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UPWARDLY MOBILE AFGHANISTAN

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BBC NEWS

Upwardly mobile Afghanistan

By Lyse Doucet
Special Correspondent, BBC News

The mobile phone has boosted the incomes of African women farmers and empowered poor Muslim women in Bangladesh. But can it also change women's lives in a conservative country where, only six years ago, a Taleban government confined women to the home?

"Absolutely," insists Shainoor Khoja, who heads social programmes for Roshan, one of the biggest mobile telephone networks now operating in Afghanistan.

But she admits it is still a "monumental task" to get women into the workforce.

In a country with few landlines, nearly four million Afghans now have mobile telephones and the number keeps rising.

It is big business and there are now four mobile phone companies in Afghanistan.

All have social programmes including projects to distribute telephones free to women, especially in even more conservative areas outside Kabul.

Women's businesses

Call centres run by the mobile companies... are now some of Afghanistan's biggest employers

Suhaira, 27, is one of the success stories. Married at 14, and now mother to five children, she runs a fruit and vegetable stand in her Kabul neighbourhood.

Inside her crowded shop, there is a phone box, essentially a pay-per-call mobile telephone for public use.

"I wanted to be the first woman shopkeeper in Afghanistan," she declares as she serves customers wearing a black scarf that covers her head and half of her face.

Her eyes shine with conviction. A sympathetic government official agreed to give her a licence. Roshan helped - through its programme to subsidise phone bills for women's businesses. And her husband gave her permission.

That did not stop rumours circulating at the local mosque about her talking to men outside her family circle. "At the beginning people would come and warn my wife, 'We will kill you'," says her husband Meraj.

"But the government of Hamid Karzai says women can work... we do not care what people say about us."

Shahnaz says the mobile telephone has changed her work "100%."

She sits on the floor of her dark two-room concrete block of a home in a Kabul slum, stitching goods on an old hand-operated sewing machine.

By night, it is also the bedroom for her and her children, plus three grandchildren.

She and her daughter Najla have both been abandoned by their husbands. A mobile phone lies on the thin carpet next to the sewing machine.

It has brought more customers, more orders, and more income.

Opportunities calling

Call centres run by the mobile companies, who are now some of Afghanistan's biggest employers, also provide new opportunities.

At the Roshan call centre in Kabul, young men and women work side by side, answering calls from customers across the country, including from southern provinces where the Taleban remain strong.

"Taleban call in and the women talk to them," says Zermina with a giggle. At only 23, she is the call centre's operations manager and says that even in her dreams, she would not have imagined Afghanistan would have opportunities like this for women.

Many women at the Call Centre, including Zermina, are Hazara, a less conservative community than some of Afghanistan's other major ethnic groups.

And many Hazaras are Ismaili Muslims, a moderate Shiite sect headed by the Aga Khan whose worldwide business empire includes companies like Roshan which have a strong social mandate.

Shainoor Khoja denies claims Roshan is favouring this community. She points out that in call centres outside Kabul, the ethnic balance is different, but concedes Hazaras have been easier to fit into a Western business model because they are relatively more open to change.

So are all these brave women exceptions in their society? "Everything is setting an example in Afghanistan," says Meryem Aslan, who has headed the UN's Development Fund for Women in Afghanistan for the last five years.

"We should use these successes to change attitudes and behaviour, but it is going to take a very, very long time."

Drive down most streets in Kabul, and you will see huge billboards with smiling Afghans hailing the magic of being connected by telephone in a shattered country struggling to overcome the legacy of a quarter century of war.

With women's illiteracy at around 86%, and with many still confined to their homes, connecting them is still a struggle.

But even in this closed world, technology is widening horizons.

"Fifteen years ago, Dubai was nothing," points out a determined Zermina, who is now able to dream. "Now Dubai is a business centre and we hope our country will grow like that."

Crossing Continents on BBC Radio 4 reports on mobile phones in Afghanistan on Thursday November 15 at 11.00 GMT.

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http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/7095388.stm

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