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SUPPORTING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CONFLICT RIDDEN STATES

Policy Brief 2021



OVERVIEW

Violent conflicts have increased dramatically in the last decade, where more countries in 2016 experienced violent conflict than at any point in almost 30 years (United Nations and World Bank, 2018, p. xvii¹). It is estimated that by 2030 more than half of the world's poor will be living in countries affected by high levels of violence (Ibid). According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (2020, p. 4²), the gap between the least and most peaceful countries is growing, where the Middle East and North Africa region remains the world's least peaceful region for the sixth consecutive year.

In contexts of violent conflict, many women become entrepreneurs out of necessity, where they face burdensome challenges in starting and operating their businesses. The relevant growing research body reports how women entrepreneurs in these contexts demonstrate high levels of resilience

in navigating the economic, social and political barriers in their conflict-ridden states (e.g., Al-Dajani et al., 2019³; Althalathini et al., 2020⁴; Bullough and Renko, 2017⁵; Sabella and El-Far, 2019⁶). In this policy brief, we focus on women entrepreneurs in the protracted conflict-ridden states of Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. Based on the findings from the research undertaken in these three contexts, we propose support measures that enable women entrepreneurs to overcome some of the structural and institutional challenges, succeed in their businesses and contribute to peacebuilding in their fragile contexts. Within our research, we adopted a qualitative approach and conducted in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with women entrepreneurs⁷ in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine.



CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN CONFLICT RIDDEN STATES

- Complexity in the regulations and the unstable political situation
- Bribery and corruption in Afghanistan and Iraq
- A painfully under-developed physical, digital, and financial infrastructure
- A lack of online payment methods such as PayPal and international customers afraid of transferring money to such states
- Lack of sales due to high levels of poverty and unemployment, and tough competition with imported products
- Insecurities and lack on incentives driving women entrepreneurs to operate in the informal economy despite the negative impact this has on the growth of their businesses
- The decrepit legal system resulting in informal export practices through logistics companies or suitcases where the diaspora community helps with marketing and sales
- Women relying on their families rather than microfinance organisations for financing their enterprises due to the political and economic volatility and Islamic finance principles
- Insecurity and fear of harassment restricting the mobility of women entrepreneurs, which in turn affects their wellbeing and business survival
- The entrenched perception that women are less capable than men to run businesses, commonly restricts their ability to access resources especially in masculinised sectors such as technology, fishing and carpentry
- A cultural preference for regular employment rather than entrepreneurship
- Outdated educational systems resulting in underdeveloped human capital



RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CONFLICT RIDDEN STATES

Overall, we recommend contextualised practical business support interventions as follows:

A supportive regulative environment:

- Provide tax incentives and activate anti-dumping laws which protect local entrepreneurs
- Create a database which provides information on local and international markets, business ideas that are vital to the economy, entrepreneurs contribution, sectors, etc.
- Improve power supply and e-commerce accessibility
- Tap into the diasporas as potential foreign investment to support private sector development such as capacity building, introducing international best practices, and financing

Robust monitoring strategies in corrupt conflict-ridden states:

- Partner with a third party such as academic institutions, private firms, or youth organizations to independently monitor, audit and evaluate the effective implementation of funded projects such as infrastructure, business support programmes, etc.
- Strengthen youth's and women's organizations and promote women's agenda



Enhance the visibility of women entrepreneurs and their role modelling

- Give the resilience stories of successful women entrepreneurs more prominence to encourage others, through for example media reports, workshops, exhibitions

Inclusive policy and support

- Involve men in women’s empowerment programmes to help change their resistant attitudes to women’s entrepreneurship and women’s economic participation
- Policies of economic inclusion should be gender inclusive

Promote an entrepreneurial mindset and social legitimization of women entrepreneurs

- Integrate entrepreneurship education into all education levels
- Schools and universities should include in-curricular and extra-curricular activities to build entrepreneurial skills and promote interest in entrepreneurship as a respectable career prospect for graduates and female graduates in particular

“When you know that international community officers aren’t able to go and monitor all grant activities, it’s easy to fake stories and make photos and prove that you are doing the work while you are not.”

Mona, Afghanistan

“Donor community should rethink their policies... Kandahar is still led by not women-friendly leaders so of course they will not make supporting women a top priority.”

Majd, Afghanistan



Offer tailored entrepreneurship training and mentoring:

- Design and conduct tailored training programmes and mentoring by experts in the industry
- Offer vocational training focused on indigenous crafts to enhance women’s competitiveness and marketing efforts internationally
- Important areas of training are digital literacy, fundraising, and using social media for marketing and promotion
- Create awareness amongst women entrepreneurs about available governmental and NGOs support
- Prioritize security of the women entrepreneurs by conducting training and mentoring in safe locations close to the entrepreneurs’ homes and/or businesses
- Offer free childcare, meals, and transportation to facilitate the participation of women entrepreneurs in the training and mentoring programmes



“It helped me a lot when the Business Women Forum brought us designers to create new ideas, and customise our products if we want to export to European markets.”

Farah, Palestine

“My priority when I graduated was to find a permanent job. But now I couldn’t give up my business, I built it and it’s my priority.”

Rasha, Iraq

“We need to promote our embroidery, which is a unique skill and creating handmade products has a market opportunity both locally and internationally.”

Majd, Afghanistan



“I prefer that the donors have a clear strategy towards both men and women entrepreneurs.”

Adam, Afghanistan

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Please use the following citation and acknowledgement when quoting or citing content from this policy brief: Althalathini, D. and Al-Dajani, H. (2021). Policy Brief: Supporting Women Entrepreneurship in Conflict Ridden States.

<https://doi.org/10.24384/5CZK-QD44>

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- ⁷ Participants whose photos appear in this report have granted their permission. The quotes presented in the report are anonymized and do not necessarily correspond with the participants appearing in the photos in this report.

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