



► ILO Brief

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Women's participation in employment and resilience-building: Experiences from the Employment-Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP) in Afghanistan

Highlights

- **Context-sensitive and community-based approaches enable women's safe** participation in employment initiatives, even in traditionally male-dominated sectors like construction. A tailored five-strategy model combined inclusive recruitment, community engagement, adapted worksites, skills development and savings mechanisms without compromising safety, cultural norms or legal constraints.
- **Women's participation strengthened economic and social empowerment.** Women earned income, developed technical and entrepreneurial skills, improved household economic security, and reported increased self-confidence and involvement in household decision-making.
- **Women's involvement contributed to shifts in community attitudes.** Sustained dialogue, inclusive implementation and visible household benefits helped reduce initial resistance and increased acceptance of women's economic roles over time.



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Community engagement in practice – An EIIP female liaison officer meets with women beneficiaries to explain their role in infrastructure projects and encourage their safe participation. 2025.

Background

Following the De Facto Administration's assumption of control in 2021, women in Afghanistan have faced increasing restrictions on their human rights, including in education, freedom of mobility and participation in economic and public life. These situations are further compounded by a deepening humanitarian crisis with rising food insecurity, widespread poverty and a weakened economy. In this complex environment, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Employment-Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP) implemented strategies to ensure the active, meaningful and safe participation of women in its initiatives. Through engagement with social partners and strong community engagement, context-specific adaptations and solutions, and investment in skills development and capacity-strengthening, the programme contributed to livelihood improvements and fostered economic empowerment and resilience among men and women beneficiaries as well as their communities. This brief describes the strategies, and good practices employed and offers insights and lessons learned from the experience of EIIP. These can serve as a guide for similar initiatives aiming to promote women's inclusion and economic empowerment in Afghanistan or other complex contexts.

Country context

After decades of conflict, political instability and humanitarian crises, Afghanistan continues to face compounding emergencies. In recent years, the country has been affected by the aftermath of two severe droughts, earthquakes, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread poverty, food insecurity. Decent employment opportunities are scarce, with high unemployment rates and a large portion of the workforce engaged in informal or unstable jobs. Agriculture is a primary source of livelihood for many and continues to be exposed to climate-related risks, further threatening livelihoods and food security. As of early 2025, nearly half the population require humanitarian assistance (OCHA 2024).

The situation is particularly challenging for vulnerable groups such as women, children, youth and persons with disabilities, who face heightened exclusion. The 2024 Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) order introduced further restrictions on women's mobility, education and participation in economic life, posing additional challenges for inclusion efforts. Female employment has dropped sharply and the education ban on girls' secondary education has further narrowed future prospects and driven some families toward negative coping behaviours such as early or forced marriage and child labour (ILO 2023; OCHA 2024; Word Bank 2024).

Female-headed households and internally displaced women who return to their area of origin face compounded risks. In addition to political and legal restrictions, strong cultural and social gender norms shape perceptions of what is acceptable for Afghan women in the labour market and in public life more broadly. These norms often limit and discourage women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors, including construction and infrastructure.

In the face of these challenges, promoting equal and inclusive access to quality education, vocational training, and decent employment opportunities for all women and men is vital for the future resilience and development of the country.



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Project beneficiaries and field officers after the orientation session for the Rehabilitation of Khalid Bin Walid Road, Mazar City — EIIP Afghanistan Project.

The ILO's work in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been a member of the ILO since 1934, and an ILO Office was established in Kabul in 2003. The country has faced ongoing challenges in aligning with international norms and standards, including international labour standards, due to capacity limitations and contextual constraints. While Afghanistan has ratified nineteen conventions, including five fundamental ones, implementation remains limited. The ILO has continued to work closely with its tripartite constituents to support progress and reform. Its engagement in the country spans across a wide range of areas, including employment creation, policy development, labour law reform, international labour standards, skills development and vocational training, labour migration and the elimination of child labour. These efforts aim to contribute to inclusive development, improved livelihoods, and strengthened institutional capacities.

Currently, the ILO is implementing projects across the Northern, Western, Eastern and Southeastern regions of Afghanistan. Initiatives focus on enhancing livelihoods, expanding access to decent employment, strengthening agriculture and enterprise development, while facilitating labour market integration and transition. Particular attention is given to supporting marginalized and vulnerable groups, including youth, women, refugees, internally displaced persons and host communities, to promote inclusive and sustainable economic recovery.

Promoting employment in Afghanistan through the EIIP

To address the ongoing humanitarian, security and socio-economic crisis, the ILO is working alongside other UN agencies in the frame of the UN-joint Area-based Approach to Development Emergency Initiatives (ABADEI) strategy for community resilience in Afghanistan to help improve living conditions of the Afghan people. As part of these efforts, and building on earlier projects, the ILO has been creating decent job opportunities through the development and rehabilitation of essential infrastructure, while ensuring compliance with social and environmental safeguards and offering skills training to enhance employability of workers. Initially rolled out in the northern provinces such as Balkh and Jawzjan, the programme expanded to Herat Province in 2024 to support earthquake-affected communities by restoring livelihoods and rebuilding critical infrastructure.

The programme applies a Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus approach, fully in line with ILO Recommendation 205 (2017) complemented through a local resource-based methodology, emphasizing direct project implementation, strong partnerships and institutional and partner capacity-building. While responding to urgent needs, the programme was designed to bridge the gap between emergency relief and long-term development, and complementary interventions such as skills training, enterprise development and employment services help create sustainable prospects for participants. Ultimately, the initiative aims to restore essential services that meet basic human needs and generate decent employment for both women and men, contributing to recovery, peace and resilience.

The EIIP approach strongly emphasizes the inclusion of vulnerable groups, particularly those affected by conflict, poverty, displacement, disability and social marginalization. It promotes equality and non-discrimination, with a specific focus on the meaningful participation of women and persons with disabilities.

► Project facts

- **Project name:** Promoting Employment and Decent Work in Afghanistan through the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus
- **Years:** 2022-26
- **Partner:** Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (STFA)
- **Regions:** North (Balkh and Jawzjan provinces) and West (Herat province)

Strategies to promote women's participation

The EIIP project team navigated political and legal constraints as well as sociocultural sensitivities by developing context-sensitive approaches for promoting gender equality and meaningful participation of women. Working closely with local communities and women themselves, the team identified and implemented tailored strategies that enabled participation without exposing individuals to risk. Through five key approaches, the initiative supported both immediate engagement and long-term empowerment of women, contributing to more inclusive and resilient recovery.

Mandatory gender quotas and inclusive recruitment processes

The project explicitly prioritised and encouraged the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities. For example, the project adopted a minimum gender quota of 10 per cent, ensuring that at least one in ten beneficiaries should be female. While this is lower than in many other settings, it is still an important and realistic benchmark that served both as a guiding principle and catalyst for change in an environment and sector where women's participation in the workforce remains limited. To support this goal, gender-sensitive recruitment policies were systematically embedded across the hiring announcements and selection process. Job announcements and selection procedures explicitly encouraged applications from women and persons with disabilities, making inclusion a visible priority from the outset. To ensure fairness and representation, female representatives were included on recruitment committees. Moreover, contractors that were women-owned or that employed female technical and field staff received preferential consideration during selection. Importantly, women workers received equal pay for equal work, in line with decent work principles and national labour standards. These measures collectively contributed to creating a more inclusive and supportive work environment for women, while also promoting broader social change within the local context.



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Community Liaison Officer engages with local women, explaining the recruitment process at EIIP worksites and encouraging their participation. 2025.

Community and stakeholder engagement

A community-based participatory approach was key to mitigate risks and navigate restrictions and sensitivities while fostering local ownership and promoting social cohesion. It also helped build awareness and recognition of the value of women's contributions within the community. From the outset, the project undertook regular and inclusive community awareness sessions and consultations to inform communities about project objectives, recruitment and payment processes, the adaptation of worksites to be more women-friendly, and the importance of gender inclusion. Discussions with local stakeholders and community representatives helped identify culturally appropriate ways to engage women. The project worked through existing community structures and actively engaged local leaders to secure their support. A female community liaison officer was appointed for each sub-project to support the recruitment of women and serve as focal points for female participants, lead outreach sessions, and address any concerns. Where available, local women's groups were also engaged to enhance outreach and advocacy for women's participation.

The project coordinated closely with village and district-level authorities to secure necessary permissions and inform about alignment and compliance with legal frameworks, such as requirements on gender-segregated workspaces. This minimised political risks while enabling women's safe participation.

Context-adapted women-friendly assignments and worksites

Initial community attitudes towards women's participation in public works were often marked by hesitation or scepticism. Recognising this challenge, the project prioritised close dialogue with both men and women in the local communities to find contextually appropriate ways to engage women meaningfully. Through these consultations, a key solution emerged: the creation of women-friendly worksites and the identification of tasks that were suitable within the prevailing cultural norms and legal frameworks, including for persons with disabilities. Together with communities, the project identified both on-site- and home-based activities that women could undertake. These included the production of personal protective equipment (such as gloves and vests), laundry services, and gabion basket weaving. In an innovative approach, women were able to contribute to the construction development process by producing specific components used in construction off site. In this way, they had a visible and valuable involvement in the infrastructure construction value chain. These adaptations were found to function smoothly and were positively received by communities.

To ensure a safe and supportive environment, the worksites were adapted based on community consultations. Measures included establishing women-only work areas and groups and ensuring that female workers were supervised by female staff. Segregated sanitation facilities were installed to safeguard privacy. Where women were required to be

accompanied when travelling distances exceeding 75 km – in line with current legislative requirements – the project addressed this barrier by covering travel costs and assigning full-time chaperones. This ensured equal access and prevented the exclusion of women from participation.

Creating a gender-sensitive working environment was central throughout project implementation. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) standards were rigorously applied, recognising safe working conditions as a fundamental right. Rest areas with shade were made available for breaks and meals. Flexibility was also a key principle and working hours were adapted for pregnant women or those with caregiving responsibilities, including options to work



© ILO / EIIP Community Liaison Officer delivers worker's Orientation to newly recruited female workers



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Women Workers weaving gabion baskets for use at construction site.

closer to or within their homes. Women were actively encouraged to take on leadership roles, such as group leaders, and all staff received gender-awareness training. In the Northern region, these sessions were delivered in collaboration with UN Women. A zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment was furthermore enforced across all worksites, which helped foster a respectful, inclusive and safe workplace culture.

► Example of activities undertaken by women

Some of the activities undertaken by women included the following:

- Site clearing, such as removal of vegetation, bushes and grass.
- Spreading sub-base material and levelling it to form camber
- Curing of structures
- Gabion basket weaving
- Tailoring local made geo-composite
- Laundry
- Cooking
- Tree plantation

Training and capacity-strengthening

Capacity-strengthening was a cornerstone of the project, aimed at empowering women through both immediate job opportunities and skills development. Women received training in technical skills relevant to construction work, enabling them to contribute directly to construction activities. In parallel, in partnership with the ILO's Enterprise Component, selected women beneficiaries received entrepreneurship and business development training through the ILO's Gender and Entrepreneurship Together (GET Ahead) programme. This equipped participants with essential skills and tools to start and manage their own businesses. In Herat province, the entrepreneurship training was implemented in collaboration with the Women's Chamber of Commerce, fostering linkages between training beneficiaries and local markets. These efforts contributed to enhancing women's capacity for both immediate income generation and sustainable self-employment opportunities, in line with the project's broader objectives on gender equality and resilience.

Savings mechanisms for women's broader economic empowerment

To promote women's long-term economic empowerment, the EIIP project introduced a voluntary community savings mechanism. Under this initiative, 50 Afghanis (equivalent to US\$0.70) was set aside for each direct workday to build collective capital for women-led community enterprises. At project completion, these pooled savings were reinvested in shared productive assets, such as sewing machines or carpet weaving equipment, enabling participating women to launch or expand small businesses. In addition to creating sustainable livelihoods for the original project participants, these enterprises continue to benefit other women in the community by providing skills training, mentorship, employment opportunities and local value chains. In this way, the savings mechanism contributes to broader social and economic inclusion.



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Women Workers curing stone masonry drainage. 2023.

Results

Together, the five context-sensitive strategies formed a cohesive and effective approach. Through inclusive selection processes, sustained community engagement, adapted and supportive worksites, targeted training, and community-based savings mechanisms, the project created pathways to women's meaningful participation in employment and resilience-building. These efforts led to visible change on the ground for both women and their communities.

For women, participation in the EIIP project contributed to valuable skills development— both in technical infrastructure tasks and entrepreneurship. Approximately 550 women contributed to the infrastructure projects, and around 850 women received business training through the GET Ahead programme. These skills have opened up new opportunities for self-employment, home-based livelihoods, and entrepreneurship, equipping women to generate income in ways that are both sustainable and culturally appropriate. Several participants have gone on to work with other international organisations, while others have reinvested their earnings and acquired skills to launch small businesses such as pastry production, weaving, or small shops. Thanks to the project's savings mechanism, several group businesses were also established, each training and employing up to 20–30 additional women from the communities. These livelihood opportunities have enabled women to strengthen their households' financial stability — sometimes as the sole earners — and to play a more active role in their families' financial management and decision-making. Several participants reported increased self-confidence and a sense of achievement through their participation.

Furthermore, the project appears to have contributed to changes in community attitudes towards women's participation in the labour market, as reported by participants and observed through follow-up consultations. While initial reactions to women's involvement were marked by scepticism, regular community consultations, compliance with legal frameworks, the engagement of female community liaison officers, and visible economic benefits to household income helped shift attitudes over time. Community members increasingly recognised the value of women's participation and contributions. In some cases, community leaders actively encouraged women to participate and requested additional ILO projects that would include employment opportunities for women.



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Women beneficiaries attend the GET Ahead entrepreneurship training to gain skills for making use of the 50 Afs savings investment. 2023.

► **The stories of Khadija and Jamila: from struggles to success in challenging times**

Khadija was a teacher and the sole breadwinner for her family, supporting her unemployed husband and two young daughters. When the ban on girls' education forced many schools to close, she lost her job and found herself in a difficult financial situation. She appreciated the opportunity to join the EIIP road construction project in her area. During her month of work on the project, Khadija set aside a part of her daily wage, knowing she needed something more sustainable. With her savings, she bought a sewing machine and began making dresses for women in her community.

Khadija also participated in the GET Ahead training and a week-long financial literacy course for aspiring entrepreneurs. These experiences helped her turn her small business into a steady livelihood. Today, Khadija supports her family through her sewing work and also trains three young women in sewing skills.

“The EIIP project was a crucial lifeline in providing me with a livelihood during a very precarious time in my life.”

Jamila lives with her three children and her husband, who has a disability. In an area with particularly strict cultural norms that restrict women from working outside the home, Jamila, as the sole provider for her family, faced significant financial challenges. However, when she learned from the community liaison officer that the EIIP project in her area was actively promoting women's participation, she saw an opportunity to change her situation.

Determined to support her family, Jamila joined the project, taking a step that challenged prevailing local norms and stereotypes. With her income, she was able to support for her family and repair her home's damaged roof in time for winter. Her participation encouraged interest from other women in similar opportunities.

“Now other women in this area want to work like me to support their families. I have become a role model to them.”

Thus, Jamila's determination not only improved her family's circumstances, but also coincided with increased community interest and appears to have contributed to evolving mindsets within the community.

Key takeaways

The EIIP's experience in Afghanistan offers several key takeaways for promoting women's participation in challenging contexts, including:

- Achieving meaningful women's participation in challenging contexts is possible, but it requires sustained commitment, creativity (e.g., identifying activities that can be done at home), persistence, and problem-solving by project managers and other staff.
- Setting ambitious yet realistic gender targets helps drive progress. These targets should reflect both the local context and the project's commitment to inclusion, and serve as a benchmark.
- Conducting a gender-responsive peace and conflict analysis is essential to identify risks and opportunities and create the basis for a Do No Harm approach throughout the project cycle.
- Close collaboration and engagement with communities from the outset and throughout implementation — especially with community leaders and women — helps build trust, ensure transparency, foster mutual understanding, adapt approaches to the local context and strengthen local ownership.
- Raising gender awareness among staff and communities is critical to improving buy-in and supporting a broader understanding of the project's gender strategy and the value of women's inclusion and contributions.
- Local female community liaison officers are essential connectors who help build trust with women and their families, facilitate communication, and increase women's participation.
- Using a gender monitoring checklist throughout implementation helps track compliance with gender commitments and hold implementers accountable.
- Investing in women's capacity strengthening through technical skills training and entrepreneurship support is critical to supporting both immediate employment and long-term empowerment.
- Participating in joint UN field missions and inter-agency dialogues provides valuable opportunities to foster cross-learning and improve gender-inclusive programmes.

Conclusion

The EIIP experience in Afghanistan shows that, despite contextual constraints, women's meaningful and safe participation in employment and decent work initiatives, in traditionally male-dominated sectors like construction can be supported through tailored approaches. This experience highlights that projects aiming to promote women's participation in similar settings should prioritise deep and nuanced contextual understanding, strong and proactive community engagement, firm commitment to inclusive practices, and a persistent, adaptive and problem-solving approach to identifying context-specific solutions.

By applying these strategies, the project successfully navigated barriers to involve women in public infrastructure works in an innovative and context-appropriate way. In doing so, it not only provided short-term employment and supported improvements in household income but also supported longer-term economic empowerment and resilience through skills development, entrepreneurship initiatives and community-based savings groups. According to participant accounts, these efforts supported women's financial contributions to their households and enhanced their role in decision-making, with many reporting increased confidence.

Importantly, the visible participation and contributions of women helped contribute to shifting community perceptions, leading to greater awareness and support for their economic participation and contributing to social cohesion. In this way, the project serves as a practical example of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus approach and offers valuable takeaways for promoting women's economic empowerment in complex settings.

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