

## Afghan women get down to business

By Mark Dummett  
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**The Kabul Star football is manufactured in a large house in the Afghan capital. The production line runs through its many rooms.**

Hexagons of leather are cut and painted in the garage, they are sewn into balls in the living room, washed in the upstairs bathroom, and put in bags in the master bedroom.

What makes the factory really unusual though is that all 60 of its workers are women.

Under the Taleban, women were banned from outside work. Even now, many Afghan families do not let their wives and daughters leave home without a male companion, and the vast majority of shopkeepers, and even customers in the capital are men.

"It's just an Afghan cultural thing," was one shopper's explanation.

But since the US-led coalition ousted the Islamist regime from power after 9/11, more and more Afghan women have gone back to work.

"We want to show the world that Afghan women can achieve something," explained Aziza Mohamad, whose charity Humanitarian Assistance for Women is behind the football factory.

"Under the Taleban, women were forced to stay at home, but now we have freedom," she said.

As well as earning a wage, she says the Kabul Star workers are also trained and encouraged to set up shop on their own.

Despite all the challenges Afghan women face, the government says a growing number have done exactly that since 2001.



Under the Taleban women were virtually banned from the workplace

"This is a really positive trend," said Omar Zakhilwal, president of the Afghan Investment Support Agency, a government body which promotes enterprise. "There are a lot of women who are now coming to the forefront."

"Within a few years you will see that women not only have a significant role, as they have always had in the production of commodities, but they will also be heading their own businesses and enterprises."

One woman already doing so is Hasina Sherjan, whose company Boumi exports embroidered curtains, cushion covers and other goods to Europe and America.

For her the biggest difficulties have nothing to do with being a woman, but the dire state of Afghanistan's infrastructure after two decades of war and misrule.

"The main challenge is the lack of electricity. We have to run the generator all day long, and that is expensive every week, every month."

According to Ms Sherjan it is hard for her to compete with similar goods made in other Asian countries. For example the textile factory she buys her cotton from - Afghanistan's only textile factory - uses technology dating back to 1939.

"Because the cost of living is so high, the salaries we pay are higher than those in India, China and Indonesia," she complains.

Other business people - both men and women - say cheap products made in Afghanistan's neighbours Iran and Pakistan are dumped on the local market and corrupt government officials do little to protect them.

Then there is the ongoing insecurity in the south and east of the country, caused by the Taliban and other anti-government forces, and fuelled by Afghanistan's most successful economic sector - the illegal drugs trade.

It is clearly a difficult place to do business.

And Mariam Siddiqi of the Afghan Women's Business Council warns: "Without women involved in the process, the reconstruction of Afghanistan will fail."



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Aziza Mohmad



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Hasina Sherjan