



Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) training for saffron growers.

Silk and saffron: lifelines for women in Afghanistan

This project will extend earning opportunities to thousands of vulnerable rural women, boosting their income and status.

A creative approach to a uniquely challenging context

Women in Afghanistan are facing extreme poverty and hardship. In rural areas, where families depend mainly on farming, prolonged drought has ravaged crops and communities, and rates of hunger and malnutrition are among the highest in the world. Women are desperate to help feed their families, but have few earning options open to them.

In a country already reeling from decades of conflict and turmoil, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 led to economic collapse and the systematic dismantling of women's rights and freedoms. Women are now barred from most paid jobs and have very limited mobility outside their homes.

These restrictions have hit poor families particularly hard. In households with no male breadwinner, the impact is catastrophic.

In this immensely challenging and complex context, this project will find new ways to reach and help women in rural areas. Through a novel women-to-women peer training approach, it will equip thousands to start earning an income by cultivating and processing climate-resilient silk or saffron, one of the few economic activities that are deemed acceptable.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Full name of project:
Silk and Saffron

Location: Zindajan and Ghuryan districts, Herat, Afghanistan

Duration:
Two years two months

Partner: Rehabilitation Association and Agriculture Development for Afghanistan (RAADA)

Reach: 4,150 women

Funds needed: £301,876

LOCATION:

Herat province, Afghanistan

- Herat produces 90% of Afghanistan's silk and saffron
- Hundreds of thousands of mulberry trees – silkworms' exclusive food
- Repeatedly hit by climate and natural disasters such as drought and earthquakes.

Afghanistan



PRODUCTS:

Silk value chain



- Rear silkworms on mulberry leaves
- Harvest and boil silk cocoons
- Make and spin silk yarn
- Wash and dye the yarn
- Weave into carpet, fabric or clothing.

Saffron value chain



- Cultivate saffron crocuses
- Harvest flowers
- Extract saffron threads
- Separate into individual strands
- Dry, weigh, package and sell.

The problem

Afghanistan is a country in crisis: over 90% of people now live in poverty and almost 24 million people need humanitarian assistance. The impact of years of conflict and climate change have been exacerbated by the social, political and economic turmoil of the Taliban's return to power, with soaring food prices and a dramatic cut in international aid.



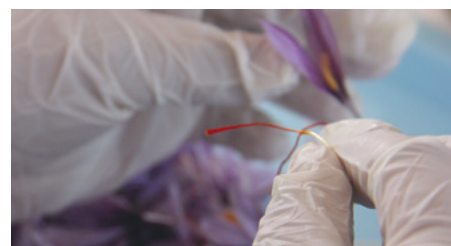
The situation for girls and women is particularly stark. Now banned from public spaces, schools, universities and most paid work, women's earning opportunities have been ripped away. Their financial situation is desperate, especially for those with no male breadwinner in the family, and hunger is rife. As women's enforced dependency cements their lowly social status, they are left increasingly powerless.

No longer allowed to employ women in most fields, many aid agencies have resorted to an all male staff team. In a context which prohibits most contact between men and women who are not related, it is therefore exceptionally difficult for them to reach the women most in need of help.

The potential

With prospects for work or travel beyond their homes severely restricted, women urgently need earning opportunities that are based at home or in local, female-only spaces. In this context of heightened isolation and confinement, social connections are also essential. Silk and saffron are both high-value, climate-resilient products with strong

market demand. Afghan women have been involved in their production and processing for centuries, and it is one of the few culturally accepted avenues for earning still open to them. Crucially, silkworms and saffron crocuses can be cultivated in women's own homes, gardens or family plots.



Our local partner RAADA has decades of experience working on the silk value chain in Afghanistan, with Christian Aid support. After painstaking planning with communities and local authorities, RAADA now plans to trial a novel women-to-women peer training model to equip thousands of vulnerable women to provide for their families despite the many restrictions they face. When women contribute to the household income, their status and influence automatically increases, so the potential benefits stretch far beyond the immediate economic gains.

The products

Herat's silk and saffron sectors were hard hit by both the pandemic and the economic collapse that followed the Taliban's return to power, but the market for these high-value products remains strong. Both also require less water than other crops, making them more resilient to climate change.

'My hands are weak and yet I must weave carpets, wash people's clothes, and do everything I can to earn an income and put food on the table for myself and my children.'

Samaan, 61, widow and weaver, Herat province

Silk production, known as sericulture, involves rearing silkworms, harvesting their cocoons and processing the fibres into yarn to weave into carpets and fabric products such as turbans, shawls and handkerchiefs.



Saffron is one of the world's most expensive spices. Each saffron crocus produces just three delicate stigma strands which must be carefully harvested and processed by hand.



The project

This project will empower over 4,000 rural women to start independent silk production, and enable a further 110 to begin saffron production. It will support and equip women to come together to process, market and sell their products, enabling them to earn a sustainable income that is not vulnerable to climate change. In a context where many women feel hopeless, the project will bring profound social and psychological benefits as well as economic ones.



The key elements are:

Practical starter kits: packs will include silkworm eggs or saffron bulbs, tools and (for saffron) fertiliser.

Peer training: the project will leverage the skills and expertise of women who were previously trained by RAADA, before the current restrictions came into force, equipping them to reach and train other women in their communities in silk or saffron production.

Producer groups: the project will support new producers to form all-female producer groups and/or will link women to existing local associations, enabling them to collectively process their raw products to add value, building their business and financial skills, and providing valued social connection.

Marketing and sales: the project will support women to build links with markets through, for example, exhibition events that connect producer groups with wholesale customers.

'We are excited about the opportunity this project provides for women to not only increase their family income but also build their social agency in an increasingly restricted environment' **Yaqoob Rauf**, Afghanistan Programme Manager

In Their Lifetime

In Their Lifetime is Christian Aid's seed fund for innovation and learning, enabling us to pilot new ideas and take intelligent risks.

Through this fund, we are able to invest in high impact, solutions-focused projects which build towards transformative change.

Innovation: In an incredibly challenging context, this project is trialling creative ways to move beyond humanitarian aid and empower women to make lasting improvements to their lives, boosting their incomes, influence, wellbeing and status.

Impact: Over 4,100 women will enter the silk or saffron value chains and as a result will have greater access to and control over household assets, income and expenditure.

Learning: Improved evidence of how saffron and silk value chains provide viable, climate-resilient income-generating opportunities for women and girls, which offers potential to leverage additional external investment.

Sustainability: Women will develop earning capabilities that are resilient both to climate change and to the extreme social restrictions that they face.

Building on experience

Christian Aid and RAADA have pioneered silk projects in Herat for over a decade. This project trials a new approach tailored to the complex context, but builds on significant experience, detailed market studies and strong community links: RAADA has previously enabled over 5,000 women to start cultivating silk, and to form local producer groups to process and sell their product.

With our support, RAADA also established the Zanan-e-Herat Silk Production Company in Zindajan. With 750 members, it is one of the only all-female companies in Afghanistan. Despite the heavy restrictions on women's paid work, it has been permitted to continue – a testament to RAADA's expertise in ensuring that the initiative was culturally appropriate and sustainable as well as profitable.

With women enduring ever greater restrictions, this project builds on a profound understanding of the silk sector to defend and expand women's space within it, finding creative ways to enable women's enterprise to thrive, despite the constraints they face. The project is also testing a similar approach to explore the potential for women in the saffron sector too.



Women harvesting saffron in Herat. Each flower produces just three stigmas, so they must be harvested very carefully.

Project budget	Total GBP (£)
Project objectives	175,692
Starter kits with silk eggs or saffron bulbs, tools and fertiliser	137,114
Starter training for silk and saffron producers	1,560
Training and set-up support for women to establish all-female producer groups	5,000
Train-the-trainer sessions and engagement with local authorities to remove participation barriers	1,600
Market exposure visit and exhibition events for producer groups	3,760
Agricultural training and on-the-job training to enable quality production	26,658
Direct project implementation costs	86,808
RAADA project staff including project manager, two community mobilisers, finance officer, procurement officer, senior monitoring officer and other key office staff	36,200
Christian Aid project staff including part-time programme manager, operations manager, security advisor and driver	28,032
Project delivery costs (including equipment, communications, partner capacity development, training and other non-salary expenditure)	18,570
Baseline survey, learning and evaluation assessments	4,006
Project support costs	39,376
RAADA organisational support costs	19,688
Christian Aid organisational support costs	19,688
TOTAL:	301,876

As per Christian Aid's organisational policy, 7.5% of the overall budget has been allocated for our project partner RAADA for long-term capacity building which helps support the sustainability of our investments, and 7.5% has been allocated towards Christian Aid's global operational costs (this includes Christian Aid global information and financial systems, global procurement, and support for global governance and strategic operational development).

**To find out more about investing in this project,
please contact ITL@christian-aid.org**

Photo credits: RAADA (Rehabilitation Association and Agriculture Development for Afghanistan)

Christian Aid is a key member of ACT Alliance. England Wales charity no. 1105851 Scot charity no. SC039150 Company no. 5171525 Christian Aid Ireland: NI charity no. NIC101631 Company no. NI059154 and ROI charity no. 20014162 Company no. 426928. The Christian Aid name and logo are trademarks of Christian Aid. Printed exclusively on material sourced from responsibly managed forests © Christian Aid April 2024.

