Owning and running your own business as a woman is a challenge in any country. In Afghanistan, where women face staggering levels of violence, entrenched discrimination, restrictions and harassment, simply earning and controlling your own money is an extraordinary challenge.

Atefe Mansoori knows this firsthand. Back in 2001 when she decided to support herself financially by teaching other women how to read and write, her own family tried to talk her out of it. Using her savings she organised the first exhibition for saffron producers in Herat province, the success of which allowed her to begin marketing saffron herself.

Success, however, brought its own complications, including death threats from extremists opposed to women being out in the markets.

Women’s economic empowerment is one of the essential pillars in achieving gender equality. Whether it’s simply earning an income, making decisions on how to spend it, or owning and running a successful business, economic empowerment not only helps pull women out of poverty, the independence, confidence, knowledge and skills it fosters can also help them stand up to violence and discrimination.

Enabling women to create and take advantage of economic opportunities relies on a complex web of support, training, networks, mentoring and education for women and girls of all ages, in order to foster ambition, creativity and innovation at all levels. It also requires eliminating additional barriers such as violence and harassment at home and in the workplace.

At this stage, putting these foundations in place requires
The overall literacy rate for women in Afghanistan. In some rural areas the rate can drop to under 2%.¹

19% of women in Afghanistan participate in the labour force. Women often face restrictions, harassment and discrimination when trying to enter the workforce.²

64% of Afghans think that women should be allowed to work outside the home. A majority agree with this in all but three provinces.³

FOOTNOTES

Despite the challenges, I never gave up because I knew the only way to eliminate violence against women is to help women become economically independent and empowered.

Atefe Mansoori, entrepreneur

UN Women built on the trade fair by holding a workshop for more than 120 female entrepreneurs and businesswomen from across Afghanistan, giving them the opportunity to share their stories and learn from each other.

Supporting women like Atefe not only helps their personal development, but also has ripple effects for their communities and the nation. It provides women and girls with role models to aspire to, it often provides direct employment and training opportunities for other women, and it helps propel women into leadership positions across the board.

Atefe, for example, hired other women to work in her company and organised training sessions for women on leadership, management and marketing skills to help them establish their own businesses, and in turn hire yet more women.

“Despite the challenges, I never gave up because I knew the only way to eliminate violence against women is to help women become economically independent and empowered. With this in mind, I worked hard and struggled to help women to learn, work and earn. And this worked.”