



Woman admires clothes displayed at an Afghan dressmaker's shop

Nisfe Jahan Store - a new retail shop by Zardozi women in Mazar-e-Sharif

Located in the heart of busy and bustling market, in the ancient city of Mazar-i-Sharif, is little shop called Nisfe Jahan, which in Dari, literally means 'half of the world'. Their name is a token of positive symbolism towards the women, whose needs the shop caters to, as well as its bold female proprietors who've undertaken this entrepreneurial venture, in a largely conservative and patriarchal society such as Afghanistan.

"We're twelve of us who built this shop, and the adjoining workshop," shares Alima, 34, who has been member of Zardozi for over a year. "Initially, each of us worked separately and found it extremely difficult to meet the market needs on our own," she explains, adding that they frequently discussed their issues of being shorthanded at the business meeting conducted by Nisfe Jahan, the namesake association set by Zardozi to help it's client get community support and other business services.

It was at one such meeting at Nisfe Jahan office in Mazar that women came up with the idea of collaborating with each other on their orders. "We discussed it and realised it would be very efficient and productive for us to pool our resources and skills together. Not only would we be able to produce in larger quantities, but we would also be able to benefit from each other's expertise," Alima shared. "Added to this, having our own shop will give us our own platform to sell our goods directly in the market," she added.

And so, after four months of planning and coordinating, the women were able to set up their own business venture and named it Nisfe Jahan, after the association. With the help of a start-up loan from Zardozi, the women rented spaces for two shops adjacent to each other, in a popular market in the heart of the city. One of the shops was converted to a workshop, while other serves as showroom for clothes produced by the women.

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Zardozi Newsletter



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LETTER TO READERS

Introducing Zardozi's New Executive Director - Homa Usmany



Zardozi is pleased to welcome Homa Usmany as our new Executive Director. Usmany brings with her tremendous experience of working with governmental and international projects and organisations in Afghanistan.

Usmany holds a Bachelor's Degree in Law and Public Administration from the prestigious American University of Afghanistan (AUAF). Apart from this, she also has a PMP certification, and Diploma in Business Administration from Afghan Canadian Community Center (ACCC). Usmany's business education is further bolstered with her practical experience of running her own tailoring and handicraft business called Hareer.

"I enjoy working with and for women in rural communities. Having been one of them, I understand their challenges very well," said Usmany who hails from Kandahar province and worked her way through hardships to becoming a successful social entrepreneur.

Her commitment towards women's economic and social empowerment is evident in the many initiatives she has undertaken including the establishment of the Afghan Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (AWCCI), first ever of its kind in the country. "I believe that through hard work and self confidence no challenge is too big to overcome," she said, encouraging more women to believe in themselves.

Usmany considers being part of AWCCI, formerly known as Leading Entrepreneurs for Afghanistan's Development (LEAD), as her greatest achievement. "If I can contribute in bringing even one woman out of dependency, I will be able to sleep well, and it is with this hope that I come to Zardozi," she added.

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"This place is for the women, and by the women. It gives our female customers a sense of safety," explains Salima, chairperson of the Nisfe Jahan association and one of the proprietors of the shop. "Besides, I feel very happy and inspired to work in an environment with female colleagues," she added.

Only a month since its inauguration in March, 2017, the shop is already carving a niche for itself in the Mazar markets. Raziya, a new but already a regular customer of the shop, is extremely excited about what the shop has to offer. "I always found it difficult to shop for new and trendy clothes that fit my size. But the tailors at Nisfe Jahan have been able to create beautiful clothes that are custom made for me by women tailors I can feel comfortable around," she shared, adding that the clothes were always up to the latest trends and styles. Indeed, the women owners of the shop often share and discuss ideas and new styles to keep improving their work. "Some of us are good at technology, and bring new design ideas they've seen on the internet," added Alima.

The shop owners not only aim to empower Afghan women in businesses, they have a larger goal of strengthening the local economy. "We want to replace the foreign-made, imported clothes in the market with those produced locally by Afghan women," explained Salima, while keeping her expectations real, "It's sad we still have to purchase fabric from Pakistan or China, but hopefully, we will be able to promote the local economy led by Afghan women," she added.

How a simple sewing machine empowered Seema Gul

For 45-year-old Seema Gul, from Nangarhar province, life was one big gruelling journey. As the sole support of her family of 10, she was constantly looking for work and barely made a living with meagre earnings. "I was really tired with my life; and was unable to find a single job opportunity that could help me feed my children," she recalls.

Seema was introduced to Zardozi three years ago when a team from the organisation visited her village. At first she was skeptical of what Zardozi case workers had to say; it didn't seem worth the effort. "But I didn't have anything else to do, so I decided to give this a chance," she says, adding that it was perhaps the best decision she made in her life.

"I not only grew more interested in tailoring but also developed a knack for business," she adds with pride. "I started working with families in my neighbourhood, taking small orders for dress making.

Seema received trainings for business and marketing, building her entrepreneurial acumen. She became a regular face at the local *Manbeh* (business centres) working hard and long hours. Her family has been very supportive of her.



Seema Gul, 45, supports her family through her small tailoring business in Nangarhar

In fact, her brother-in-law who has a shopping centre in the city often gets her new orders and business.

Today, Seema is "Master" having gained expertise in cutting and sewing. She also runs a successful small business. "But what makes me really happy is that I am able to bring up my children with a better life than I could have ever dreamed of. My oldest daughter is in class 12 and will graduate soon," she adds with pride. "My family, and especially my daughters, would not have known this kind of life if it weren't for Zardozi," she adds.

Zardozi explores new regions with latest programme in Kapisa



Aspiring business women attend trainings conducted by Zardozi

Late last year, in November 2016, Zardozi started its programme in a new province, Kapisa, in addition to its existing regions of operation in Afghanistan. Initiated in associating with Women for Women International (WFI), the programme has helped bring Zardozi's expertise in women's financial empowerment to nearly 65 clients currently under WWI in Kapisa. Apart from this, Zardozi also undertook the training and support of 256 WWI clients in Jalalabad, as per the agree MoU between the two organisations.

"We have many shared goals with WFI and this collaboration has allowed us to expand our services to new regions in Afghanistan," explained Hasina Aimaq. "We are excited to help implement our programme with the women in Kapisa and help female clients through our ongoing support and trainings in the region," she added.

While Zardozi doesn't yet have a regional office in Kapisa, as it does with other provinces they operate out of, this new alliance has allowed them to set up the first community business centre, also called *Manbeh*, in the WFI office in Kapisa. After concluding the initial trainings, a vocational trainer and market facilitator visit the *Manbeh* once every week to help the clients, especially with establishing market links—a service that Zardozi has developed considerable experience in.

"Our biggest challenge was reaching out to potential businesswomen in the region without offering cash incentive," Aimaq shared. Several organisations working in Afghanistan often employ the use of cash or gift incentive to encourage women to participate in their programmes. Zardozi has found such methods to be unsustainable, with far lesser impact in the long run. "Instead we counselled the women on the long-term benefits of our programmes and encourage them to be part of our *Manbehs*," she added.

"We offered several services including support to help link women to the markets to sell their products. We also offered to help organise an exhibition to showcase their products to a larger audience," shared Aimaq. The exhibition attracted several clients and is scheduled to be held ahead of the month of Ramazan this year.

As a result, Zardozi was able to convince several local clients that showed a strong interest towards developing their business skills and expanding their market base. "Nearly 40 of the 50 clients who had rejected the idea of participating in Zardozi programme are now deeply involved with the exhibition. So much so, we had to start another *Manbeh* to facilitate their needs," Aimaq added.

Canada funding for Zardozi

Zardozi is pleased to announce that it has been awarded a four-year grant from the Canadian Government through Global Affairs Canada. The funding, which runs from March 2017 to March 2021, will make a substantial contribution towards the costs of Zardozi's new programme, Economic and Social Empowerment for Afghan Women (ESEAW).

Under ESEAW, Zardozi will provide production and business skills for 3,600 women in five provinces of Afghanistan, and update training for a further 2,400 women already involved in the programme. Included in the programme is an increase in the number of Community Business Centres under Nisfe Jahan, workshops with women and with adult and young men on women's rights and social protection issues, and community engagement to advocate for stronger Government and civil society support for women's rights and women's social and economic empowerment.

Zardozi acknowledges the Canadian Government's contribution with thanks, and looks forward to working with Embassy staff in Kabul and Global Affairs Canada personnel in Ottawa over the next four years.

About Zardozi

ZARDOZI is a local non-government organisation based in Afghanistan providing business services to women.

It emerged from the DACAAR Sewing Centre Project set up in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1984 to provide skills and employment to some of the millions of refugees who were pouring across the border into Pakistan from Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation.

Zardozi receives donor funding. Over the past three years, Oxfam Novib and DfID have been the primary funders to run programmes in the city centers of Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar, and Herat.

The programme provides business support services to some of the poorest Afghan women living in urban and semi-urban areas.

Zardozi provides these women with an initial package of a broad range of business trainings together with whatever skills upgrade training is considered necessary.

Zardozi staff then work with the client to develop a product and to find the first orders; the new client is mentored by staff through up to 3 orders and then handed on to the professional association Nisfe Jahan (see website for details on the association).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please contact:

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