONLINE CHANNELS.'

In Nangarhar, ACCI introduced a strong focus on social cohesion. Workshop participants cautioned that programmes targeting only returnee women risk creating tensions in communities where livelihoods are already under pressure. ACCI therefore recommended integrated programming that includes both returnee and host community women, alongside support for business registration and market access, so that assistance strengthens the local economy without reinforcing divisions.

Overall, effective economic support for returnee women should prioritize integration into existing women-led businesses, shared opportunities with host communities, and practical market linkages, rather than standalone interventions that isolate returnees from the wider local economy.

WHAT WORKS 4

Cooperative groups

The participatory workshops with local market actors highlighted the existence of cooperative groups including, sewing and embroidery workshops, dairy and saffron processing. Returnee women from Herat mentioned taking some months to gain better awareness of these groups. Connecting them earlier could be beneficial.

Returnees from Iran suggested a few improvements to these cooperatives, based on their experiences in Iran. They mentioned how motorcycle delivery services were available in Iran and could be replicated in Afghanistan to address mobility restrictions and lack of direct market linkages. "Here, transportation companies could develop this sector so that women can easily deliver their homemade products to their customers", explained Zahra in Herat

Others continued with the value of online shops for women in Afghanistan, connecting them to global markets where possible. Yet, intermediaries in the carpet weaving sector or in tailoring and embroidery production units all hire women to work locally.

In more constrained environments, a first step is to build on existing networks of self-help groups across Afghanistan, which can serve as a foundation for stronger cooperatives. In Nangarhar, local market actors mentioned seeing women pool their money to create a job for one woman, who would then share profits equally among the contributors, or lenders. Similar examples include groups of women opening small tailoring units, or purchasing goats and cows for other women to manage and earn an income.

Mapping and encouraging these small groups of women who work together – to use their own money and later share the benefits equally – and supporting them into cooperatives supported by the government or other organizations, can ensure that the cooperative system expands in a gender-sensitive way in Afghanistan.

In restrictive contexts, informal cooperatives — like private sewing circles or informal skills groups — have emerged to help women learn marketable skills and support each other economically. These models operate in community homes but still leverage collective learning and mutual support. Returnee women can play a strong role in these informal settings.

5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research shows that Afghan returnee women are constrained less by a lack of skills or motivation than by a mismatch between their capacities and the realities of the labour market, as well as limited access to information, capital, tools and networks.

The economic exclusion of many Afghan returnee women is systemic rather than individual, worsened by the cumulative effects of authorities' edicts restricting women's work, education, mobility, and public presence. These restrictions have reshaped labour markets, erased formal pathways for women, and compressed women's economic participation into narrow, informal, and low-value activities.

International and national organizations should prioritize protecting and activating women's economic agency within these constrained spaces, while preserving women's skills, aspirations, and leadership potential for future recovery and rights restoration.

Across return corridors, women return with experience, adaptability, and strong intent to contribute economically, yet are funnelled into a narrow set of low-capital, home-based activities. These offer limited income, security, or growth. A near-universal lack of capital acts as a gateway constraint to starting new businesses, while layered social, institutional, and logistical barriers persist. Return thus functions as an economic and social reset.

The profile of exclusion and marginalization of returnee women highlighted by this study reinforces UN Women's strategic analysis that integrated action to promote gender equality, increase women's economic resilience and support local women's organizations is essential to counter the structural impacts of restrictions. These restrictions are not additional obstacles: they redefine the very conditions under which women can access education, work and productive resources, and are a central factor in poverty and exclusion.

This study does more than simply describe constraints: it proposes operational levers for action that can be adapted to realities on the ground. These levers can help protect women's economic rights, reduce the gap between their potential (skills and experience acquired in exile) and the economic opportunities actually available to them, and support a more inclusive and sustainable recovery of the Afghan economy, despite an extremely hostile legal and social environment.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATION

The overall recommendation is to adopt an approach that prioritizes integration into existing women-led businesses and shared opportunities with host communities to (1) avoid isolation from the local economy, (2) identify shared opportunities for returnee and host women, to strengthen social cohesion and prevent tensions, (3) create a more enabling environment where Afghan returnee women can leverage their skills while overcoming common barriers to women's livelihoods and contribute meaningfully to the Afghan economy.

Addressing women's reintegration requires ecosystem-based interventions that activate skills, reduce non-financial barriers, and strengthen social cohesion. Without such an approach, large-scale returns risk entrenching underemployment and vulnerability.

With it, returnee women can become critical contributors to household resilience, local economies, and longer-term recovery.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

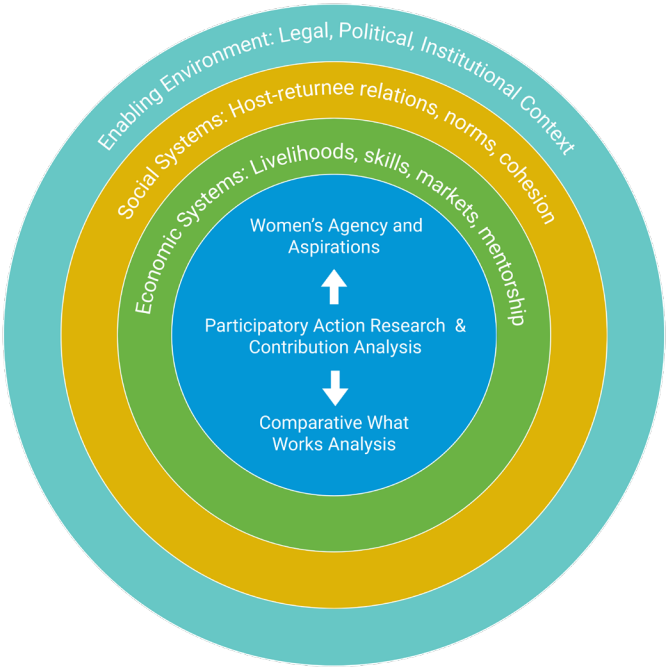
Shift from skills accumulation to activation of existing capacities focusing on capital access and asset provision

Women-led business owners shared the need for an additional boost in resources and market linkages.

- **Establish targeted capital support for skilled returnee women:** The research reveals that 92.4 per cent of skilled women identify lack of capital as their primary barrier to economic participation, while they face minimal training constraints. This represents a critical gateway constraint where relatively modest financial interventions could unlock existing capacity. Specific actions include:
  - **Reorient livelihood programming toward asset-based activation**, ensuring that women who already possess skills can immediately apply them.
  - **Prioritize graduated asset packages**, ranging from basic start-up kits (e.g. sewing machines, food-processing equipment) to more advanced shared machinery for women with higher skill levels.
  - **Combine asset provision with light-touch technical refreshers** focused on quality control, adaptation to Afghan market preferences, and safe business practices.
  - **Prioritize in-kind transfers** to reduce diversion risks and protect women from the pressure of misusing cash for household survival needs.
  - **Favour grant over credit mechanisms** in the current environment; instead, using small, non-repayable grants that acknowledge the structural impossibility of predictable income generation under restrictions.

FIGURE 10

Research Framework: An ecosystem approach to supporting women's economic reintegration



- **Tailor the assets provided to sectors with proven demand** (tailoring, food processing, crafts, small-scale livestock farming), taking into account mobility and home-based work constraints.

This recommendation meets the Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG) priorities on economic opportunities, decent jobs and resilient livelihoods, and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) criteria of access to livelihoods, employment and adequate standard of living.

Strengthen women's economic networks and structured mentorship

Host-returnee collaboration can be supported to bolster social cohesion and community-wide skills transfer.

- **Support business networks:** Many returnee women have expressed willingness to serve as or be supported by mentors. Simultaneously, returnees lack local business networks and market knowledge. This could frame an opportunity to support sector-specific women's networks (e.g. tailoring, food processing, handicrafts), focusing on:
  - Information sharing,
  - Group purchasing of inputs,
  - Pooling of market opportunities.
- **Establish structured mentorship programs** focused on guiding returnee women through market navigation, customer development and business management. These should leverage the experience of successful local businesswomen to provide practical advice and support, focusing on themes such as market navigator or customer development.
  - **Encourage peer mentoring among returned women**, recognizing that women returning from Iran or Pakistan often bring advanced techniques, work discipline, and business exposure.
    - Promoting skills acquired in exile as resources for the entire women's economic ecosystem.
  - **Ensure mentorship is practical and problem-solving oriented**, focusing on:
    - Navigating local restrictions and informal rules,
    - Identifying viable buyers and intermediaries,
    - Managing risk and unpredictability
- **Establish and support business platforms and networks** – whether digital and/or physical – such as WhatsApp groups or community hubs, for women working in similar sectors that are often over-represented, such as handicrafts and tailoring. These platforms can facilitate critical information sharing, bulk purchasing opportunities and collaborative marketing efforts, to reduce costs and expand reach. Returnee women's networks in Iran and Pakistan can be paired with Afghan host women's networks in Afghanistan to facilitate both sourcing, and selling, domestically and across borders.
  - **Link networks to existing women-led institutions** (e.g. AWCCI, women-led CSOs) to enhance sustainability.

This recommendation meets the DSWG priorities on economic opportunities and community cohesion, and the IASC criteria for livelihoods and participation through women's networks, mentorship and collective market access.

Create and support safe spaces for women and women-only workshops

The absence of dedicated workspaces for women emerged as a fundamental barrier preventing women's economic participation.

- **Support and pilot women's work hubs through multi-functional, Integrated Support Services:** These hubs should offer integrated support services, including skills training, access to tools and equipment, childcare facilities, and market linkages, to maximize women's economic participation and success.

Such spaces are vital for enhancing productivity, fostering community, and providing a sense of security and autonomy.

  - » **Anchor these spaces in existing local structures** to maximize their social acceptability and locate hubs strategically in areas with relatively higher tolerance for women's activity and embed them within community-approved structures.
- **Pilot community-based women's production hubs** in areas with relatively more permissive environments (Kabul: Makroryan, Khaer Khana, Dasht Barche; Herat city center; Nangarhar urban areas).
  - » **Use phased models**, beginning with small groups and expanding cautiously to avoid backlash.

This recommendation meets the DSWG priorities on protection, safety, livelihoods and access to services, and the IASC criteria for safety, security and livelihoods with potential referral pathways for documentation and legal aid.

Design inclusive programming that strengthens social reintegration

Amid growing tensions, but with signs of collective solidarity still emerging from communities, supporting collective and cooperative models can promote economic solidarity and reduce perceptions of competition, before tensions grow larger. This will require:

- **Inclusive livelihood interventions** that deliberately include both returned and host community women.
- **Use joint activities**—training, production, mentoring—as entry points for social cohesion, not just economic outcomes.
- **Strengthen the role of local women as economic and social mediators.** Engage respected women leaders, women's organizations and community actors to mediate perceptions of fairness and legitimacy.

Women returnees will continue to face additional challenges in rebuilding their lives and supporting their families, including further internal displacement driven by environmental shocks and economic pressures. Photo: UN Women/Sayed Habib Bidell

- **Monitor social dynamics closely to adapt programming** and avoid reinforcing stigma against returned women.

Strengthen links with local, national and regional markets

Returnee women interviewed reported reluctance to start businesses due to uncertainty about their viability and sustainability.

- **Address business duplication through sector diversification:** Specific actions include:
  - **Conduct rapid market assessments** in high-return areas to identify oversaturated vs. underserved opportunities .
  - **Work with trusted intermediaries**—including women-led businesses—to connect producers with urban, institutional, or humanitarian procurement markets.
  - **Support aggregation and collective sales models** that allow women to pool production and access buyers.
- **Build domestic market connections and export pathways:** most women sell within Afghanistan only, with high-quality products, such as traditional clothing, facing export challenges. Specific actions include:
  - **Map and connect women producers with existing markets** such as Babur Garden in Kabul where tourists and higher-income customers already purchase handicrafts;
  - **Facilitate access to higher value-added domestic markets**, particularly urban, tourist or institutional markets.
    - **Invest in value addition**, including packaging, branding, quality consistency, standardization and certification, rather than increasing production volume alone.
  - **Explore low-risk export opportunities through formal intermediaries**, diaspora networks or regional partnerships, while minimizing women's exposure to border or regulatory risks.
    - **Establish partnerships with the chambers of commerce from neighbouring countries** to create formal market linkages between women producers and clients (e.g., hotels, retailers, diaspora buyers).
  - **Support digital or remote sales channels**, where feasible, for women with prior experience in online work.

This recommendation meets the DSWG priorities on economic opportunities and resilient livelihoods, and the IASC criteria for livelihoods and adequate standard of living through stable market access.

Tailor interventions to provincial and regulatory variations

Domestic production, if linked to the domestic markets, could substitute imports as regional dynamics complicate trade.

- **Conduct provincial risk and opportunity assessments** to track changes in enforcement, norms, and market conditions.
- **Develop province-specific livelihood pathways**, reflecting:
  - Degrees of mobility restriction,
  - Dominant local sectors,
  - Household structures.
- For example:
  - **Herat:** support skilled production, micro-workshops and artisanal hubs with stronger market linkage.
  - **Kabul:** support higher-value activities and models, discreet home-based or digital livelihoods.
  - **Nangarhar:** prioritize home-based activities, with intermediary sales mechanisms and doorstep support
- **Maintain flexibility to adjust interventions rapidly** as restrictions tighten or loosen.

This recommendation meets the DSWG priorities area based planning and data-for-solutions approaches, and the IASC criteria for risk-informed, context-specific programming to strengthen safety and sustainable livelihoods across provinces.

TABLE 11
Entry points by province

Province	What we know	Entry points
Herat	• Strong technical skills (tailoring, embroidery, and hairdressing). • Quality of work recognized by employers. • Main barriers: capital, market saturation, weak sales channels.	• Support women-only micro-workshops. • Food processing groups (high potential). • Market linkages + package/branding support
Nangarhar	• Most restrictive norms; limited mobility. • Strong livestock/poultry skills; tailoring market oversaturated. • Women rely heavily on intermediaries for market access.	• Women-only safe workspaces near homes. • Poultry/dairy micro-enterprises. • Doorstep TVET + intermediated sales (cooperatives/shops)
Kabul	• Most diverse skills; some rare skills (teaching and computer). • Highest employment; main constraint is child care + licensing. • Better demand-side environment.	• Childcare-linked livelihoods. • Licensing support for home businesses. • Digital/remote work micro-hubs.

ANNEX 1

IRAN VS PAKISTAN RETURNEES : COMPARATIVE ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

This comparative table shows that employment participation among women returnees is nearly identical across return corridors, with a difference of less than one percentage point between Iran and Pakistan returnees. By contrast, income levels differ substantially, with Pakistan returnees reporting higher mean and median earnings. This income gap largely reflects differences in settlement patterns, as Pakistan returnees are far more likely to be located in urban areas, where labour markets offer higher wages for similar types of work.

Sectoral distribution is broadly similar across corridors, with the majority of employed women concentrated in craft and trades occupations, followed by elementary and service roles. Despite higher urban concentration, Pakistan returnees also report higher care burdens, which may help explain why employment rates remain comparable despite more favourable labour market conditions. Overall, the findings indicate that return corridor alone is a weak predictor of women's employment outcomes, while location and caregiving responsibilities play a more decisive role.

TABLE 12
Comparative economic outcomes

Indicator	Iran Returnees	Pakistan Returnees	Difference
Sample size (n)	281	301	-
Employment participation	-	-	-
Empoyment rate (%)	16.7	17.6	−0.9 pp
Income (employed women only)	-	-	-
Mean monthly income (AFN)	1,179	2,094	−915
Median monthly income (AFN)	700	1,500	−800
Main employment sectors (% of employed)	-	-	-
Craft and trades workers	69.7	73.8	−4.1 pp
Elementary occupations	17.4	11.9	+5.5 pp
Service and sales workers	8.7	9.5	−0.8 pp
Wellbeing & context	-	-	-
Income worse than before return (%)	44.8	41.3	+3.5 pp
Received livelihood support (%)	13.2	9.7	+3.5 pp

ANNEX 2: METHODOLOGY

STUDY DESIGN

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and participatory case studies. The approach was designed to capture both measurable economic outcomes and the lived experiences of women returnees, while enabling comparison across return corridors (Iran and Pakistan), provinces, and socio-economic profiles.

Quantitative data provide estimates of employment participation, income, sectoral engagement, and household conditions. Qualitative data deepen interpretation by exploring perceived barriers and enablers to economic reintegration, decision-making dynamics, care responsibilities, and experiences of return.

QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT

The quantitative component consists of a structured survey administered to women returnees who had returned from Iran or Pakistan and were residing in selected provinces, including Kabul, Herat, and Nangarhar. The survey collected information on:

- Demographic and household characteristics
- Employment status and income
- Sector of economic activity
- Care responsibilities and time use
- Access to assistance and services
- Aspirations and perceived constraints

Employment and income indicators are reported for employed respondents only, unless otherwise specified.

The quantitative analysis is based on a total sample of 582 women returnees, comprising 281 returnees from Iran and 301 returnees from Pakistan. These respondents were residing across selected provinces, including Kabul, Herat, and Nangarhar, at the time of data collection. Sub-sample sizes vary across specific indicators due to employment status (for income-related questions) and item non-response. All percentages and summary statistics are calculated using valid responses for each indicator and are reported with corresponding denominators where relevant.

QUALITATIVE COMPONENT

The qualitative component included semi-structured interviews and participatory case studies with women returnees. These qualitative inputs were used to:

- **Contextualize** quantitative findings
- **Explore** mechanisms underlying observed patterns
- **Capture** experiences not easily quantified, including social norms, safety concerns, and household negotiations

Qualitative quotations are used illustratively throughout the report and are not intended to be statistically representative.

ETHICAL AND SAFEGUARDING CONSIDERATIONS

The study was conducted in line with ethical research standards and safeguarding protocols. Key measures included:

- **Informed consent obtained verbally** from all participants prior to participation
- **Voluntary participation**, with the option to skip questions or withdraw at any point

- **Confidentiality and anonymity**, with no personally identifiable information included in analysis or reporting
- **Gender-sensitive data collection**, including the use of female enumerators where appropriate and careful sequencing of sensitive questions
- **Do-no-harm principles**, particularly in relation to discussions of livelihoods, household dynamics, and economic stress

No direct assistance was promised or provided as part of participation in the study.

TRIANGULATION

Findings were triangulated across multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives, including:

- Quantitative survey responses
- Qualitative interviews and case studies
- Comparisons across return corridors (Iran/Pakistan), locations, and household profiles

Triangulation was used to assess the consistency of patterns across data types, to identify convergent and divergent perspectives, and to strengthen the robustness of key findings, particularly in relation to employment outcomes, care burdens, and perceived barriers to economic participation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to examine differences across return corridors, locations, and selected intersectional characteristics (such as care burden and household structure). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and explanatory narratives that inform interpretation of quantitative trends.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be noted:

- **The study relies on self-reported data**, which may be subject to recall or social desirability bias.
- **Sample sizes limit the extent of fine-grained disaggregation**, particularly for disability and ethnicity.
- **Cross-sectional data capture conditions** at a single point in time and do not allow causal inference.
- **Structural constraints** affecting women's employment may evolve rapidly in the current context.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design and triangulation approach provide a robust basis for understanding patterns of economic reintegration among women returnees.

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