

Livelihoods Case Study

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: SPINNING A LUCRATIVE YARN IN AFGHANISTAN

COUNTRY: Afghanistan

THEMES: Women's economic empowerment; Livelihoods

BACKGROUND

The northern regions of Afghanistan are flat, desert lands which experience harsh summers and bitter winters. Following years of war and displacement, many families are returning to the north of Afghanistan, their homelands, to find few opportunities to earn a living. The Afghan province of Faryab is widely known for carpet production, which is the primary vocation of Turkmen and Uzbek women in this area. Women spin wool using a traditional drop spindle, which is time consuming, physically wearing and cannot produce fine wool. Typically women can produce 0.6kg of yarn per day, which is sold for AFN 40 to dealers, who sell it to carpet merchants for roughly AFN 190.

THE PROJECT

The spinning wheel project was designed to support women's economic empowerment by providing training, wool to practise the new technique and improved spinning wheels to women. Beneficiaries were selected by Tearfund in collaboration with the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Faryab, focusing on women from households which were poor, did not own much livestock, were in debt, were in poor quality housing or had difficult family structures (e.g widows, disabled family members or large families).

Some 394 beneficiaries from 12 villages were selected to receive a foot-pedal spinning wheel, a chair, 40kg of wool and 80 hours of training. The new wheels do not require electricity, and so can easily be used in the village. Only simple maintenance is required for the wheels, and therefore they can provide a long term, sustainable source of income. Additionally, spinning wool is a more disaster resistant income than many other forms of livelihoods, as it is not reliant on weather; so as long as the supply chain is operational, women can continue to earn a consistent wage.

Beneficiaries received three days of training on:

- installation of the wheel
- pedalling and operation of the wheel
- cleaning the wool
- spinning yarn into different thread sizes
- spinning wheel maintenance
- price setting for different quality grades of yarn

Tearfund also provided on-the-job training for ten weeks. Women were organised into groups within their towns and linked to the markets for their product. This increased access to wool to spin, and facilitated the opportunity to directly sell yarn to and buy wool from merchants.

IMPACT ON BENEFICIARIES

Surveys were performed before and after the implementation of this project in order to monitor its benefits. All beneficiaries stated that spinning wool was a great source of income for covering their daily expenses. By using a foot pedal wheel, income earning abilities were greatly increased, and 96 per cent of beneficiaries were using the new machines, while the remaining women had loaned their spinning wheels to others. By using the new spinning wheel, women spun 3-4kg of wool daily (100 per cent increase). Nearly half of the women also taught their daughters to spin wool, providing them with a skill which they can use to generate their own income in the future. All of the beneficiaries earned AFN 120 per day, and spent their income on food (28 per cent), home expenses (40 per cent) and children's education (34 per cent). By learning to use spinning wheels, women believe that their income will bring positive changes, and some believe that they can live independently now.