Original Research Article

Empowerment or Exploitation? The Dual Role of Informal Work in Women’s Lives in Afghanistan’s Carpet Sector Post-2021

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ABSTRACT

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| **Purpose:** This study examines the dual role of informal work in women’s lives in Afghanistan’s carpet sector post-2021, highlighting both empowerment and exploitation. With formal employment banned, informal work has become a survival strategy for many women.**Design/Methodology/Approach:** A qualitative research approach was adopted, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 20 women working in Afghanistan’s carpet industry. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns to discuss the empowerment and exploitation of women in this industry.**Results:** The findings reveal that while carpet weaving provides women with a source of income and social engagement, it also exposes them to low wages, poor working conditions, and limited career mobility. Many workers experience exploitation due to lack of bargaining power, and the influx of unemployed women has led to further wage suppression. However, some respondents reported gaining skills, and self-confidence, indicating the industry’s potential as an economic lifeline despite its limitations.**Theoretical Contribution/Originality:** This study advances understanding of women’s informal employment in conflict-affected regions, emphasizing the need for better wages, improved working conditions, NGO’s and legal support from the government. patients. These predictors, however, need further work to validate reliability. |

*Keywords:* *Informal economy, women’s employment, carpet industry of Afghanistan, gender and labour, women empowerment, exploitation, qualitative research.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The informal economy has long served as a crucial source of employment for marginalized populations, particularly in developing countries where formal job opportunities are scarce (ILO, 2019). Across the globe, an estimated 61% of workers are engaged in informal employment, with a significantly higher percentage in low-income regions (ILO, 2019). Women, in particular, face structural barriers to formal employment, such as gender discrimination, limited access to financial resources, and socio-cultural constraints (Joseph et al., 2020; Etim & Daramola, 2020). Consequently, the informal sector has become a primary means for women to earn an income, despite its precarious nature, lack of legal protections, and low wages (Rojas-García & González, 2018).

In Afghanistan, the informal economy plays an even more critical role due to ongoing political instability, economic decline, and legal restrictions on women’s participation in formal employment. The Afghan carpet industry, a centuries-old sector known for its craftsmanship and cultural significance, has long been a major source of employment for women, particularly in rural areas (Nasrat & Karimi, 2016). However, despite their central role in the production process, female weavers often work under poor conditions, receive minimal wages, and lack bargaining power (Pain & Ali, 2004; Arify, 2023).

The return of the Taliban in August 2021 has further restricted women’s rights, banning them from formal employment and education, leaving informal work—such as carpet weaving—one of the few available livelihood options (Meera & Yekta, 2021). Although informal work provides women with some financial independence, it often perpetuates exploitation, economic vulnerability, and lack of career growth (Horwood et al., 2019). Moreover, many Afghan women face additional challenges, including mental health struggles, social isolation, and increased financial burdens (Neyazi et al., 2023). While some studies have explored the economic significance of Afghanistan’s carpet industry (Nasrat & Karimi, 2016; Moallem, 2018), limited research has specifically examined women’s lived experiences in this sector post-2021.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the dual nature of informal employment for Afghan women in the carpet industry—as both a source of empowerment and exploitation. Using qualitative interviews with female carpet weavers, the research examines their entry into the industry, working conditions, financial situation, skill development, and future aspirations. By applying thematic analysis, this study identifies key challenges and opportunities that women face in the industry and offers policy recommendations for improving their socio-economic conditions.

This paper contributes to existing literature by providing a context-specific analysis of Afghan women’s informal employment post-2021, linking their experiences to broader discussions on gender, economic exclusion, and labour rights in developing economies. The findings also have implications for policymakers, NGOs, and international organizations seeking to support Afghan women in gaining financial independence while improving workplace protections and opportunities for career advancement.

**1.1 Research Objective**

This study aims to examine the dual role of informal work in Afghanistan’s carpet sector, exploring how it serves as both a means of economic empowerment and exploitation for women post-2021.

**2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Informal economy is the oldest form of economic activities, with considerable significance in today’s world. International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 61% of global employed population are employed in informal economy (Bonnet et al, 2019). Employment in informal economy comes with no work-based social protection (Bonnet et al, 2019). Absence of other forms of livelihoods drives workers to choose informal work, which comes with little to no legal support from regulatory bodies, making these workers more vulnerable (Bonnet et al, 2019).

Globally, 80% of workers in rural areas are employed in informal economy, while around 44% of workers in urban areas work in this economy (Bonnet et al, 2019). Williams et al., (2015), suggest that the participation in informal economy is positively impacted by lack of alignment of society’s formal institution such as laws and regulations with its informal institution such as norms, values and beliefs. However, Joseph et al. (2020), noted that gender inequality in formal economy, such as inequality between genders in getting job, significantly contribute in pushing women to join informal economy. Etim and Daramola (2020), supported gender inequality as a factor pushing women to informal economy, and added unemployment, high taxes, bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, and lack of social security as other drivers of informal economy. Although, informal economy has a significant positive impact on GDP growth rate of countries (Islam & Alam, 2019; Khuong et al., 2021). However, higher percentage of informal workers are from poor families when compared to formal workers (Bonnet et al, 2019).

In developing countries, 92% of women are employed in informal economy, while this percentage is 87% in men (Bonnet et al, 2019). Even though, being the primary responsible for household chores, women show lesser interest in working, and demand the type of work that is compatible with household chores (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2019) . The main reason for women to join informal economy is financial problems their family and insufficient income of their husband. They engage with informal work to support their family (Arsal et al., 2017). Such large presence of women in informal economy comes with a lot of challenges for them. Although, they might have stable work, they are observed to be more vulnerable, low paid, and food insecure (Horwood et al., 2019). Additionally, workers in informal economy are exposed to long working hours and health hazards without any health insurance or hazard pay (Akinwale, 2014). Georgina Rojas-García and Mónica Patricia Toledo González (2018), studied paid household workers, whose majority are women, and found out that these workers are mostly women, lack social security, and are paid very poorly (Rojas-García and González, 2018). In addition to workers in informal economy, self-employed women also face significant challenges such as unavailability of finance, lack of capital, non-payment of debt, high taxes (Peprah et al., 2019).

Despite the challenges associated with employment in informal economy, this economy is considered to be a source of empowerment, particularly for women, helps them to have their own source of income, and decision making power (Arsal et al., 2017; Duque et al., 2022). Which in return, it positively impacts regional economic growth (Firmansyah and Estro, 2021; Kelikume, 2021). Although, women empowerment through informal economy is limited when compared to men empowerment through this economy (Theeuwen et al., 2021).

Kovess-Masfety et al. (2021) find that 84.61% of women do not have any source of income, and 47% of women have experienced high psychological destress. High percentage of women with no income is highly influenced by traditional ways of living such as Pashtunwalli, and jirga rulings (Ginsburg, 2011; Brohi, 2016). Interestingly, Neyazi et al. (2023) highlight an increase in percentage of women showing depression symptoms to 79.1%. They further confirm a positive correlation between depression and factors such as low income, no occupation, living in rural areas, having any illness, and a past trauma experience.

Women employment in Afghanistan comes with lots of challenges due to different reasons, such as legal framework, lack of economic opportunities, and terrorist attacks, as explained by (Berrebi et al. 2016; Cahalan et al. 2020; Desai et al. 2016; Meera and Yekta 2021). Hector Maletta (2008), studied gender and employment in rural Afghanistan, and noted that women in rural areas are paid much lesser than men. Similarly, women working in public sectors share concerns regarding their salary and consider it as the primary factor impacting their job satisfaction (Mehrzad and Rostan, 2024). Additionally, gender disparities in financial inclusion further limit women's economic participation, as Afghan women face significant barriers in accessing and utilizing formal financial services due to socio-cultural and institutional constraints (Mohammady & Vepa, 2025).

The Afghan carpet industry has long been an important source of jobs and exports, but it faces many challenges. It struggles with competition from neighbouring countries, a lack of branding, and limited access to global markets (Nasrat and Karimi, 2016). The industry is also highly fragmented, with traders and middlemen controlling much of the trade, leaving weavers with little profit (Pain and Ali, 2004). Women play a major role in carpet weaving, especially in rural areas, but they often work in poor conditions for very low wages, despite their essential contributions to their families' incomes (Arify, 2023).

In recent years, the Afghan carpet industry has changed due to globalization. There is now a growing demand for war-themed carpets that depict the country’s long history of conflict, attracting buyers from around the world. However, this shift has also made it harder for traditional Afghan carpets to compete in the market (Spooner, 2011). The industry also faces tough competition from Iran, India, and Pakistan, which have better finishing facilities and stronger export strategies, putting Afghan producers at a disadvantage (Bilgin et al., 2011).

Additionally, The carpet industry in Afghanistan heavily relies on women, especially in refugee camps, where they weave war carpets featuring images of weapons and conflict. These carpets are sold in Western markets as cultural or historical items, but they often hide the difficult working conditions and low wages of the weavers (Moallem, 2018). Media and museums help promote these carpets, making war seem like an artistic theme rather than a harsh reality. Some buyers believe purchasing these rugs supports Afghan women, but in reality, it continues a system of exploitation (Moallem, 2018). This shows how war and labour are turned into profitable goods while keeping the struggles of Afghan women invisible.

3. methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of women working in Afghanistan’s carpet industry. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, social interactions, and personal challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the socio-economic constraints and restrictions on formal employment opportunities for women in Afghanistan, qualitative methods provide valuable insights into the dual nature of carpet weaving as both a means of empowerment and exploitation.

**3.2 Data Collection Method**

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, a method that enables researchers to capture detailed personal narratives while allowing flexibility in responses (Kallio et al., 2016; Adeoye‐Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This method is particularly useful for exploring sensitive topics, such as employment restrictions, financial hardships, and workplace conditions, as it gives participants the freedom to express their perspectives in their own words (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

**3.3 Sample Selection**

A total of 20 women working in Afghanistan’s carpet industry participated in this study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that diverse perspectives were included based on factors such as age, years of experience, and financial dependency on the industry (Patton, 2014). The selection criteria included:

* Women actively engaged in carpet weaving.
* Individuals who had experienced the industry post-2021.
* Participants willing to share their experiences voluntarily.

The interviews were conducted in Farsi (Persian), the primary languages spoken by the participants in the area, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 30 – 40 minutes. To win their confidence and trust, the interviewer introduced herself and explained the purpose of this study to the participants. They fully understood the purpose of the research and trusted that their identities are confidential and anonymized. They were clearly told that there is no right or wrong responses. It is also important to note that a female interviewer was tasked to carry out the interview, considering the cultural sensitivity and comfort of the respondents.

**3.4 Data Analysis Method**

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen because of its flexibility and ability to highlight key issues that women workers face in the carpet industry. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework, the analysis included six steps. Frist familiarization with the data. Second generating initial codes and relevant statements related to the codes. Third identifying themes that includes grouping of codes into broader themes. Fourth step includes reviewing the themes and their relevance to the entire transcriptions. Fifth step includes identifying theme names that clearly communicate the theme’s purpose. Sixth and final step includes writing the report and adding the identified quotes related to each themes.

**3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed to ensure the protection and anonymity of participants (Orb et al., 2001). Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards, ensuring voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage.

**4. RESULT**

**4.1 Entry into the Carpet Industry**

While carpet industry has been one of the main source of employment for over a million women in Afghanistan for centuries, education and formal employment ban for women has increased number of women joining this industry. A significant number of women entered the carpet industry as a result of the Taliban’s employment and education bans, which left them with few alternative sources of income or opportunity for personal growth. Several participants reported that they had been students or employees in different sectors before being forced to transition into carpet weaving. Participant 1, who was previously a student, shared that she had nothing to do after her school was banned, so she join the carpet industry to keep herself busy. Similarly, Participant 20, who was a teacher before the employment ban, had to find A work to support herself financially.

*"They banned our school and I had nothing to do, so I started working in carpet industry. Because working in carpet industry is better than doing nothing."* – Participant 1

*“I was teaching in a school before Taliban. After they banned formal employment for women, I decided to learn a new profession that they allow us, so I joined carpet industry.”-*Participant 20

While finding a new source of income is the main reason for women to join this industry, there has been cases where women, who were banned from formal employment, joined carpet industry to improve their mental health, get out of isolation, and overcome depression and stress they faced due to education and employment ban. Participant 18, who had a job in the previous government, mentioned that she joined this industry to improve her mental health.

*" After Taliban takeover, closing schools and universities for women, and formal employment ban for women, I joined this industry. The main reason was my mental health, as I got into depression after losing my job and getting excluded from society at once.”-Participant 18*

**4.2 Compensation and Financial Situation**

Women working in carpet industry feel they are underpaid for the labour-intensive work they perform. They lack bargaining power, and their wages have remained stagnant despite increasing workloads. Additionally, these workers believe that formal employment ban on women have increase number of women who want to join carpet industry, which has paved the way for further exploitation of women workers in this industry. This feeling of dissatisfaction with compensation increases among women who had formal employment before the Taliban. Although, women workers are not happy with their compensation, they are afraid of complaining to the government. Some fear that if they complain, they might lose their work, while others are afraid of this employment being banned like formal employment. Even women, who were working in this industry before the Taliban, show dissatisfaction with their compensation, and expressed that women unemployment has increased their insecurities regarding their work. Participant 8 mentioned that workers receive very little compensation despite the physical demands of their job. Participant 9 highlighted that workers are afraid to demand better wages because they fear losing their jobs.

*"It's better than nothing. But, it's not enough with the workload we have. We should be compensated more as there is so much work in this industry.”* – Participant 8

*"I get very less wages, and in many years I have been working in this industry, my wages have not increased significantly. But we cannot complain, we are afraid if we complain to government, they might ban this employment as well the same way they banned formal employment."* – Participant 9

Participants frequently mentioned financial instability and their inability to contribute significantly to their household income, and emphasise low income as the biggest challenges of workers of carpet industry. Participant 5 noted that her earnings were just enough to cover her personal expenses, but she could not provide financial support to her family.

*"It’s ok! I can make a bit money to cover my personal expenses, but I can’t contribute to my family expenses."* – Participant 5

While some even called this exploitation of women workers. Participant 6 complain regarding her unfair compensation, and participant 9 called it an example of exploitation.

*“ … I think we deserve more salary as the workload is too much.”-*Participant 6

“*Low wages and high workload along with more working hours are examples of exploitation in this industry. Since formal employment ban, a lot of women are trying to join carpet industry, so if we don't work hard or for longer hours if they ask us, we will be fired. We can't complain about our wages too.”-*Participant 9

**4.3 Skill Development and Social Connection**

Women workers, who do not have previous education or employment, tend to feel empowered by this industry. They believe that working in carpet industry has helped them to learn some new skills, particularly skills related to carpet weaving. Gaining these skills has improved their self-confidence, and they consider these skills as a potential asset.

Participant 2 stated that she has become a professional designer, but has been unable to establish her own business due to financial constraints. Participant 18 explained that besides learning to design and weave carpet, joining carpet industry has improved her communication and teamwork skills as well.

*"Yes, I have learned a lot of skills in carpet industry. I can say I am a professional designer by now. But I haven't tried doing business due to weak financial situation I have. I love to set up my own business one day, as just weaving carpet doesn’t have a long-term growth"* – Participant 2

*"* *It’s natural that when someone joins a new community or group will learn a lot of new things. I have learned many skills such as communication, teamwork, and carpet weaving and designing.”*– Participant 9

Besides self-growth, the workplace provides a sense of community and an opportunity to connect with others. For many women going to a workstations and connecting with others have been significantly helpful to overcome stress and depression. This social connection not only helps them to improve their mental health, but also gives them opportunity to find like-minded people that can be advantageous for their future. Participant 12 shared that she has formed friendships at work, which provided her the opportunity to discuss some future business plans. Similarly, Participant 20 stated that making new friends in work station has improved her mental health.

*"* *Yes, I have made some friends here. As I know tailoring, I want to start tailoring classes with some friends from this workstation..." –* Participant 12

*" Working in carpet industry provided me with the opportunity to meet new people, make new friends, and connect with community, which has been significantly helpful in overcoming depression that I suffered after I was banned from teaching in school.” –* Participant 20

**4.4 Working Conditions**

Respondents working in older workstations tend to show dissatisfaction with the poor working conditions, cramped spaces, inadequate equipment, and a lack of proper facilities such as clean drinking water in their workstations. Respondents were concerned about the safety and health hazards of their working conditions as well. Participant 3 expressed dissatisfaction with the small and overcrowded workspaces, while Participant 9 highlighted the physical toll of weaving on her health, and lack of safety equipment in her workplace.

*"* *The working space is small and there are too many of us working here. There are no proper equipment and facilities. Also, drinking water here is not filtered and it's not good."* – Participant 3

*"* *I think our working conditions is very bad. There is no safety equipment like first aid kid or anything like that. We work in a small space which is not comfortable and healthy. I have got backpain due to working in this workstation. "* – Participant 9

Interestingly, some respondents, who are working in new establishments, reported better working conditions with new equipment. They also said that they have received proper training on how to use the equipment safely. Respondent 12 expressed satisfaction with her newly opened workstation and its working environment.

*“The workstation we are working is newly opened, so the working conditions are good and the equipment are new. So I am happy with the working conditions in our workstation.” –* Participant 12

**4.5 Aspirations and Future Preferences**

Women, who had formal employment or were students, expressed a strong desire to leave the carpet industry if given the opportunity, highlighting the temporary and restrictive nature of their work. They said that they have joined this industry as there was no other option and the little money they make from this industry is better than nothing. While some of them mentioned that they joined carpet industry to get busy and overcome depression they were suffering from due to education and employment ban. On the other hand, workers who were working in carpet industry before the Taliban see their future in this industry.

Participant 1 said she would rather continue her education, but due to current restrictions, she has no option, and she wishes to receive better compensation and support. Participant 5 shared that she once dreamed of becoming a doctor but has now accepted that it is not possible.

*"If I had chance, I would continue my education and get a formal employment. But at this situation, working in carpet industry is good if they increase our salary and NGOs support Afghan women."* – Participant 1

*"I was excited to finish school and go to university to become a doctor. But everything changed. They banned our schools and destroyed our dreams."* – Participant 5

*“I would still choose this industry as I have no education, but have a lot of experience in this industry.”-* Participant 12

**5. DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study align with the broader literature on informal employment, particularly in the context of gender, economic vulnerability, and worker exploitation. The results highlight how the Taliban's ban on formal employment and education has forced many Afghan women into carpet weaving, reinforcing existing gender disparities in the labour market. This is consistent with Joseph et al. (2020) and Etim and Daramola (2020), who argue that gender inequality and barriers to formal employment push women into informal work. The increase in women joining the carpet industry due to financial necessity reflects the structural limitations imposed on their economic participation.

The financial struggles reported by women in this study support the argument that informal employment is often characterized by low wages and financial insecurity (ILO, 2019). Participants emphasized their inability to contribute significantly to their households, mirroring findings from Horwood et al. (2019), who noted that informal women workers remain economically vulnerable despite their employment. The fear of losing even informal work and the reluctance to demand better wages further validate the precarious nature of informal employment (Rojas-García and González, 2018).

Moreover, the participants’ fears that complaining about wages might result in the government banning this employment as well reflect the lack of legal protections for informal workers, which is a key concern in global discussions on informal labour rights (ILO, 2019). The concern that the influx of unemployed women into the carpet industry has worsened exploitation also aligns with research by Pain and Ali (2004), who found that the Afghan carpet industry is highly fragmented, with middlemen and traders controlling much of the trade and limiting weavers' earnings.

The study confirms that long working hours and poor working conditions are central issues in the carpet industry, reinforcing the concerns raised by Akinwale (2014) regarding health hazards in informal work. The lack of safety measures, physical strain, and absence of first aid kits reported by respondents mirror the working conditions of women in other sectors of the informal economy (Rojas-García and González, 2018). The findings also support Moallem (2018), who observed that Afghan women in carpet weaving face hidden exploitation masked by the marketability of their products.

However, not all workplaces were described as exploitative, as some newer establishments reportedly provided better conditions and training. This suggests that interventions from NGOs and fair-trade initiatives could significantly improve conditions for women in the sector.

Despite financial and labour challenges, many participants acknowledged learning new skills through carpet weaving, particularly those with no prior formal employment or education. This supports findings from Arsal et al. (2017), who argue that informal work provides economic participation opportunities for women. Additionally, some respondents reported improvements in mental health due to their engagement in work, highlighting the psychosocial benefits of social connections in employment, as also noted by Duque et al. (2022).

Yet, the study finds that skill development in carpet weaving does not necessarily lead to long-term career advancement. The lack of capital and business opportunities prevents many women from expanding their work into sustainable self-employment, as also observed in the challenges faced by self-employed women in informal economies (Peprah et al., 2019).

Women who were students or previously employed before the Taliban's rule generally expressed a strong desire to leave carpet weaving if given the chance, reflecting the temporary and restrictive nature of their work. The dreams of higher education and professional careers being crushed by political changes are consistent with Kovess-Masfety et al. (2021), who found that economic exclusion leads to psychological distress among women. Moreover, Neyazi et al. (2023) identified a positive correlation between depression, low income, and lack of occupational opportunities, which is clearly reflected in the lived experiences of Afghan women in this study.

Interestingly, women who had been in the carpet industry prior to the Taliban’s return showed more willingness to continue their work. This aligns with Deshpande & Kabeer (2019), who suggest that women in informal economies often prioritize jobs that align with domestic responsibilities rather than formal career aspirations.

The findings suggest an urgent need for policy interventions to improve wages, working conditions, and financial protections for women in the carpet industry of Afghanistan. The recommendations from participants align with broader research advocating for greater NGO involvement, government policies supporting fair wages, and access to financial services for women (Firmansyah & Estro, 2021; Mohammady & Vepa, 2025).

4. Conclusion

Overall, this study contributes to the literature by shedding light on the realities of Afghan women in informal employment post-2021. While carpet weaving provides a source of income and social connection, it also exposes women to economic vulnerabilities, low wages, and exploitation. The findings reinforce existing research on gendered labour markets, informal work, and economic exclusion while also providing new insights into the intersection of employment restrictions, mental health, and financial insecurity in Afghanistan.

Future research should explore interventions that can improve conditions in the Afghan carpet industry, particularly in the areas of fair compensation, financial support, improvement of working conditions, and market access for women weavers.

DATA AVAILABILITY:

The data supporting findings of this study is not publicly available to ensure anonymity of interview participants.

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