



Supporting Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan

From traditional drying to a self-sustaining SME – saffron processing centre in Herat



Saffron Processing Facility,
Pashtoon Zarghun District, Herat Province.

Source : UNICEF Afghanistan/2022/Omid Fazel

In Pashtoon Zarghun District, Herat Province – known for its saffron production – a group of female saffron producers across four villages (Shah Abad, Gulmeer, Manzil Village, and Dashte Bam) came together with support from the Aga Khan Foundation and the Danish Refugee Council to transform their livelihoods. Each village has its own group of 3-5 members, and together they have built something remarkable: a community-owned and women-led processing centre that is now generating income for the group.

Before the intervention, saffron producers faced significant challenges. They had no dryers – saffron was dried at room temperature, which degraded quality and reduced prices. They had limited knowledge about production and farm management. They sold their saffron to intermediaries who captured most of the profit. There was no processing centre, no collective infrastructure, and no way to add value to their produce.

The intervention provided two types of support. First, individual cash support of **€800** per beneficiary (approximately 60,000 AFN), delivered in two instalments (€320 or 24,000 AFN and €480 or 36,000 AFN respectively), for production inputs including fertilizer, sprayer, integrated pest management supplies, hygiene kits, and harvesting baskets. This support increased production because fertilizer use improved. Previously, the beneficiaries did not know how much fertilizer to use – one producer used five bags per jerib when the need was only one 49kg pack (1 bag) of Di-Ammonium Phosphate. As a result, awareness has improved.

Second, group collective cash was utilised to establish a processing centre with electric dryers. The dryers were purchased at the end of 2025. Each dryer can process around 10kg of saffron in 24 hours, with each cycle taking 7-15 minutes. This modern equipment replaces traditional room-temperature drying, which degraded quality.

Several members of this women-led group also participated in a fair in 2025, which proved to be a catalyst. They connected with other value chain actors and are now selling directly to them – bypassing intermediaries. They also connected with banks and learned that financial actors exist to support them. However, they need more support to access markets outside Herat.

What makes this case exceptional is the emergence of a self-sustaining Small and Medium-sized Enterprise model – an unintended but powerful outcome. The group is planning to charge non-members €20-27 per kilogram (1,500-2,000 AFN) to use the dryer for the coming harvest season. The beneficiaries mentioned that they have *“initiated a small SME to earn from the support we have been provided with”*.

In addition, solar panels installed at the processing centre generate power. The group sells electricity to nearby shops, earning approximately €20 per month (1,500 AFN) – around €200-225 per annum (15,000-18,000 AFN). This money is also planned to be used for expansion of the business and SME. The group plans to establish a shop to buy and sell saffron bulbs and saffron.

The female beneficiaries are determined to continue – stating that *“We want to continue even if no support is there for sustainability, but support could speed up the expansion and economic improvement – previously we would sell to other actors and now we will process by ourselves and earn more.”*

However, certain challenges remain. The current processing centre facility is not sufficient for all needs. None of the group members have the capacity to repair the dryers or solar equipment. There is land available (group members land), but no financial capability to increase production – one jerib needs around 100,000 AFN to be prepared for cultivation and cultivated with new saffron. During harvest season women are busy with picking flowers (one month) and weeding.

The group has requested for more support for other small producers, a larger processing centre, access to new markets outside Herat, and capacity building for repair and maintenance.

This case illustrates that when female producers are given the right combination of individual inputs and collective infrastructure, they can build sustainable enterprises that generate income, add value, and create lasting change.



We have initiated a small SME to earn from the support we have been provided with.

- The Beneficiaries stated.



This success story was identified as part of the **Final Evaluation of Eight EU Interventions Supporting Women's Economic Empowerment in Afghanistan (Reference no. SEA-2023-42022).**

Success stories are concrete, beneficiary-centred **examples of positive change** that emerged from the interventions and were identified through triangulated evidence from field discussions, interviews, and analysis. While not representative of the full portfolio or beneficiary population, they remain meaningful by **showing pathways of change** and providing hope.

In 2026, the EU Delegation to Afghanistan conducted an evaluation of eight EU-funded interventions supporting women's economic empowerment in Afghanistan (2022–2025). The aim of the evaluation was to provide the EU and relevant stakeholders with an **independent assessment of the performance, results and contribution** of the eight interventions, and to **identify lessons learned, conclusions and recommendations** to inform future programming and ensure accountability for the use of EU resources.

The evaluation used a **mixed-methods, outcome-focused approach** combining document review, monitoring data, KIIs, FGDs, Outcome Harvesting and Most Significant Change methods. The desk phase reviewed project and contextual documents and included remote interviews with implementing partners and EU representatives.

Fieldwork took place from April to May 2026 across eight provinces (Balkh, Bamyan, Faryab, Herat, Kabul, Kunar, Nangarhar and Takhar) and engaged almost **400 beneficiaries through 26 workshops and discussions**, alongside interviews with partner staff, community representatives, local leaders and market actors.

A **gender-responsive, conflict-sensitive** and ethical approach centred women's voices and lived experiences, supported by six trained female enumerators.

Findings were triangulated and analysed thematically to identify contribution pathways, enabling and constraining factors, and lessons.



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