

Researching livelihoods and  
services affected by conflict



# Gender, youth and urban labour market participation: evidence from the tailoring sector in Kabul, Afghanistan

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# About us

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people in conflict-affected situations make a living, access basic services like health care, education and water, and perceive and engage with governance at local and national levels. Providing better access to basic services, social protection and support to livelihoods matters for the human welfare of people affected by conflict, the achievement of development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals and international efforts at peace- and state-building.

At the centre of SLRC's research are three core themes, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity in conflict-affected situations

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka, Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000 in Sierra Leone, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction of Wageningen University (WUR) in the Netherlands, the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan.

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# Executive summary

## What is this study about?

The creation of good jobs and decent work in conflict-affected places is widely seen to generate not just better-off households, but also safer societies and more legitimate states. However, so much of the good jobs agenda is dominated by technical approaches more concerned with balancing out supply and demand than with serious analysis of the role of institutions, identity and power in mediating access to opportunities. This study is about understanding how labour markets actually work in insecure and dynamic contexts, with a particular focus on: (1) how young women and men acquire skills and enter the urban labour market in the first place, particularly in light of the highly gendered nature of boundaries between public and private space; (2) what the nature, terms and limits of their labour market participation look like; and (3) whether participation in that urban labour market is working for or against them (in terms of its effects on various dimensions of their wellbeing). More specifically, it looks at young women's and men's experiences in Kabul's tailoring labour market. The study – together with wider comparative work being done by SLRC, including a closely connected sister project in northern Uganda – ultimately sets out to help us understand what a 'good jobs agenda' for fragile states might actually look like.

## What did we do?

Data collection was carried out in Kabul by researchers from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) in January 2014. Researchers employed qualitative methods (mainly semi-structured interviews, some focus group work) to generate information on processes, experiences, meanings and effects of employment in the tailoring sector. A mix of participants was drawn on, including young women and men (apprentices, participants in NGO programmes, young shop owners) and older tailors and teachers (in order to better understand processes of recruitment). In addition to original interview material, the researchers drew on existing but unpublished qualitative data generated by a local NGO working with women tailors in different parts of the country. Finally, in order to get a sense of how particular or general the nature of youth participation in the tailoring labour market is, interviews were also carried out with young male carpenters and young female beauticians.

## What did we find?

Three findings from the research stand out. First, pathways to skills acquisition and the terms of labour market participation are socially regulated and deeply gendered. Networks matter, and labour market outcomes have a strong relational dimension to them. For example, gaining the support of key male figures (fathers, uncles, husbands) appears important for young women wanting to enter the sector, and, for young men, access to tailoring 'apprenticeships' (informal, but widespread) is largely dependent on social connections and the relationship between teachers and students' parents. Second, the multiple ways in which women's access to the market is regulated can be understood as a kind of informal tax on women's livelihoods. The combination of years of unpaid labour, a more limited and lower quality skill-set relative to male tailors, and restricted access to various parts of the physical marketplace works to reduce economic returns for most women (although examples of real success are also apparent, but in far smaller numbers). And third, participation in the tailoring labour market has quite different meanings for young women compared to young men: while for the latter, the acquisition of tailoring skills is often seen as forming an economic safety net when times get tough – a long-term Plan B, as it were – for women, participation is much more about the hard-won outcome of a struggle against institutional bounds on economic activity. In some ways, the very act of being able to operate visibly in the urban labour

market constitutes if not a major achievement, then at least a symbol of resistance against the (highly patriarchal) social rules of the game. However, the generally poor terms of women's participation in the urban labour market serve to remind us that there is still a long way to go before we might consider calling this a good news story.

### **What does it mean?**

These findings suggest that the labour market ultimately functions as a social economy: one's access and participation are socially regulated not only by one's networks, but also by institutionalised ideas about what is seen to constitute acceptable behaviour for different social groups. As such, donor programming seeking to create better work for young people in Afghanistan must start with the idea that labour markets both reflect and reinforce existing social inequality, and engage with the evidence showing how the constraints facing women and men in finding and staying in work are of a completely separate nature. In this context, the notion of 'decent work' cannot just be about increasing the supply of less insecure jobs, but rather demands practical engagement with the deeply gendered way in which things work – not only in the space of the economic marketplace, but also within the reproductive economic space of the household.

# 1 Introduction

**The most notable characteristic of the employed population in Afghanistan is that most workers by far – 81 percent – work in a vulnerable setting, characterised by informal work arrangements and insecure employment, unstable and inadequate earnings and low productivity. This is almost universally the case for workers in the farming and livestock sub-sectors (accounting for 25 and 15 percent of the employed respectively) but to a very large extent also for those in other sectors characterised by informal employment. (CSO, 2014: 27)**

These summary findings from Afghanistan's latest National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA), conducted between 2011 and 2012, starkly set the broader context for the analysis presented in this paper. For many millions of people, the economy of Afghanistan is one of acute risk. Participation in labour markets – both rural and urban – is characterised by struggle and uncertainty. It is also deeply gendered: questions of access, mobility and returns are all contingent on, among other intersectional factors, whether the individual exchanging their labour is a man or woman.

This study is concerned with a particular sector of Afghanistan's expanding urban labour market, investigating the opportunities and constraints that young women and men face in finding what we might term 'decent employment' in Kabul tailoring sector – one part of the mass of small and medium enterprises that make up 85% of Afghanistan's businesses (Mushal, 2014). It responds to a wider interest in employment creation within the 'fragile states agenda', which has had a tendency to view the generation of 'good jobs' as possessing a kind of instrumental and transformative potential for peace building and state building. In the last few years, for example, two of the World Bank's annual World Development Reports have dedicated considerable space to discussions of how the provision of jobs can help build safer societies and more legitimate states (World Bank, 2012; 2013).

But exactly what the specifics of a good jobs agenda might look like, particularly in contexts affected by political violence and conflict, remains far from clear. Much of the thinking on employment works within normative models of supply and demand, with little attention paid to the governance of the marketplace and to the ways in which power and forms of social regulation – of which gender and identity are key features – structure access, participation and returns (Kabeer, 2012). It also largely fails to treat the relationships between (un)employment and violence with the caution and nuance they demand (Cramer, 2010). As Harriss-White (2010) reminds us, much of the economy in developing countries exists outside the regulative role of the state, and this is even more the case in conflict-affected situations. The informal economy is primarily made up of those who are self- or casually employed, or working in small and often unregistered enterprises; under such circumstances, good jobs (which can be characterised as those which provide secure benefits and social rights) are by definition dependent on the work rights that underpin them (Harriss-White, 2010). However, it is exactly these dimensions that are often overlooked. In the words of Carolyn Nordstrom (2010), they become 'vanishing points': parts of the economy where the normative (what should be) intersects with reality (what actually is). As a result of 'the conventions of politics, research and power', a huge bulk of (typically informal) economic activity in developing countries is left unseen, uncounted, unaddressed (Nordstrom, 2010: 164).

By responding to the demands of Kabeer and Nordstrom that economies be assessed realistically and as they actually function, our study directly addresses these questions of power, regulation and informality within the economic (and social) space of the marketplace. But it does so while also

addressing another important theme: the experiences of youth in urban labour markets. Young people are often discussed as an important target group for job creation programmes and policies.<sup>1</sup> In places affected by conflict, this is related – discursively, at least – to a tendency by many to label young people in a somewhat simplistic fashion (e.g. as passive victims lacking agency, or as potential aggressors (‘dangerous young men’). However, the reality is far more complex than these narratives imply (Sommers, 2010; 2011). We know, for example, that living under conditions of conflict can affect the views and values held by young people, particularly when displacement to urban areas within and outside their home country (see Saito, 2009) shapes their economic and cultural aspirations. Thus, as people are confronted with new norms, opportunities and constraints, urban spaces become important sites of transition for many (this is not to say that rural spaces are disconnected from towns and cities, nor that they themselves are static and unchanging).

Against this brief yet illustrative backdrop, the broader study (of which this particular piece of research constitutes one part) set out to generate information on a series of research questions:

What is the nature and household structure of women’s and men’s economic activity in conflict-affected situations?

- What are the mechanisms through which shifts in the nature and household structure of economic activity occur?
- How do labour markets function in conflict-affected situations?<sup>2</sup>
- What are the formal and informal barriers mediating young women’s and men’s access to, and participation in, labour markets in conflict-affected situations?

The Kabul research is partnered by a separate case study from northern Uganda. Together, these two case studies will form the basis of a forthcoming synthesis report which will investigate more deeply the theoretical aspects of labour market participation, the key themes to emerge from the empirical work, and the policy implications of our findings.

The structure of this paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 provides some context to the study, sketching out illustrative overviews of Kabul’s urban economy and Afghanistan’s cloth and garment sector. Section 3 discusses the methodology behind our research. Section 4 constitutes the core of the paper, presenting and analysing the qualitative data gathered through interviews. It is split broadly into three parts: the first discusses young men’s and women’s entrance into Kabul’s tailoring sector, as well as the urban labour market more generally; the second covers the often lengthy process of becoming a tailor, homing in on the deeply gendered pathways to skills acquisition; the third reflects on what it means to be a tailor in an urban environment, particularly in terms of its material and relational effects. The analysis also draws on qualitative evidence (see methods section) from Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad in an effort to identify whether the kinds of processes and patterns observed in Kabul are similar elsewhere. In Section 5, we compare and contrast young people’s experiences of becoming a tailor with the experiences of those working in the carpentry (for men) and beauty parlour (for women) sectors in order to explore the extent to which these experiences are sector-specific. Finally, Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the differential ways in which the particular labour market under study works for (and often against) young men and women seeking a decent living and a peaceful existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth is defined by the Government of Afghanistan as people aged between 18 and 30 years of age.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase ‘household structure’ refers to the division of labour between women and men at the household level vis-à-vis participation in both the productive and reproductive economic spaces (see Elson, 1999).

## 2 Setting the context: Kabul's urban economy and Afghanistan's garment sector

Telling the full story of recent economic transformation in Afghanistan and its urban centres is beyond the scope of this paper. It is also unnecessary for our purposes here. Rather, this section sets the scene for the proceeding analysis by first providing a short overview of the current state of Kabul's economy, and second offering a more detailed dissection of the country's cloth and garment sector, with a particular focus on its urban dimensions.

### 2.1 Kabul's urban economy

Kabul's population has been estimated to have doubled since 2001, when it was approximately 2 million (Metcalf et al., 2012). Its expansion has been driven by a series of factors, including: returning refugees from Pakistan; internal displacement from continuing conflict within the country; the effects of drought; and an overall decline in the rural economy. Although Kabul became a relative sanctuary for many rural Afghans during the 1980s, during the 1992-96 conflict between warring Mujahedeen factions it became a direct battleground with acute consequences for its inhabitants, many of whom fled (Metcalf et al., 2012).

Since 2001, there has been a building boom driven both by the spill-over effects from the high levels of aid and military spending (including a rental market for expatriates) and the recycling of profits made from the opium economy. This has contributed to a land grab of public land by the political elite and powerful. The growth of an unruly city economy in which powerful non-state actors have been engaged has led to a rise in violence and crime, which has contributed to the general sense of unsafe conditions (Pantuliano et al., 2012: S8).

For Kabul, as Metcalf et al. (2012) found, conditions of uncertain and irregular work in the informal economy characterise the employment opportunities for the internally displaced and others. There are also marked seasonal dimensions to employment opportunities, with a sharp decline during the winter period at exactly the time when expenditure requirements increase in relation to the need to heat.

Although it is generally known that the construction sector has been a visible component of the Kabul economy over this last decade, in general there appears to have been limited research on the structure of the city economy. While not specific to Kabul, the labour market survey of employment in Afghanistan's urban economies (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, 2009), which is discussed in more detail below, points clearly to unskilled labour as being the most significant form of employment for men (17.5% of surveyed males) and tailoring as the most significant for women (25.5% of surveyed females). What's more, in terms of how people find work, around 80% of the sample population cited either 'family connections' or 'friends/neighbours referral' as the main method. Only a small minority of respondents reported gaining employment via formal vocational training programmes.

The recent NRVA results, however, are perhaps more revealing of the challenges to gaining employment (CSO, 2014). Nationally representative data show that while the male labour force participation rate is 80%, for women it is only 19%. Further, only 13% of women living in urban areas are reported to be working, indicating the significant barriers that women face to finding employment. The participation rate for boys aged 14 years is high (at 46%), as is that for men aged between 65 and 79 years, confirming the need for households to generate income. For women,

employment rates vary little with age (CSO, 2014: 30). Labour force participation rates differ not only by sex, but also by geography. The NRVA data highlight differences between rural and urban areas (rates for both men and women are higher in the former), while data from the slightly older urban-based survey (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, 2009) reveal differences specifically between urban areas: a larger proportion of Kabul's population above 15 years of age, for example, is in some form of employment (64.3%) relative to that survey's urban sample areas on average (47.1%).

What characterises Afghanistan is its very young age structure, with 48.4% of its population under 15 – the second highest proportion in the world. In addition, urban areas have a higher proportion of 15-24 year olds (23.6% of the urban population) compared with rural areas (17.8% of the rural population). This has probably been driven by selective in-migration of students and young adults looking for education opportunities and jobs in the urban labour market, as well as by lower urban fertility rates (CSO, 2014). The propulsion of young people towards urban areas has not been experienced evenly, however. As the NRVA report points out, 'immigration to Kabul dwarfs all other provincial immigration ... taking over half of all recorded immigrants' (CSO, 2014: 21).

Finally, as mentioned above, the economy of Kabul – and the country's urban centres more generally – is for the most part defined by informal economic activity. As Mushal (2014) notes, most of Afghanistan's small and medium enterprises, which employ roughly one-third of the country's labour force, are based in urban areas; some 70-80% of these remain informal and unregistered with the government. Afghan businesses and traders face a range of challenges in their day-to-day as well as their longer-term operation. According to Mushal (2014), these include: decreasing market confidence (related to wider political shifts and concerns about security); a dependence on donor organisations for start-up support; weak technological capacity; and limited product diversity. In addition, a 2013 survey by the Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries finds that a lack of electricity, corruption and land acquisition were reported as major challenges by 80%, 78% and 32% of surveyed business owners, respectively (in Mushal, 2014: 10). While these findings speak openly to the formal constraints on running a business in Afghanistan – indeed, the World Bank ranks the country's business climate as 164th out of 189 national economies – they do not tell us anything about how access, participation, expansion and returns are mediated by institutionalised forms of social regulation. We can consider this, perhaps, to be one of Nordstrom's 'vanishing points' of existing economic assessments.

## **2.2 The cloth and garment sector in Afghanistan**

As any visit to a district town, provincial centre or major urban city in Afghanistan will quickly reveal, the business of selling cloth and the stitching of clothes for men and women by tailors is one of the most pervasive and visible features of the market landscape. Few small towns are without their tailors making traditional clothes for men and supplying the fashion-driven market for women. Despite the rise in imports of cheap, ready-made clothes, largely coming from China but increasingly from Turkey, the cloth and garment markets of rural Afghanistan are still primarily based on bespoke traditional clothing. Even in urban areas where readymade clothes have had the greatest penetration, a large market for bespoke clothing, particularly customary dress, remains (as plainly evidenced by the number of tailors and shops making and selling such clothing).

The market for bespoke clothing is segmented between clothes for men and clothes for women. However, both men and women are active workers in this gendered and segregated marketplace. Male tailors occupy the visible space of the cloth trading centres and tailoring shops, which usually specialise either in making men's or women's clothing; in the major cities, one can find even further specialisation (for example, in the making of wedding or special event clothes for women). But less visible is the role that female cloth workers and tailors play in supplying both handicraft work and stitching services to men working in the male and female clothing sectors. This includes working in

the *peron tambon* market (e.g. Kandahari embroidery for the expensive male *peron tambon*,<sup>3</sup> stitching *peron tambons* for the cheap *peron tambon* market in Mazaar), doing beaded work for women's velvet dresses, or working as home-based tailors in their own right for female clientele in the neighbourhood markets.

The scale of the cloth and clothing market in Afghanistan is difficult to estimate but it is highly regionalised and differentiated.<sup>4</sup> In common with other informal markets in the country, it is subject to multiple forms of social regulation. One self-evident form is gender; another is ethnic identity. For example, most of the women working outside the home in cities and who penetrate the male-dominated space of the physical marketplace are Hazara women. Similarly, the market for cheap, ready-made *peron tambons* in Mazaar is occupied exclusively by Hazara men. All of Afghanistan's cities are ethnically diverse, but the boundaries between ethnic groups are less sharply drawn in some cities (Herat) than in others (Jalalabad, Kandahar). Nevertheless, what consistently underpins and lubricates the functioning of these markets is the supply of informal credit, which in turn works through networks of personal social relations structured by gender and identity. The scale of it is significant, but women have considerably less access to credit than men.

While the purchase of cloth from Pakistan in the case of both wholesale and retail traders in Jalalabad is more cash-based (both wholesale and retail informants suggested figures of about 10% of trade was in credit), there appear to be greater levels of credit provided in the case of cloth for women both from the wholesale markets in Kabul and for those importing Chinese cloth. However, in the case of the wholesale supply to provinces and districts, traders' use of credit is more widespread. One informant in Pain (2012b), for example, reported that he had more than 100 Lakhs Pakistani rupees outstanding with suppliers but in turn he had more than 300 Lakhs rupees given out as credit to traders in the region.<sup>5</sup> He estimated that, on average, about 50% of the cloth that he provided was done so on a credit basis.

Geography is also a significant factor in the structuring of the clothing market. Herat shares with the cities of Jalalabad, Mazaar and Kandahar a set of distinctive features. They are cities of the plains surrounded by a historically rich irrigated agricultural hinterland that has generated the surplus to support the growth of the cities and their trading communities. They are all located on the borders of Afghanistan, and are essentially 'port' cities oriented to serving their immediate hinterland and trading with the 'outer world' rather than with the Afghanistan national economy. More specifically, Herat has borders with two countries (Iran and Turkmenistan) and is deeply influenced by the rich and sophisticated culture of Iran, Mazaar is oriented to the north, while Jalalabad is more a part of Pashtun culture and thus linked closely to the Pakistan state. Kabul, located inland and without a surrounding plain economy, is the exception.

These 'port' cities are distinctive in terms of their imports. Jalalabad is the primary importer of cloth from Pakistan, which is mainly used for men's traditional clothing; Herat and Mazaar are, to a lesser extent, importers of ready-made clothing from China and Turkey as well as cloth from India and South Korea. The market is differentiated by cloth type and quality with, for example, sharp gradations in quality for different sorts of velvet coming from South Korea and China, with different traders specialising in particular cloth qualities.

Within each city, there is a geography of physical marketplaces with wholesalers and retailers of particular types of cloth located in specific locations. In Herat, for example, the garment market is divided into three tiers. Tier 1 traders cover those wholesale importers who supply both the national and Herat market. Tier 2 traders deal as secondary wholesalers and sell primarily to the retail trade

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<sup>3</sup> *Peron tambons* are traditional Afghan men's clothing.

<sup>4</sup> This section draws on Pain, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c.

<sup>5</sup> One Lakh is equivalent to 100,000.

in Herat and the surrounding districts and provinces. They obtain their cloth from tier 1 traders. Tier 3 covers the retail trade, which is divided between the trade in cloth, ready-made clothes, *peron tambons*, embroidery and silk. Variation also exists within each tier of the market. For example, there are both larger and smaller tier 1 traders – a difference that appears to be based on ethnic identity. Over this last decade, a group of Kandahari traders have moved from Kandahar to Herat on account of better security and trading conditions in the north, and they appear to be the major players at the upper level of tier 1. Kuchi market appears to be occupied exclusively by these Kandahari traders and they also have a major presence in Qamar market. Many of them have two passports (the second being a Pakistani one), making it easier for them to travel. They have essentially formed an immigrant ethnic enclave within Herat city.

These brief insights into the structure of the cloth and garment sector of Afghanistan illustrate the complex regulation of the broader clothing market within which Kabul is located. A number of recent trends affecting the market as a whole can also be identified (Pain, 2012c):

- A rise in the market for western style, ready-made garments for both men and women, leading to a decline in demand for fabrics. This may be more of an urban than rural trend, but it is evidenced in the decline of the ready-made *peron tambon* market as well as in the market for women's and men's fabric in the cities.
- A dynamic rise in the market for hand-embroidered products, driven both by an international market as well as a domestic one.
- A long-term decline in the historical production and trade of silk and silk products.
- The import from Mazaar of computer-designed *peron tambons* which are cheaper than those produced in Herat.
- An overall decline in demand due to current political and economic uncertainty produced by the process of Western withdrawal from Afghanistan (see also Mallett, 2014).<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this section has been to establish a context for the analysis presented in Section 4. It has illustrated the shifting and largely informal nature of Kabul's urban economy and drawn attention to the structural characteristics of Afghanistan's cloth and garment sector. In this next section, we briefly describe the methodology of our research, before turning to the core of the paper: an analysis of becoming a tailor in Kabul.

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<sup>6</sup> Mushal (2014) observes similar (expected) effects of withdrawal on Afghanistan's small and medium enterprises more generally.

### 3 Methodology

In 2009, the Labour Market Information and Analysis Unit of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Martyrs and Disabled undertook a survey in the 31 provincial capitals of the occupation of working men and women. The survey sampled 24,768 urban households.

Table 1 below summarises the top ten ranked occupations reported by men and women, illustrating the prevalence of unskilled labour for men and tailoring for women as employment options.

**Table 1: Percentage of men and women working in urban areas ranked by occupation**

Men		Women	
Profession	%	Profession	%
Unskilled labour	17.2	Tailoring	25.5
Government	9.8	Cooking / Domestic	13.9
Shopkeeper	8.7	Housewife	13.6
Tailoring	4.5	Carpet Weaving	8.2
Driver	4.4	Embroidery	7.6
Student	4.2	Teacher	7.1
Teacher	3.5	Government	3.6
Mason	2.7	Artist	2.3
Car Mechanic	2.6	Handicraft	2.2
Carpentry	2.0	Beauty Parlour	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>59.6</b>		<b>86.1</b>

Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, 2009: 26-27

Given the interest of this study in the gendered dimensions of labour market participation, it was decided that the focus would be on employment in tailoring (note that this was the top-ranked sector for women and the fourth-ranked sector for men). In order to explore whether the gendered dimensions of the tailoring labour market are sector-specific, two ‘gender-exclusive’ sectors were also selected: carpentry and the beauty parlour business, which ranked as the tenth most significant sector for men and women, respectively. The beauty parlour business was of particular interest since it is the one area where it is legitimate for women to establish a shop in the public space, even though it is seen by many (both men and women) as a somewhat disreputable or ‘immoral’ occupation and thus subject to social censure (see Section 5).

A further reason to focus on tailoring was that it complemented earlier studies that had been undertaken by Adam Pain (Pain, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c) on the cloth and garment markets in the cities of Mazaar, Jalalabad and Herat for Zardozi in 2012.<sup>7</sup> The reports of these remain unpublished but have been drawn on for this report.

Our research is based primarily on a phase of fieldwork conducted in January 2014. The research team consisted of Massouda Kohistani (AREU), Ihsanullah Ghafoori (AREU), Richard Mallett (ODI) and Adam Pain (AREU/ODI). Semi-structured qualitative interviews were selected as the main method. A checklist of key interview themes, developed out of the overarching research questions for the study (see Section 1), was discussed and refined by the team both before fieldwork began and once all members were in Kabul.

Interviews were conducted in selected parts of Kabul. The selection of locations was influenced by the known clustering of tailor shops in specific regions of the city; these were then purposively

<sup>7</sup> Zardozi is a registered Afghan NGO helping women to start small businesses in handicrafts and clothing. For more information, see [www.afghanartisans.com/test/about\\_us\\_test.html](http://www.afghanartisans.com/test/about_us_test.html).

sampled in a way that would capture differences in location and tailoring sub-sectors (there was, however, no social dimension to this sampling). The selected areas included: those outside the city in peri-urban areas; those on the outskirts of the city; and those located more centrally in town. While the clusters situated outside and at the margins of the city primarily served the neighbourhood market, in the more central area clusters tapped into a wider regional market and were more specialised. Thus, informant 5 was located in the Shari Naw district – the ‘Savile Row’ of Kabul – and concentrated on producing bespoke suits for more senior government officials and international staff. Similarly, the tailoring cluster located in the Old City (1st district near to Shah-e-Do Shamsheera Wali) focused on suits and uniforms for the national police.

Since most of the young men working as apprentices in the tailoring business are seen both by themselves and by their employers as students working under a teacher, it was often not possible to speak to them directly in the shop. As such, many conversations were held with teachers. In the case of women, except where it was possible to meet a group of women tailors working with Zardozi, they could not be accessed directly by the male members of the research team and were instead interviewed by Massouda. These constraints in accessing informants are acknowledged. However, it should be noted that interviews with teachers provided a good opportunity to cross-check information received from those who had recently completed their apprenticeship. Annex 1 provides the full list of 29 interviews and informants (and interview number, which is used for reference purposes in the report) along with each informant’s gender, occupation and age.

In addition to the January fieldwork data, our analysis also draws on slightly older data generated by Adam Pain through previous research with Zardozi, as well as on some of the organisation’s documentary accounts of women participating in the Zardozi programme in Kabul and elsewhere. Included in this data is a series of interviews with 14 women conducted in 2012 by Barb Everdene (for which Adam Pain had an advisory role) examining issues of women’s economic empowerment through individual women’s life histories. Finally, short case studies used in Zardozi reporting have also been drawn on. The use of Zardozi material was intended not only to deepen the evidence base from which this study draws, but also to consider how ‘Kabul-specific’ the findings from our own interviews might be.

## 4 Becoming a tailor in Kabul: gendered pathways to urban labour market participation

The pathways to becoming a tailor in Kabul are distinctly gendered, even if the skills needed are universal. This section charts and critically examines the process of becoming a tailor as experienced differently by men and women, with a view to: (1) understanding how the labour market actually works, and; (2) informing an analysis of how employment in this sector might contribute towards the accumulation of capital and empowerment.

It is split into three parts. The first outlines motivations for, and degrees of choice in, entering the tailoring sector and the 'world of work' more generally. The second discusses pathways to skills acquisition, seeking to answer the question: how do young men and women actually gain the skills they need to function effectively in the labour market? The third and final part examines how the accumulation of expertise and experience may or may not lead to decent employment (within the context of the informal regulatory structures of the labour market), with a particular emphasis on what 'being a tailor' means for women.

### 4.1 On accessing the urban labour market

Motivations for starting a tailoring apprenticeship were varied. For some young men whose fathers are tailors, the acquisition of tailoring skills is an inevitable outcome of providing help to their father (many of the tailors interviewed as part of this research had their sons working with them). In some cases, where a father or close male relation was also a tailor, there was an almost natural progression into helping the father, elder brother or relation with their work. In one interview, where a Tajik tailor working outside Kabul had had his eight sons of various age working with him and supporting him because of his back problems, he talked of the desirability of giving them a profession, whether or not they chose to continue with it later in their life.<sup>8</sup> Thus, although there are questions around what degree of choice his sons might have had in entering the labour market, there was no doubt their future career was up to them and that they were free to take up other occupations (as two had done).

However, this tailor also said that one of the reasons to keep his sons working with him was born out of fears of insecurity in the area. Essentially, he wanted to keep them near him rather than roaming around outside. A second informant commented that a prime motivation to have his son as a tailoring student was to keep him off the streets and under supervision (again out of fears for his physical insecurity).<sup>9</sup> Evidence from elsewhere has similarly shown how physical insecurity – and, importantly, people's subjective perceptions of the risk involved – subsequently shape economic behaviour and activity (Badiuzzaman et al., 2011; Rockmore, 2011).

For those who do not come from a tailoring family, the choice of a tailoring apprenticeship can be a combination of interest, necessity but also social position; in comparison with other trades, tailoring was reported as having a somewhat higher status. It also depends on the economic conditions of the household, with poorer families sending their sons to work on the streets or to wash cars, while more

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<sup>8</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>9</sup> Interview 12.

well off families direct their sons to tailoring, carpentry or car workshops and garages.<sup>10</sup> Even in comparison with these 'better off' professions, tailoring is seen as a 'cleaner' profession.

Men typically become tailors as boys, and they may start very young – one informant was only 11.<sup>11</sup> However, this 11-year-old, like other boys of school age, was continuing his schooling, working with the tailor during the holidays and part-time during the school term. Eight of the male tailors interviewed, all of whom were already established, talked of starting at an even younger age, in part because they were children during the Russian period and economic necessity forced it. Informant 18, for example, reported starting at the age of six.

As mentioned above, economic circumstances were also factors that would bring boys into the workplace while still at school (this was reported by 7 of the 15 male tailors we talked to). The young 11-year-old boy in his account of why he had sought work – and in this case there was no suggestion that his father had pushed him into it – strongly indicated economic hardship within the household: his father worked in a lowly paid salaried occupation, his elder brothers were mostly unemployed (one of them had to join the police force in order to find work), and all remaining members in their 20s were unmarried.<sup>12</sup> He talked of his small pay of 200 Afghanis per week being used to buy the household bread and washing powder.

As with those who had no relations already working as tailors, this young boy had used social connections to find his placement. In his particular case, it was his elder brother who knew the tailor. But in others it was often fathers who had established connections with tailors in an effort to place their sons with them. For all of those we talked to, personal connections and networks were absolutely key to starting life as a young tailor. Moreover, many of the qualified tailors we interviewed reported that whenever they were approached by unknown young boys looking for work, they would first ask to meet their parents in order to be able to assess the family background and reputability of the boy. In none of the interviews were there any examples of conflict within the household over a young man or boy expressing the wish to become a tailor or start work.

In contrast, the barriers for young girls or women working as tailors or cloth workers are formidable, particularly if they wish to work outside the private space of the home. They may, as the young boy described in the previous paragraph did, be able to draw on female social networks to find work but these are likely to be much more circumscribed than those of young men. But there are other challenges as well which have multiple overlapping dimensions.

The first one is simply a lack of awareness of the outside world, not knowing what options are out there, not realising that they could earn an income. This is closely linked to issues of confidence. Two examples from Zardozi's case files illustrate this well (see Table 2). The first concerned Brikhna who, as a Pashtun girl living in Jalalabad, was reportedly simply unfamiliar with the market and unaware of what she might do in order to earn money. The second case concerned Sohila who, on attending a Zardozi event to publicise the case of a successful woman, was reported as saying: 'Before this event I would not have believed that a woman could have such an income. I thought I am nothing and cannot do anything' (Zardozi, 2013 Quarterly Reports). As Zardozi has come to appreciate, there are fundamental issues of horizons and ambitions that affect women's perceptions of what is possible with respect to work and income.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview 6.

<sup>11</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>12</sup> Interview 1.

**Table 2: Case Examples from Zaradozi Reports**

Name	Location	Circumstances / Motivations	Outcomes / Areas of work
Mahtab	Mazar	Married; Personal drive	Beaded velvet work Employing 85–170 workers Earning \$1393 per month Giving credit to shopkeepers Husband now at university and she meets all household expenses
Fauzia	Mazar	Deserted by husband; Poverty	Community tailor
Razia	Mazar	Father sick; Family lives with uncle but problems as economic hardship	Community tailor, sisters help Tailoring piecework Improved income
Benazir	Jalalabad	Husband sick and old; 11 children	Contract work
Najiba	Mazar	Orphaned with sisters; Living uncle but abused by family	Community tailor living separately with sisters
Zarin	Mazar	Husband casual labourer; low income	Community tailor with cousin Home-based shop
Said Pari	Mazar	Elder husband disabled	Tailoring piecework Increased income
Pari Gul	Jalalabad	Widow with 6 children; No support from in-laws	Sales agent working for shopkeepers and neighbours Son at university
Hamida	Mazaar	Husband jobless; Living with her brother's family but problems	Working as piece worker with 20 women in hijab sector, but expanded to bead embroidery with 60 women and meeting household expenses Husband migrated to Iran for work
Brikhna	Jalalabad	Fiancé died, living at home, father old and sick	Selling embroidery to traders, earning a living and supporting both her family and her fiancé's family

The second dimension of constraints on women's access to the urban labour market is the considerable opposition many women face, even if they aspire to work. Opposition comes from within their own household as well as from the neighbourhood society in which they live. Broadly speaking, seeking to work within the home is seen as more acceptable than seeking work that is linked more explicitly to the outside world.

The first line of opposition often comes from directly within the family. As a young unmarried woman, there is likely to be particular opposition. One young Pashtun woman from Qarabagh district, just outside Kabul, described the difficulties of getting her father's permission:

Four years ago I decided to learn tailoring so that I could work at home and get some income as well. Therefore first I asked my mother, she said that is okay with her and she did not have any problem. After that when she (mother) shared that with my father he was not agreeing with it, he said 'why does she want to learn that and what is the benefit of that work to her and us?' My grandmother and my mother tried a lot to convince him. I went to [the teacher] Sabiqa's house and told her that I want to come to her house and learn tailoring. But the problem is that my father does not allow me. After that Sabiqa told me don't worry I will talk with your father. One night Sabiqa came to our house and talked with my father. Sabiqa told to my father there are no men in her house and it would be useful for me

that I should learn tailoring. Thus Sabiqa with help from my grandmother and mother tried a lot and convinced my father.<sup>13</sup>

One respondent, Homa, also recounted how regulations on her mobility and options were enforced by her mother (in contrast to the previous case) when she was a very young girl:

My mother said...“You are a girl and you cannot do anything except of that to do something in the house. You are not a boy that I let in the shop to work there”

It is sometimes also the case that the fathers of girls and young women might oppose their daughters' labour market participation ostensibly on the grounds of security concerns. One male tailor we spoke with, Ruhullah, explained that because he has very little trust in others in Kabul, he would find it difficult to let his daughter go outside and work with 'strange people'.<sup>14</sup> Ruhullah went on to say that if there were a situation where a female teacher (whom he already knew) could take his daughter on in a 'safe environment', then he would have no problem with that (although he did not know of any such situations personally). In reality, however, these kinds of decisions are about more than just security; our evidence suggests that the risk of exposing one's daughter to other men – and the implications this might have for one's honour (see concluding discussion) – also serve to maintain this form of social regulation.

In addition to the opposition from their fathers (brothers can be equally problematic and influential), young married women may often face obstruction from their spouses. This reflects the fact that, in Afghan society, the customary duty and responsibility of the husband or male members of the household to provide in a material sense retains a strong hold on ideologies of masculinity, with powerful effects on women's agency. This opposition can be expressed in range of ways from discouragement to harassment to being physically violent: Kabeer et al. (2011: 13) report on the high levels of domestic violence that exist in the everyday lives of women, not just in the form of men beating women (e.g. sisters, wives), but also women beating other women (e.g. daughters-in-law). Interviews with female beauty parlour workers confirm how initial entrance into that particular urban labour market is sometimes accompanied by domestic violence.<sup>15</sup> Such opposition requires considerable strength of character to resist the effects it is likely to have on feelings of self-worth, confidence and capacities to act.

However, acute economic hardship for many households – the Zardozi case files provide strong evidence of economic need linked to widowhood, desertion, sick or disabled husbands, elderly husbands who are too old to work or male unemployment (see Table 2) – can tip the balance, pushing women into the economic marketplace regardless of whether they aspire to work or not. In time, this can secure for those women respect and support from other members of the family. Thus, in the case of Brikhna in Jalalabad, her ability to earn income and support both her own family and that of her deceased fiancé earned her support and praise.<sup>16</sup> Most of the cases reported by Zardozi point to the considerable benefits from women earning income in terms of reducing social tensions (often caused by economic hardship) in the households in which they live. We will explore this in greater detail in section 4.3.

Opposition within the household is one matter. But equally constraining may be the opinion and opposition of other family members and the wider neighbourhood, particularly if the woman seeks to work outside the home. Both men and women, as the Everdene interviews make clear, will spread rumours about the reputation of women who are seen in more public places and gossip about it. One of the effects of this is that women who do go into public spaces are often secretive about it or do

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<sup>13</sup> Interview 13.

<sup>14</sup> Interview 16.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews 26 and 27.

<sup>16</sup> Following Afghan custom, the death of her fiancé had effectively made her a widow, leaving her as an economic burden on her own family and as a likely target for blame for the bad luck she is seen to have brought on her fiancé's family.

not disclose it to their family. Brikhhna, for example, made it clear that she did not tell her family about going to the market and chose to tell them only that she was attending a training course run by an NGO. Only when she was bringing in an income did she reveal what she was doing.

The third dimension of the constraints that women face is being able to gain the technical skills necessary to become a proficient tailor and to engage effectively with the market (although much depends on which market she chooses or is forced to work with). Many young women learn tailoring skills either from their immediate female family members or from local women who have acquired these skills.<sup>17</sup> But this means of skills acquisition has traditionally limited young women to the skills that their teachers have themselves acquired which, in effect, usually then limits their subsequent economic activity to the neighbourhood market for women's and children's clothes. Few, if any, of the women who provide training for other women have skill levels comparable to those of male tailors. For example, Storai talked of one female teacher who, although having 15 students under her, when faced with orders she could not technically handle, quoted a high price in order to make the customers seek out a male tailor. The following discussion on 'becoming a tailor' explores these issues in greater depth.

## **4.2 On becoming a tailor: gendered pathways to skills acquisition**

The technical skills required to become a good tailor are considerable.<sup>18</sup> The first stage involves gaining knowledge about fabrics. More specifically, students must understand how the properties of a particular fabric influence the way it needs to be cut and stitched in order for the final product to hang correctly. The most important skill is to be able to cut the cloth correctly – this is specific to the fabric and technically highly demanding. While pattern templates that help home dressmakers cut cloth to the appropriate size are available in many countries, they do not exist in Afghanistan. Thus tailors have to work from catalogues, and knowing how to breakdown a picture of a dress in a catalogue into dressmaking pieces that will go to a tailor is a significant technical challenge. The cutting of the cloth not only has to take account of the demands of the fabric but also the measurements of the client. Once cutting has been properly learned, various specific sewing skills are required, from the relatively less demanding such as the sewing of straight seams, darts, pleats and so forth to the more exacting of setting sleeves, learning how to hand-stitch hems and lapels, for example. Specific skills are needed to make buttonholes and there are also skills in ironing to be acquired which help the processes of cutting and sewing.

The ability to carry out these basic yet demanding technical operations requires appropriate spaces and facilities. Common to all the male tailoring shops visited were cutting and sewing tables against which male tailors stood to work. In addition, there were sewing machines with seating for the stitching part of the process. All activities take place in a shop open to the public (although some male tailors had developed their premises to include a separate workspace and showroom).<sup>19</sup>

Social restrictions mean that women cannot work as tailors in public shops and are therefore confined to working as tailors at home. However, the household is first and foremost a private space and often not conducive for work, shared as it is for other purposes (reproductive roles, child care provision, hosting) which may be seen by men to be the primary function of the households. The absence of a dedicated space for women's economic activities is not just a simple inconvenience. The relatively clean, clear and uncluttered work surfaces taken for granted in the shops of male tailors are often hard to come by in the homes of their female counterparts. Similarly, in lacking any cutting tables, let alone ones of the right height, women face extra difficulties in cutting cloth precisely. Many women use a cushion to work on, possibly to keep the material clean, which must

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<sup>17</sup> For example, interviews 7 and 13.

<sup>18</sup> This section draws heavily on a detailed discussion with Kerry Jane Wilson, Zardozi Enterprises, Kabul, 25 January 2014.

<sup>19</sup> For example, interview 18.

make their task even more difficult. Even if women do own certain items of equipment, such as electrical sewing machines, access to the people who can service and fix the machines is limited and often dependent on a male member of the household making the arrangements. While these might seem like trivial issues, their cumulative impact is one that places female tailors at an even deeper disadvantage when it comes to the basics of the trade. They also speak to the near impossibility of having any kind of boundary between home and work life. For women tailors, spaces of productive and reproductive economic activity are essentially one and the same. Thus, the tailoring labour market forms a key point of intersection of these two economies, and of the ways in which people make a living and also care for themselves and others (Humphries and Rubery, 1984, in Elson, 1999: 612).

The gendered nature of space has other effects, too. Men work in a public space and with other tailors, and therefore see what other tailors are doing. In such circumstances, they may face challenges over the quality of their work and their skills. In addition, men are exposed to observable changes in the marketplace: they are aware of what their competitors are displaying in their shop windows and what else is available on the market. Since tailoring shops tend to cluster together, potential customers also know where to find them.

In villages, women often have notices on their doors saying that they are tailors for women's and children's clothes; in Kabul, however, they do not have these notices.<sup>20</sup> This may be because there are so many male tailors that women clients can go to – tailors likely to have a skills advantage over their female counterparts – that women are essentially crowded out of the market. Ultimately, the fact that women are confined to working as tailors in private or domestic spaces denies them the exposure that men have to the wider world. As a result, they miss out on accessing a number of important skills and learning experientially from the marketplace, and are therefore at a considerable skills disadvantage in making clothes. Their isolation also has effects on their ability to access the latest fashions and designs as they usually do not have catalogues or are unaware of the latest trends.<sup>21</sup>

The gendered regulation of access to public space has further consequences. As will be seen below, the apprenticeship scheme that operates for men builds their exposure to the marketplace, increases their capacity to deal with customers, improves their knowledge of the workings of the market, and establishes social networks with both customers and suppliers of cloth – a crucial connection in building informal credit relations on which they will later depend. The restriction of women to private spaces limits the extent to which this knowledge and these connections to the market can be built. Many women lack knowledge even of where the markets are, and their unfamiliarity with Kabul's urban space makes navigation of the built environment (including the transport system) problematic. One female employee of Zardozi noted how women taken to the markets by the project car still had no idea of where the markets were or how to get there.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, Zardozi started insisting that they took public transport to find their way to these markets. But the limitation on access to the market also has financial costs: women face higher costs of inputs, because they cannot physically easily go to wholesalers (or, if they do, they cannot establish credit relations to be able to procure supplies). Thus, while a box of dressmaker's chalk containing 19 chinks costs AFs 40 at the wholesaler, many women buy their chalk from retail shopkeepers close to their home where each chalk costs AFs 10. Similarly, a box of 20 or more buttons that costs 20 AFs at the wholesalers are sold in shops for 3-4 AFs per button.<sup>23</sup> This can be

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<sup>20</sup> Interview 19.

<sup>21</sup> We are grateful to Kerry Jane Wilson for this point.

<sup>22</sup> Interview 19.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 19.

understood as a kind of gendered informal tax on women's economic activity in the tailoring labour market created through spatial and social mechanisms (see Lough et al., 2013).

The geography of gendered spaces has, therefore, clear implications for skills acquisition for women. When considered in relation to the social barriers constraining initial entry into the sector, a detailed picture of unevenness within the urban labour market starts to emerge.

#### 4.2.1 The 'apprenticeship'

Related to, but slightly distinct from, the discussion about the gendered dimensions of economic space within the labour market is the question of how exactly young people learn the tailoring trade.

For young men, a kind of apprenticeship scheme was reported to follow a fairly standard pattern. This apprenticeship is informal in the sense that it is not a registered vocational process. But its prevalence is such that it can be considered an essentially formal practice, and 'unusually formal for this society' in particular.<sup>24</sup>

Most start young and, as with informant 1, begin by sweeping the shop floor, learning the basic steps of sewing buttons, and learning to sew hems using a sewing machine. Over time the repertoire of skills is slowly expanded to include more complicated sewing. The final stage is learning how to cut, gradually moving from the more simple designs (in male clothing) to more demanding ones. Informant 17 described how he started learning first how to stitch trousers and then shirts; once he had done that, he began to learn how to cut properly. The same sequence is followed in developing the tailoring skills for working on women's clothing.

The decision on whether to work as a tailor of men's or women's clothes appears to be influenced in part by the specialisation of the teacher. Most male tailors interviewed tended to be specialised as a tailor either of men's or women's clothes. A number of the male community or neighbourhood tailors sewed both men's and women's clothes, but more central locations in Kabul tended to be more specialised, with a particular sector of male tailors working on wedding or event clothes for women.

The duration of the apprenticeship is variable in length, lasting from a minimum of two to three years up to in some cases five to seven years (and, in a minority of cases, sometimes even longer). There were a few comments made about how some teachers intentionally dragged out the apprenticeship period, keeping the students on basic skills and paying them a low salary. Informant 11, for example, commented how he had met a tailoring student in Kabul who had been a student for 10 years and could still not stitch (which possibly says as much about the student's ability as the teacher's practices). Pay at the start is essentially pocket money to pay for travelling expenses: informant 1 was earning AFs 150 (about \$3) a week, while informant 17 started at AFs 200 a week. Over time, as the student's skills improve, their pay begins to increase with payments tending to be made on a per-piece rate. In the case of informant 17, after three years he was earning about AFs 2500 (about \$50) a week. The piece rate seems to be common practice, and although the reliability of pay could not easily be assessed through our research, informant 1 did comment that he had not been paid for the last four weeks.

Clearly, the skills that a student learns are dependent on the skills of their teacher. In one case, a student who had completed his apprenticeship found himself working in a shop for someone else and realised that the man he was working for was in fact 'learning from him'; as such, he decided to set himself up independently.<sup>25</sup> In common with many of the established teacher tailors, this young man had actually learnt his key skills outside Afghanistan while working in Pakistan. Informant 11, for example, who had learnt the basics from his father, explained how he had acquired many new skills, including how to stitch waistcoats and collars, while working as a refugee in Pakistan. The

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<sup>24</sup> Interview 22.

<sup>25</sup> Interview 8.

story of starting and/or developing one's trade outside Afghanistan – often in Peshawar, Pakistan but also in Iran – was fairly common among our male interviewees.<sup>26</sup>

What is evident from most of the interviews is that the relationship between student and teacher was (and still is) one of respect. It also has an enduring quality. The relatively young established male tailors talked of how they had sought the blessing of their teacher to set up shop as independent tailors. Informant 2, for example, commented that he started receiving per-piece rate pay after his first year, and from that started to accumulate capital in order to buy machines. It took time for him to build both his tailoring skills and the relationship with his teacher – seven years – but having set up his shop as an independent tailor, was also able to take some of his existing clients with him. Similarly, informant 12 said that he was still in contact with his students, whether they had gone on to set up shop independently or left to work for some other tailor. He spoke also of the relationship that he had built not only with his students, but their families as well.

This relationship building seems to be a key part of the apprenticeship process, and is consistent with the building of networks of social trust and support. This is also reflected in the way in which tailors saw the clustering of tailor shops as more of a collaborative rather than a competitive exercise, because it offered the opportunity to build relationships, access sources of informal credit, and to outsource (or take in) work when times were good or hard. Haseebullah, for example, made the point that while there was of course 100% competition between the five to six tailors in the area, they were also close friends and collaborated professionally.<sup>27</sup> He cited one example of when his neighbour first established his shop close by: at this time, the new tailor struggled to find work, so Haseebullah gave him some clothes to cut (a kind of outsourcing based on social capital and solidarity).

On the other hand, while there are evidently female tailors who act as teachers and take in female students, they are not nearly as numerous as male teacher tailors (and of course they work from home rather than in the public sphere). At least one of the female informants<sup>28</sup> to this study who had trained with a female teacher had indicated, as with the male apprentices, that the relationship has endured beyond the apprenticeship. But the female teachers are also, in general, not as skilled as male tailors, having had neither the same level of access to skills acquisition in a second country nor the wider experience of the marketplace against which to judge and sharpen their own competencies. There are exceptional female tailors, but they are few.

All this means that the apprenticeship of those young women who go to learn skills from female teachers is markedly different from that of young men. Not only are there limits to the skills which can be acquired – which in turn limit future economic returns on labour (for example, while a male tailor will charge, say, AFs 700 to stitch a particular item of clothing, a female tailor will charge just AFs 200 to stitch the same piece)<sup>29</sup> – but there is also a tendency for women tailors to focus on the lower value end (domestic clothing) of the female clothing market. This is largely a neighbourhood market, because women's clothing for events (e.g. parties and weddings) or more 'on trend' fashion clothing tend to be made by the more skilled male tailors.<sup>30</sup> As an example, one young Pashtun woman – who, in common with many from her community, had not been to school and was illiterate – commented that she had studied with her teacher for two years but had not been paid anything during that time. Despite this, she said that she was just happy to learn the skills, and after two years she set up on her own at home. However, as her father did not allow her to work for other

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<sup>26</sup> Babara Everdene (personal communication) has reported that this is also true, but to a lesser degree, of women in Mazar who have discussed with her how they had refined their dressmaking skills in Iran.

<sup>27</sup> Interview 18.

<sup>28</sup> Interview 13.

<sup>29</sup> Interview 12.

<sup>30</sup> Interview 19.

shopkeepers, she was restricted to working for her neighbours and relatives or doing piecework for her teacher.<sup>31</sup>

The main consequence here is that, right from the start, there are limits placed on the skills and returns that can be drawn from tailoring by women as well as on their ability to build wider relationships and networks. Perhaps more fundamentally, by having their economic mobility restricted to the space of the household and immediate neighbourhood, many women take years to grasp 'the fact that a market exists, and that they need to be part of it'.<sup>32</sup>

It was in an attempt to fill this considerable gap in the skills of female tailors – and perhaps to a lesser extent broker access to the wider market – that Zardozi found its operating niche. Accounts from young women who have participated in the Zardozi skills training programmes clearly illustrate how the organisation functions to provide women with the kinds of vital experiences and expertise conferred naturally on young men through the 'apprenticeship scheme' and widen their social networks. This is evident in relation to the acquisition of basic skills:

It's about 7 month that Zardozi came here and we all learn new technique and new skill from them. Before we used to sew, according to our local skill, when we cut the cloth we measured with our hand which was not looking nice. Several times we used to open the cloth and fix them again and again. Since we learn centimetre we do not make any mistake in our cutting because we measure the cloth according to our client body.<sup>33</sup>

Women's knowledge on how to run a business is also developed:

Before Zardozi I did not know how to enter in the market and how should I know about the price and quality materials and goods in the market. Now I get familiar and know about the each and every price in the market, even when we need something for the house.<sup>34</sup>

Since we joined with Zardozi we know how we should do an evaluation about the cost of our transportation, time and all about our product.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond these tangible skill-sets, however, more psychological and subjective changes are also evident in women's perceptions of their own economic positioning:

When I enrolled in Zardozi organisation I learn how as women I should to enter in the market. Therefore they encourage us and told us that we are the ones that produce the product and we women should be involved from the starting of the business to the end of business.<sup>36</sup>

The problem was that, [previously] we did not have courage and did not know how negotiate with trader in the market.<sup>37</sup>

### **4.3 On being a tailor: what participation in the labour market means for young people's livelihoods**

From all the accounts provided, the actual business of setting up a shop and registering with the government seems to be a relatively unproblematic process – for men. Informant 3 described how obtaining the necessary licence was very straightforward, taking him only two hours and costing somewhere between AFs 800 and 1000. Informant 5, who ran a suit business for the upper end of the market, also reported few difficulties: he required a licence which cost him for his larger shop AFs 2000 per year, and a work permit which cost AFs 3000 for three years. In addition, while there

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<sup>31</sup> She had only been able to do this because her father had bought her a sewing machine, suggesting familial support in some aspects of the practice but not others.

<sup>32</sup> Interview 22.

<sup>33</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>34</sup> Interview 4, third focus group discussant.

<sup>35</sup> Interview 4, first focus group discussant.

<sup>36</sup> Interview 4, fourth focus group discussant.

<sup>37</sup> Interview 4, second focus group discussant.

were standard business taxes to pay, none of the informants reported any significant informal or unofficial taxation. Most even viewed the system as relatively effective, with municipal officers checking on shops and, if necessary, issuing licences where shopkeepers are found not to have them. However, although this was not an issue that was specifically explored, it is likely that most of the tailors do not register with the Ministry of Commerce and pay taxes to the Ministry of Finance as they are meant to do. Rather they register as a shop with the local municipality, which is simpler and has lower taxes and is a practice which the municipality is unlikely to discourage.<sup>38</sup>

A bigger challenge is finding the operating capital to start a business and locating a suitable premises to rent. One informant, Qudoos, had moved into his shop just 10 days before our interview; so far, it had cost him AFs 75,000 (around \$1,500), with the costs of his sewing machines being additional expenses.<sup>39</sup> In order to pay for this, he had saved up from previous tailoring work. Qudoos currently stitches clothes for women by himself, which generates enough income to meet his expenses (although he has ambitions to move into the more lucrative wedding dress market in due course). Qudoos' account is broadly consistent with those of other male tailors who had also set up shop. However, costs can vary from place to place. Informant 5, who had a shop in a more expensive area of town, estimated that to start and run a similar shop today would cost around \$30-40,000. He had paid a deposit of \$25,000 for his premises along with a monthly rent of \$800, plus a rent of \$1,000 for two other premises where he employed tailors and students.

But for many who aspire to set up their own shop and become independent, like Ahmad who has been working with the same tailor for the last five years, the biggest barrier is often a lack of capital and the risks that come with borrowing money.<sup>40</sup> Informant 2, for example, would like to expand his business and could employ more people to work with him in the summer, reflecting the seasonal nature of his business linked to women's wedding clothes. But none of his family can help him with the capital, and he dare not borrow because he cannot be certain of being able to pay it back.

Once new tailors have established their shop, they start by drawing on the client base that they might have built up as a student tailor (which, as has been seen, they can take with them), as well as by taking work passed their way from established tailors, work from relatives and friends, and work from new customers coming into the shop. Cloth is obtained on the basis of credit. In the case of informant 8, he takes advances from his clients so that he can buy the material for cash. This in part reduces his risks, but it also helps him establish a relationship with the cloth suppliers, meaning he may be able to take cloth on credit in future. This social basis of credit and lending is widespread. For example, when Homayoon returned to Kabul after many years away, he discovered that he had lost most of his professional connections. In an attempt to rebuild both his networks and his new business, his cousin provided an introduction to a trader in order to help Homayoon establish himself as a trustworthy individual. Without that introduction, it would have been difficult for him to get credit.

For those tailors who specialise in men's clothing and customary or traditional clothing, the market has been relatively predictable and steady, particularly for those that have been long established. There are also those who have a market niche, such as in the stitching of uniforms for the police (a cluster of tailor shops in the old city that has done well over the last decade). However, those working with men's suits are facing a more difficult environment. There are two apparent reasons for this. The first is the import of ready-made Chinese suits, which are hitting the lower end of the suit market. The second is the decline in demand by expatriates for suits at the top end of the market. Informant 5, who has grown his business over the last decade, was making 600 suits a month three years ago, but this has now declined to 250 a month. His market has been primarily with senior level

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<sup>38</sup> We are grateful to Kerry Jane Wilson for this point.

<sup>39</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>40</sup> Interview 17.

civil servants and he thinks part of the reason for the decline is that people are less willing to spend in view of the impending International Security Assistance Force withdrawal. But a key part of his business has been making suits for expatriates; until recently, he had a business in Kandahar and supplied suits to the British and Americans in the south. He has now closed this part of the business, and orders from these kinds of customers have reduced dramatically – while they previously made up about 30% of his business, that figure is now down to around 5%. The knock-on effects of this decline will be reflected in the take-home pay of his workers, who are paid on a piece-rate basis.

For men specialising in women's clothes, there is a much more dynamic and segmented market driven by fashion and divided according to cloth and purpose of the garment (the difference between domestic and wedding clothes, for example). Informant 2 told how he had moved into specialising in making wedding clothes. A friend of his had asked him to go with him to buy the dress for his friend's bride. The tailor saw the dresses and decided he could also make them. He made a few examples, went back to the wedding dress shop, and they asked him to make more. He has shifted and increased his turnover by moving into wedding dresses during the season (spring to autumn), making clothes for individual clients during the winter period. As with other tailors, he gets his material on a 50% cash and 50% credit basis, with the wedding dress shop paying him a 50% advance on the collection of the garment and the other 50% on the sale of the dress. It has increased his income but not sufficiently for him to accumulate sufficient capital to expand his business. Nevertheless, he constantly attempts to keep abreast of the fashions, which he does through the use of the internet and accessing catalogues.

For female tailors, and even for those who are more skilled, access to shifting market designs and fashions is more difficult as they have limited access to the internet and to catalogues. Again, part of the Zardozi programme is designed to address this specific constraint women face in keeping abreast of market changes and gaining knowledge to compete more effectively with male tailors. Massouda described the effects that learning about the effect of new techniques and designs had on her income:

Before we used to sew according to our own skills and when we cut the cloth we measured with our hand length which was not accurate. Since we have learned to use a tape measure we do not make mistakes in cutting. Before we did not know about new designs so we only took about AFs 100-150 for the garment. When Zardozi provided that catalogue we show it to our clients ... and they select some ... therefore we asked them to pay us more.<sup>41</sup>

Women who have had access to the Zardozi programme have clearly seen income benefits, as Massouda went on to describe (see also Table 2):

I have a good enough income that I use the money for our daily expenditure, because my father is a driver and is not home for 20-25 days and nights at a time. Before I had an income, we used to take a loan from our relatives and villagers. Since I learnt tailoring we do not need to take a loan for our daily expenses.<sup>42</sup>

Many of the Zardozi case studies, drawn from women they work with in Jalalabad and Mazaar, point simply to the effects of additional household income improving household economic and food security, or allowing those women to pay the costs of education so that their children can go to school. In a few exceptional cases, women have been able to establish successful businesses that do more than just meet household needs. The grounds for their success appear to be related to a combination of individual drive and ability, and supportive male members of their household.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>42</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>43</sup> Personal communication from Kerry Jane Wilson and Barb Everdene.

None of the male tailors in Kabul – with perhaps the exception of informant 5 who had clearly built up a large and successful business since 2001 – talked in terms of prospering and expanding their business. While there were clearly differences in income depending on location and skills, with those with greater skills maintaining a good business, most did not see tailoring as a primary or sustainable occupation for their children. Being an independent tailor can generate enough capital to take care of one's family, to cover all basic household expenditures, but being able to 'survive and save' at the same time is considered more problematic. Many might create wealth over a gradual period, but huge savings are unlikely for most. Thus, male tailors with sons speak of the profession as being a kind of long-term back-up option or safety net; their sons will almost invariably learn the trade, but often only because tailoring skills are something to fall back on later in life when times get tough. Being able to move in and out of the labour market with relative ease appears to be an option for males, socially connected as they are to enduring networks built up over time through their male relatives, friends, and former teachers and colleagues. In this way, although tailoring may be seen as a second option, always inferior to a good education, the intergenerational transfer of skills and know-how can be understood as a means of providing a degree of long-term economic and social security to young males. It offers, as it were, a way of finding one's feet when crisis hits.

This privileged perspective on the role and function of tailoring is not held by young women. For them, rather than being one option among many, tailoring usually constitutes the only pathway to any degree of economic freedom. As we have seen from the evidence discussed above, simply aspiring to learn the skills in the first may place produce considerable struggle and resistance within the household. In a sense, entrance into the urban labour market represents, particularly for women with little formal education, an achievement in itself, never mind the size of later returns. However, as with men, engaging in tailoring – and in the 'world of work' more generally – can still be viewed as a means of minimising future risk. For women, developing tailoring skills and gradually entering the market is linked to a reduced dependence on key males, such as husbands, fathers or uncles. This might prove particularly significant if, for example, one's husband becomes incapacitated for whatever reason and is then unable to bring in an income for the household. That said, there is a fine line to tread: as our interview data suggest, women's labour market participation comes about through a gradual process of careful negotiation with the power-holders in the household. Pushing too hard, too quickly, as it were, exposes the individual to considerable 'patriarchal risk'; that is, it increases the likelihood of abrupt declines in economic welfare and social status should a woman find herself bereft of male guardianship as a result of contravening the social order (Cain et al., 1979, in Kabeer, 2011: 501). Thus, young women's entrance into the urban labour market plays out in a hazy and ambiguous social space. On the one hand, they are required to continuously test and stretch the institutional boundaries of what is and what is not considered acceptable behaviour for a woman, whether married or unmarried. In this sense, their encroachment into the economic space of the urban labour market becomes a symbol of (measured) resistance to the taken-for-granted ways in which things are done. But on the other hand, they must exercise extreme caution in doing so, probing rather than penetrating those boundaries. The consequences of visible and un-negotiated transgression are severe: 'as soon as you break the rules and leave the household, it doesn't matter what the results are'.<sup>44</sup> In other words, although deeply intersectional and therefore contingent upon one's wider position within society, social conventions in many cases trump material returns (we return to a discussion of why ideas about control over women's mobility remain so powerful in Section 6.1). As a result of these strict forms of social regulation, women may resort to subterfuge tactics, essentially 'having to lie to get out of the house'.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Interview 22.

<sup>45</sup> Interview 22.

The 'patriarchal contract', as Cain et al. (1979) put it, may first and foremost serve to maintain male dominance, but its resilience ultimately feeds off the incentives it creates for female complicity. Indeed, it is one of the characteristics of institutionally embedded 'tools of coercion' that they are often widely perceived as legitimate practices. As Carr (2013) explains:

It is critical to understand that the mobilisation of identity through livelihoods strategies is not merely an imposition of the powerful on the weak. The legitimacy behind the roles of those in authority rests on their ability to draw on social expectations that mobilise roles and meanings beyond their control, and to which they must answer to maintain social status. This constrains their options for action. It is therefore difficult to identify a dominator and dominated in any social unit; there are those with more capacity to act on the actions of others, but all actors are embroiled in a context that is beyond their control.

Thus, although women's participation in the urban labour market can help, in some circumstances, to shore up future welfare in uncertain environments, at the same time the very act of entering this space produces additional, sometimes overtly violent risks for women (as documented in the previous pages). This is consistent with the findings of much existing work into women's economic empowerment. Diane Elson (1999) has shown how, despite the assumption that cash earnings from the market are expected to improve women's bargaining power within the household (Horton, 1996), a more in-depth understanding of the process by which earnings are achieved often reveals the flip-side of women's participation in this space (see also Agarwal, 1994). She identifies three sources of consequential risk (or, perhaps more accurately, factors that work against empowerment) in particular. First, earning an income does not necessarily mean a woman has control over that income. For example, a recent evaluation of a BRAC skills training programme in Kabul (which included tailoring) found no significant difference between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries in terms of whether women who earned an income were able to influence decisions on how that income was spent (Echavez et al., 2014). Second, participating in the labour market may involve additional financial costs, from transport to equipment, which potentially leads to an accumulation of debt. And third, women's participation in the labour market may weaken their 'extended entitlements' (see Dreze and Sen, 1989) if it involves:

stepping outside what have been accepted as the normal roles for women. The possibility of earning an income of their own may empower them to take more decisions about their own lives – but it may also cut them off from support of male kin, leaving them on their own, and newly vulnerable to market forces. (Elson, 1999: 616)

The kinds of market forces Elson is talking about here are apparent within the Afghan clothing market: shifting patterns of regional and global capitalist production (specifically, the increasing inflow of cheaper, ready-made clothes from Turkey and China) are currently exerting new market pressures on Kabul's tailors, particularly those specialising in more contemporary clothing.

In spite of the formidable barriers associated with 'becoming' and 'being' a female tailor, the effects of participation on good terms can have both positive material and relational dimensions. The additional income brought in through a daughter's or wife's tailoring can at the very least help meet the subsistence needs of the households, which is particularly important when male members of the household are struggling economically.<sup>46</sup> But their economic activity can sometimes mean much more. It is often simply assumed that a young woman's contribution to the household is not an income-generating one, not something that results in collective improvement. Massouda, for example, clearly remembers her father's reaction upon hearing about her aspiration to learn tailoring: 'he said, "why she want to learn that, and what is the benefit of that work to her and us?"'<sup>47</sup> However, our evidence suggests that demonstrations of economic impact can, in certain circumstances, lead to changes in such attitudes. As one female interviewee noted:

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<sup>46</sup> Interview 4, focus group discussant 3.

<sup>47</sup> Interview 13.

In the past men did not pay value to the women job and business. And they did not believe that women also can do business as well. Now it's visible to everyone that women run some business inside of their house, and they take care of their children and their family as well.<sup>48</sup>

The implication here is that women's participation in the labour market can shape dynamics, relations and attitudes within the household for the better. That said, it must be noted that this is not a universal occurrence.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview 4, focus group discussant 4.

## 5 Tailoring compared: becoming a male carpenter and a female beautician

The evidence on becoming a male tailor points to a well-established but informal apprenticeship scheme that builds skills, competencies and social networks, and which allows qualified tailors to establish themselves independently. Access for young men to this employment can come either from belonging to a tailoring family or from family connections to a tailor. As a profession, it is seen to be an acceptable occupation to pursue that can provide a sufficient income and – at the fashion end of the market – perhaps more. However, the bespoke clothing market looks likely to face long-term decline, particularly in urban areas.

For women, there are fierce access constraints to be able to work within this sector, starting with social approbation, awareness and confidence in dealing with the outside world, as well as the possibilities of gaining the skills and knowledge to compete effectively in the market. For many it is seen to be almost the only option for pursuing an independent income.

But are the pathways for a young man to become a tailor comparable or different to those of becoming a carpenter in the city? And if a woman wants to work in a beauty shop, one of the few areas of employment outside the home that is just about socially legitimate, how does that compare with the challenges she might face in relation to becoming a tailor?

The pathway for men to becoming a carpenter in Kabul displays some strong similarities with the pathway to becoming a tailor. While there are many individual carpentry shops in the city, Kabul is also characterised by lines of 10-12 carpentry shops in various locations (for example, in District 11 Shaeed Square, and Kher Khana). These carpentry shops make window frames, doors and furniture, and have established themselves through the building boom that Kabul has experienced since 2001.

Drawing from our seven interviews with carpenters, a number of summary points can be made. First, there is an informal yet common apprenticeship scheme that directly parallels that of the tailoring scheme, both with respect to its method of recruitment as well as with the process of skills acquisition. There is a degree of specialisation in the carpentry shops, with some just making doors and frames while others with a greater range of skills manufacturing furniture as well. This level of skill appears to be linked with the skills that the teacher or workshop owner acquired while working in either Iran or Pakistan.

Second, and significantly, it appears that almost all the workshop owners, teachers and students in the carpentry line come from a single district – Surkhparisa in Parwan province – following in the footsteps of an early migrant and drawing on a set of basic skills learnt from just one carpenter in the district. This is essentially a very defined ethnic enclave of workers, pointing to the significance of relationships and networks in accessing work.

Third, in contrast to the student tailors, carpentry students are paid a monthly wage. While this starts at a level equivalent to those of the new student tailors – about AFs 100-200 per month – the levels it can reach are significantly greater: incomes of between AFs 7,000-8,000 and up to AFs 15,000 were reported, almost double that of the tailors. It was agreed that carpentry paid more than tailoring and that the margins were greater. However, similar capital costs of AFs 150,000 to 160,000 were required to establish the business.

Fourth, carpentry appears to be more of a seasonal business than tailoring, with significantly reduced demand during the winter period. However, the current economic uncertainty is leading to a

decline in demand, with one carpenter in particular reporting that business had declined by about 40% during the last year.

In a similar way, the evidence from the interviews with four beauty parlour owners is consistent with the evidence of the access constraints to working that women face. If anything, it draws this aspect out even more strongly. Enjillah told of the long battle she had as a youngster to be allowed to work in such a shop, with her mother and other female relatives maintaining that it would be shameful for her to work there; those who worked in such places were seen as 'bad' and 'immoral' women. Eventually, by dint of persistence – including making herself become sick and not eating – she pressured her mother into allowing her to become a student at the beauty shop. This was to be kept secret, however:

If you go to that shop we must hide it from everyone in our family, even my family must not know about it ... if my family knows about this, they will cut off relations with me.<sup>49</sup>

Eighteen months later Enjillah's uncle found out, dragged her from the shop, beat her, quarrelled with her mother, and broke off relations for four years. Yet, when economic hardship hit the family, it was her income from working in the beauty parlour that kept the household afloat.

Enjillah's story up to now reflects the deeply constraining nature of social regulation of women's work in Afghanistan. She has worked as a beautician for over 20 years. But it was only six months before this interview that she was able to open her own shop – despite her much earlier contributions to household welfare. In the event, Enjillah was finally able to get a loan from her mother's brother, who had long objected strongly to this use of the money but eventually agreed. She now runs the shop with her sisters. Similar accounts were given by other informants vis-à-vis the (initial and enduring) opposition they faced, the verbal and physical abuse they received, and the necessity of having to resort to deception simply in order to be able to work as a beautician or set up a shop.

However, their ability to bring in income at times of economic hardship and the prosperity that they had achieved as a result of the income was, in some cases, quite striking: over the course of 10 years, for example, one woman had bought two houses, three cars and took holidays in Turkey with her daughter. The accounts of these women point to a certain strength of character and purpose to be able to achieve what they wanted, as well as the considerable obstacles that they faced in doing so. But once they had achieved this, they found themselves working in a particular labour market from which men are denied access, and where it has been possible to make an impressive living.

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<sup>49</sup> Interview 26

## 6 Between autonomy and affiliation in the social economy of Kabul's tailoring labour market: a concluding discussion

Through a detailed exploration of the urban labour market for tailoring in Kabul, this paper has sought to investigate the process, terms, limits and returns of young people's participation in this particular economic space. Our research has been informed conceptually by the work of various scholars, including those studying the ways in which markets and economic activity actually work (Geertz, 1978; Nordstrom, 2010), those concerned with the gendered structures of labour markets (Kabeer, 2012) as well as with their non-financial meanings and dimensions (Cramer, 2010), and those pushing for a closer and more critical treatment of how individuals can be either excluded from or adversely incorporated into particular economic arrangements (Hickey and du Toit, 2007).

Among other purposes, this study set out to provide evidence on the ways in which periods of violent conflict reorganise labour markets and mediate people's access to economic opportunities. On these potential effects, however, the paper has in fact been rather silent. This is in part because, since 2001, explicit and widespread conflict has not been particularly evident in Kabul – although violence and risk have never been absent from the urban landscape throughout this time. Nevertheless, many of the households in our dataset have experienced conflict, with various effects. One consequence, particularly from the period of the Russian invasion and during the Taliban period, has been migration and exile. For men at least, this has in a number of cases provided an opportunity to gain new experiences and skills in tailoring, which they subsequently brought back with them. A second dimension has been the economic hardship that has affected households, forcing younger men to leave school and cut short their education in order to find work. But this has also, in some cases, motivated or provided opportunities for women to find work in order to support their households financially. There is also probably a third element which this study has not specifically captured: the movement of young people into Kabul to find work, driven by a declining rural economy or even conflict. However, it is possible that the tailoring sector, depending as it does on personal relationships to gain access, may not be an obvious form of employment for such individuals.

On the functioning of the urban labour market for tailoring – the way it actually works, both for and against different people – this paper has had rather more to say. It points to a very sharp gendered basis of access to the sector as well as the relative ease with which young men, if they can get a foothold, can acquire skills and understanding of the tailoring market, and in the process secure a reasonable means of living. This can be contrasted with the formidable barriers that young women still face: both 'becoming' and 'being' economically active are closely bounded and deeply gendered processes, circumscribed as they are by selective forms of social regulation, uneven pathways to skills acquisition, and alternative negotiations of urban space. These multiple constraints – which have been similarly observed by others researching female entrepreneurship in Afghanistan (e.g. Holmen et al., 2011) – place women at a cumulative disadvantage within the labour market. The various limits on what they can do, where they can go, who they can interact with translate – in more formal economic terms – into weaker technical skill-sets, less expansive networks of business contacts, higher overhead costs, and smaller margins and returns. In a sense, the different forms of social and spatial regulation over labour market participation discussed in this paper can be understood as a kind of intangible informal tax on women's economic activity. This 'tax' works by maintaining the status quo of women's economic disempowerment, which in turn: places boundaries on young women's horizons and aspirations; renders the economic space of the marketplace an unfamiliar terrain; and keeps the socio-economic costs of entrance high (e.g. working for years as

unpaid labourers, 'creating mayhem' within the household)<sup>50</sup> and the financial returns of participation low. While the social (patriarchal) regulation of economic activity might be considered more extreme in Afghanistan relative to other contexts, recent work by Sylvia Chant (2013) suggests these kinds of gendered limits on the use of space, skill-sets and financial returns characterise informal work in cities across the global South more generally.

## 6.1 The labour market as a social economy

What is clear from our evidence is that Kabul's labour market for tailoring works, perhaps above all else, as a social economy (albeit a deeply uneven one). Access is secured, participation is negotiated and livelihoods are made all through relationships and networks. It is the social dimension of the labour market that appears to largely determine one's experience, including their prospects of accumulating capital at a scale that matters.

To put it somewhat crudely, the nature of this particular social economy works much better for males than it does for females (as do many labour markets in Afghanistan and further afield – Chant, 2013; Elson, 1999; Kabeer, 2012), even if wider structural forces are making the tailoring sector more difficult to work in generally. This is because the norms of the labour market reflect those of society more widely; the distribution of power follows a similar pattern. There are usually rational explanations for why patriarchal social and economic structures are so enduring (Carr, 2013). In Afghanistan, for example, one objective of men is often to reduce the visibility and mobility of their wives and daughters as part of a broader and continual strategy to project a masculine image of themselves.<sup>51</sup> For Veronica Doubleday (1988), the traditionally Muslim practice of physical female seclusion and separation, *purdah*, 'was not simply about being segregated and veiled; it meant that men had complete control over the mobility of their women, and it gave men ultimate power' (in Moghadam, 2002: 22). Control over women's bodies essentially becomes a vehicle for the construction and reinforcement of a particular form of male masculinity. There are reasons for this which stretch beyond questions of individual agency. A failure to (be seen to) control the behaviour of one's wife or daughter risks undermining a man's social standing within his community (see Pitt-Rivers, 1977 on the 'honour-shame complex'), with deleterious impacts on his levels of social capital. Given that relationships and networks are so important to economic life in Afghanistan, this becomes a serious problem that carries with it the potential for economic loss (affecting the household as a whole). It soon becomes clear why and how social norms permeate so thoroughly the fabric of the economic space of the labour market. Indeed, they often permeate so thoroughly that labour market institutions exist not only as 'bearers of gender' but also actually function as 'reinforcers of gender inequality' (Elson, 1999: 613). Thus, policy interventions 'must not only deliver teaching and learning outcomes, but also tackle social, economic and institutional factors that result in unequal access and multiple deprivations' (Echavez et al., 2014: v). Indeed, the evaluation report from which that quote is drawn finds the most severe barriers to women's labour market access in Kabul to be education, access to financial capital and productive resources, and restrictions on female mobility.

Moreover, even when women are able to secure employment as independent tailors on relatively good terms, their success has a clear social basis. More specifically, it seems that having a supportive male figure within the family (usually a husband or father) is often a necessary, but of course not sufficient, factor. It is for this reason that Zardozi uses some of its budget to pay for public celebrations of women's achievements, which are seen to possess the potential to change men's attitudes towards female employment.<sup>52</sup> Drawing on research conducted in Bangladesh, Kabeer

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<sup>50</sup> Interview 22.

<sup>51</sup> Zardozi motivations report.

<sup>52</sup> Interview 22.

(2011: 525) concludes with a similar point: 'One important insight that comes out of the analysis is the critical role of men, both in blocking the possibilities open to women but also in enabling them to realise the full potential of these possibilities.'

It is abundantly clear from our own research here that in order to gain any real sense of economic empowerment, young women in the city's tailoring labour market must carefully tread the boundary between autonomy (operating completely independently) and affiliation (continuing to comply with the patriarchal ordering of social and economic life), occupying an ambiguous space somewhere in-between. The central paradox here, then, is that while ties of affiliation remain a strong imperative for many women in Afghanistan, at the same time they are likely to act as enduring constraints on pathways to autonomy. Thinking carefully about how this tension might be smoothed is a key task facing researchers, practitioners and policy makers – and there are examples presented here of how Zardozi has attempted to grapple with that question in the context of female tailoring.

Beyond this, our findings speak to the importance of viewing economic activity and labour markets as social arrangements and processes (Carr, 2013; Levine, forthcoming; van Dijk, 2011). The advantage of such a perspective is clear. By both enabling and demanding an analysis of the governance of the economic marketplace, questions of power, people and space are pushed right to the forefront of livelihoods research.

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## 8 Annex 1: List of informants interviewed during the study

No	Informant	Occupation	Gender	Age
1.	Faisal	Apprentice tailor, men and women's clothing	M	11
2.	Faruk Khan	Tailor, wedding dresses	M	30
3.	Homayoon	Tailor, mainly men's clothing	M	40-45
4.	Four women	Group of four women tailors	F	20-40
5.	Name Unknown	Tailor and owner of suit shop	M	40+
6.	Mujib	Tailor, women's clothing	M	37
7.	Massouda	Home tailor, women's clothing	F	22
8.	Qudoos	New shop, wedding dresses	M	c 30
9.	Jawid	Traditional men's clothing	M	c 38
10.	Name Unknown	Employed tailor in male suit shop	M	c 30
11.	Haji Gulam Haider	Tailor traditional men's clothing	M	50s
12.	Hazrat Jan	Tailor mainly women's clothing	M	Late 30s
13.	Majabin	Home tailor	F	25
14.	Sabiqa	Home tailor	F	45
15.	Abdul Wahid	Suits, traditional and police uniforms	M	55
16.	Ruhullah	Men's traditional and police uniforms	M	45
17.	Ahmad	Qualified student, suits	M	19
18.	Haseebullah	Women's clothing	M	c 27
19.	Storai	Project Officer, Zardozi	F	20s
20.	Zubidullah	Women's clothing	M	26
21.	Four carpenters	Four carpenters	M	27 - 40s
22.	Head of Zardozi	Head of Zardozi	F	NA
23.	Name unknown	Carpenter	M	30s
24.	Name unknown	Carpenter	M	20s
25.	Name unknown	Carpenter	M	30s?
26.	Enjillah	Teacher in beauty parlour	F	32
27.	Hasal Banow	Owner of beauty parlour	F	45
28.	Maliya	Part owner of beauty parlour	F	45
29.	Yasamin	Student in beauty parlour	F	36



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