

# Labour markets, social inequality and the tailors of Kabul

## Key messages

- Labour markets are not neutral, impersonal spaces. They both reflect and reinforce existing social inequality.
- Social connections and networks matter for labour market outcomes. Personal relationships underpin access to opportunities and sources of capital.
- Policy makers must start with the idea that the governance of the economic marketplace should be treated with the same critical analysis as the governance of political spaces. Policies designed to promote 'decent work' cannot just be about increasing the supply of jobs.

## What is this study about?

The creation of good jobs in fragile and conflict-affected situations is widely seen to generate not just wealthier economies, but also safer societies and more legitimate states. However, much of the thinking in this area 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. It does so through an analysis of the experiences of young women and men working in the tailoring sector of Kabul, Afghanistan. Tailoring employs more women than any other sector in urban Afghanistan, and it is also the fourth largest employer of men living in urban areas. It therefore offers an ideal opportunity for gendered labour market analysis. More specifically, this study looks at:

- How young women and men acquire skills and enter the urban labour market in the first place;
- What the nature, terms and limits of their labour market participation look like;
- And whether participation in the urban labour market is working for or against them (in terms of its effects on various dimensions of their wellbeing).

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For young men, access to tailoring 'apprenticeships' is largely dependent on social connections.

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## Labour markets, social inequality and the tailors of Kabul

Together with wider comparative work being implemented by SLRC, and a closely connected sister project in northern Uganda (Mallett and Atim, 2014), the purpose of this study is to help us understand what a 'good jobs agenda' for fragile states might actually look like.

### What did we do?

The findings presented here are based on data collected in Kabul by researchers from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). In January 2014, qualitative methods (mainly semi-structured interviews and some focus group work) were employed to generate information on the processes, experiences, meanings and effects of work in the tailoring sector. In order to better understand the processes of recruitment, we drew on a diverse mix of participants. This included young women and men – mainly apprentices, young shop owners, and participants in NGO programmes – as well as older tailors and teachers. In addition to original interview material, we also drew on existing but unpublished qualitative data generated by Zardozi, a local NGO working with women tailors. Finally, in order to get a better sense of how particular or general the nature of youth participation in the tailoring labour market is, interviews were carried out with young male carpenters and young female beauticians. These sectors were also selected for their 'gender-exclusivity,' with the additional aim to explore whether the gendered dimensions of the tailoring labour market are sector-specific.

**'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...'** (Informant, Afghanistan)

### What did we find?

Three findings in particular stand out from the research.

#### The labour market functions 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.

For example, gaining the support of key male figures (fathers, uncles, husbands) appears important for young women wanting to enter the sector. And where women have become successful tailors – in some cases to the extent where they are now able to send their children to university, support their husbands economically and take the family on vacation overseas – it was typically the case that the attitudes and behaviours of key male figures within their immediate social circle were an important part of the story.

For young men, access to tailoring 'apprenticeships' (informal, but widespread) is largely dependent on social connections and the relationship between teachers and students' parents. Many of the men we spoke to had acquired their tailoring skills while displaced in Pakistan; there too, developing key relationships with other men in the trade was vital for building one's craft. Further, access to credit – the basis on which much economic activity in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) operates – tends to be secured through informal means, including the gradual building of personal relationships over time.

It is the social dimension of the labour market, we find, that appears to largely determine one's experience, including one's prospects of accumulating capital at a scale that matters. Our findings echo the work of Naila Kabeer (2012: 50), who has argued that 'Labour markets are not impersonal arenas for the purchase and sale of labour along textbook lines, but stratified by power relations along class, gender, racial and ethnic lines'. This stratification is explored below.

#### Labour market participation means different things to different people

Participation in the tailoring sector has quite different meanings for young women compared to young men. 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. Indeed, the sector offers one option out of many within the urban labour market as a whole, and men who have trained as tailors seem to be able to move in and out of the profession with relative ease.

For women, however, 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. There is a careful balancing act to manage here, as un-negotiated transgression of these social norms can result in severe consequences. As one interviewee noted, 'As soon as you break the rules and leave the household, it doesn't matter what the [economic] results are'. In other words, social conventions can trump material returns.

The resilience of these social conventions can be partly explained by structural and economic factors. In Afghanistan, male 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'), which can subsequently undermine the strength and value of his social ties. 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.

### Labour markets reflect – and often reinforce – existing social inequality

To put it somewhat crudely, the nature of Kabul's tailoring labour market works much better for men than it does for women (as do many labour markets in Afghanistan and further afield). This is because the norms of the labour market reflect those of society more widely; the distribution of power follows a similar pattern. This inequality can be observed throughout the process of labour market entrance and participation. For example, our research highlighted the following constraints on the ability of women to get the most out of the sector:

- A lack of awareness about the options and opportunities available to them with regards to earning an income
- A poorer understanding of the contours of the physical marketplace relative to men
- The opposition women often face, both within their own household and from their neighbourhood society, when they wish to work outside the home
- The difficulties in learning skills required to become a proficient tailor. Female tailoring teachers tend to have a weaker skill-set relative to their male counterparts, meaning the capacities of their students also tend to be weaker than those of young men
- The absence of a dedicated space for tailoring work, since



High numbers of young people work in tailoring. Many start out in the profession at an early age, often due to economic hardship at home.

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women are mostly forced to work from the home. This situation can result in a compromised end product

Ultimately, the multiple ways in which market access is regulated for women can be understood as a kind of informal tax on women's livelihoods. 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 as one interviewee put it) 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.



What does this mean for policy makers?

Our evidence strongly suggests that 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.

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. Drawing on research conducted in Bangladesh, Kabeer (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



Tailoring is deeply gendered and the labour market works differently for young men and women  
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social and economic life), occupying an ambiguous space somewhere in-between.

The central paradox, 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.

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This briefing paper is based on the following SLRC working paper: Gender, youth and urban labour market participation: evidence from the tailoring sector in Kabul, Afghanistan ([http://www.securelivelihoods.org/publications\\_details.aspx?resourceid=312&Page=2](http://www.securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=312&Page=2))

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