



Outcome Harvest Evaluation -
Key Findings

Supporting Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan



Introducing the Evaluation:

Since returning to power in August 2021, the Taliban authorities have imposed sweeping restrictions on women and girls, limiting mobility, education, employment and market access. During this period, the EU has maintained support to the Afghan people, prioritising women and girls while avoiding legitimisation of, or indirect support to, the Taliban authorities.

Methodological Approach:

The evaluation used a mixed-methods, outcome-focused approach combining document review, monitoring data, KIIs, FGDs, Outcome Harvesting and Most Significant Change methods. A desk review and remote stakeholder interviews informed fieldwork across eight provinces (April-May 2026), engaging nearly 400 beneficiaries through 26 workshops and discussions. A gender-responsive, conflict-sensitive approach prioritised women's voices. Findings were triangulated and analysed to identify outcomes, contribution pathways, enabling factors and lessons.

Objective of the Evaluation:

The evaluation provided the EU and relevant stakeholders with an independent assessment of the performance, results and contribution of eight EU-funded interventions supporting women's economic empowerment in Afghanistan (2022–2025), and identified lessons learned, conclusions and recommendations to inform future programming and ensure accountability for the use of EU resources.



Specific objective 1:

Inform the identification and formulation of future EU interventions supporting women's economic empowerment in Afghanistan.



Specific objective 2:

Generate lessons and good practices that can be replicated in EU interventions promoting women's economic empowerment in other fragile, repressive and conflict-affected contexts.



Specific objective 3:

Ensure accountability for the use of EU resources by assessing the performance, results and contribution of the evaluated interventions.

The Eight Interventions:

Project (Implementing Partner)	EU Support	Period	Project Objectives
1 Women's Economic Empowerment through Local Enterprise Development (UNDP)	€15m	2024–2025	Aimed to strengthen women's economic empowerment through savings groups, access to finance, business development support and market linkages for women-led enterprises, while contributing to community resilience and financial inclusion.
2 MSME Access to Finance for Livelihoods (Afghanistan Credit Guarantee Foundation)	€11.8m	2021–2025	Sought to improve access to finance for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises through matching grants, credit guarantees and technical assistance, with particular attention to women-owned businesses, youth and underserved areas.
3 Support to Displaced Afghans (International Organization for Migration)	€47m	2022–2026	Aims to support displaced Afghans, returnees and host communities through a combination of humanitarian assistance, protection services and livelihoods support, including measures intended to strengthen women's protection, economic empowerment and self-reliance (ongoing).
4 Faragir – Inclusive Livelihoods Recovery and Community Resilience (AfghanAid)	€8m	2023–2025	Sought to strengthen food security and resilience through livelihoods support, vocational and agricultural training, self-help groups, climate-smart agriculture and natural resource management, with a focus on women and persons with disabilities.
5 Livelihoods Improvement through Inclusive Food Security (Aga Khan Foundation)	€15m	2022–2025	Aimed to improve food security and livelihoods by supporting women-centred agricultural and home-based income-generating activities, savings groups, vocational training and micro-enterprise development.
6 Enhancing Household and Community Food Security and Resilience – Phase II (World Food Programme)	€35m	2023–2025	Sought to strengthen household and community resilience by linking food assistance with livelihoods support, community asset creation and agricultural development, while promoting women's participation in vocational training and home-based value chains.
7 Safeguard and Create Artisan Livelihoods and Enterprises (ACTED)	€11m	2022–2025	Aimed to support women's economic participation through vocational training, apprenticeships, enterprise development and the strengthening of artisan value chains, particularly in tailoring, embroidery and handicrafts.
8 Afghanistan Essential Services and Livelihoods Stabilisation Programme (Dutch Committee for Afghanistan)	€5.7m	2022–2025	Sought to strengthen rural livelihoods and food security through support to women-led agricultural and home-based enterprises, producer groups, technical training and market access initiatives.

Main Findings

FINDING

1

The portfolio made a substantial contribution to preserving and, in many cases, strengthening women's economic participation under exceptionally challenging conditions.

Women established, maintained or expanded income-generating activities through home-based enterprises, agriculture, livestock production, vocational training, savings groups, business development support and access to finance. The strongest results were achieved in livelihood continuity, access to productive assets, household resilience and women's confidence in managing economic activities.

FINDING

2

Additional income enabled households to purchase food, healthcare, education materials and agricultural inputs, while reducing debt and reliance on negative coping strategies.

Women also reported greater influence over routine household expenditure and livelihood decisions. However, improvements in agency remained largely confined to the household, as wider restrictions on women's mobility, asset ownership and public participation continued to limit transformative change.

FINDING

3

Collective economic platforms emerged as one of the portfolio's greatest strengths.

Self-Help Groups, Community-Based Savings Groups, producer organisations and women's networks provided access to savings, emergency finance, peer support and practical learning. Many groups continued operating after project support ended, demonstrating their value as both economic institutions and informal social protection mechanisms.

FINDING

4

The evaluation consistently found that integrated support packages produced the strongest and most sustainable outcomes.

Training was most effective when combined with productive assets, finance, mentoring, technical assistance and market connections. Similarly, agricultural and livestock interventions performed best when complemented by veterinary services, processing facilities or reliable buyers. In contrast, stand-alone training was less likely to generate sustained income.

FINDING

5

Different intervention models successfully served different groups of women.

Enterprise finance generated the strongest commercial outcomes for established entrepreneurs, while poorer and more constrained women benefited most from savings groups, livestock, agriculture and home-based production. Apprenticeships and practical vocational training offered valuable pathways for younger women, returnees and women excluded from formal education. These findings highlight the importance of tailoring interventions to women's differing starting points and capacities.

FINDING

6

Context-sensitive implementation was central to success.

Home-based production, women-only groups and markets, female staff, community facilitators, Sharia-compliant finance and digital delivery mechanisms enabled participation that would otherwise have been impossible. Partners with strong local networks were generally best placed to adapt to changing conditions. However, these approaches also involved trade-offs, including higher delivery costs, more complex monitoring and continued dependence on male intermediaries.

FINDING

7

Limited market access remained the principal barrier to sustainable enterprise growth.

Many women relied on small local markets or intermediaries, while sectors such as tailoring and handicrafts showed signs of saturation. Better outcomes were achieved where projects strengthened value chains, linked producers to reliable buyers, supported aggregation and processing, and expanded access to business networks and digital marketing.

FINDING

8

The portfolio successfully reached poor rural women, female-headed households, returnees, women excluded from education and employment, entrepreneurs and some women with disabilities.

Nevertheless, women living in remote areas, those lacking literacy, documentation, collateral or supportive family networks, and many women with disabilities continued to face the greatest barriers to participation.

FINDING

9

Evidence of sustainability was strongest where women retained productive assets, transferable skills, savings capital or customer relationships after project support ended.

However, continued economic activity did not necessarily indicate commercial sustainability. Many enterprises remained constrained by low profits, weak demand, rising production costs and limited access to business services.

FINDING

10

Few significant negative effects were identified.

Positive spillovers were more common and included skills transfer to family members, mentoring of other women and the spread of savings practices within communities. Some women nevertheless reported heavier workloads, attempts by family members to control income and continuing psychosocial pressures. These issues received less systematic monitoring than economic outcomes.

Conclusions



Contribution and Strategic Achievements

- 1 The portfolio successfully preserved women's economic participation under exceptionally restrictive conditions.
- 2 The portfolio strengthened women's economic agency and resilience within the spaces available to them.
- 3 Integrated support packages generated the strongest and most sustained economic outcomes.
- 4 Tailoring intervention models to women's different circumstances increased programme effectiveness.



Programme Delivery and Portfolio Performance

- 5 Context-adapted implementation was fundamental to the portfolio's effectiveness.
- 6 The portfolio combined complementary interventions but did not establish a coordinated pathway for women's economic progression.
- 7 Partnerships with communities, financial institutions and private-sector actors strengthened implementation and expanded economic opportunities.



Sustainability and EU Added Value

- 8 The portfolio established credible foundations for the continuation of women's economic participation beyond project support.
- 9 Market integration remained the principal constraint to achieving stronger and more sustainable economic outcomes.
- 10 EU added value derived from maintaining a coherent development-oriented portfolio and preserving institutional capacity under exceptional political constraints.