

The Rise of the Afghan Saleswoman

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Female shop assistants are defying tradition – and bringing in extra business.

Aqila, a 22-year-old cosmetics saleswoman in Kabul's Raees Khan Business Centre, has acquired quite a following among her customers.

Women who enter the shop greet her with delight, and she says that she has signed many exclusive contracts with make-up artists.

"Because I sell nice, good quality products and behave in a friendly manner with customers, they really trust me," Aqila said, adding, "Women prefer to deal with the shop assistants of the same sex."

Aqila has been working as a sales assistant for the last three years and earns a monthly wage of 250 US dollars, a significant sum in a low-income society and one she says has made a real difference to her family income.

But not everyone approves of a woman going out to work in this way, Aqila added.

"Being a saleswoman is something new here, and many of the traditions and customs which dominate our society still make it hard for us," she said. "We should fight against these customs so as to get rid of them for good."

Women's economic power has been growing in Afghanistan ever since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001.

Now entrepreneurs and shopping centre managers are encouraging more women to start working as sales assistants, judging that this will in turn increase the number of female customers.

Ahmad Melad Sharifi, who runs the Faisal Business Centre in Kabul, said that out of just over 100 employees, 13 were women who earned between 250 and 300 dollars each month.

Transport facilities were also laid on for all workers, which meant women employees did not need to fear harassment on their way to work each day.

And saleswomen were particularly useful when marketing products such as clothes, shoes and cosmetics.

"By appointing female workers, we solve problems with female customers who feel far more comfortable bargaining and dealing with women rather than men," Sharifi continued. "Also, women who order dresses prefer female tailors to take their measurements."

Female consumers agree that they far prefer dealing with women in shops and markets.

"I always try to buy what I need from women," said one shopper, Tahmina Khorasani. "I can speak so much more comfortably with saleswomen because there are some specific products which are only used by women and I can't even ask for them from male shopkeeper because of embarrassment.

"When women try to buy those products from men, male shopkeepers start ogling and staring which irritates women."

Strict gender segregation in Afghan society also meant that it was less acceptable for women to do their own shopping themselves and risk encountering a male shop worker.

"Having female sales assistants in our society has solved many problems," explained Malalai, another shopper. "Now we don't need to ask men to buy us what we need. In the past when we wanted something, we asked men to purchase the products for us, but they forgot or sometimes they bought us low-quality products. Today there are many saleswomen so we can go to their shops and we can comfortably purchase the products we need."

Nonetheless, conservative traditions in Afghan society means that women working outside the home are often jeered at and taunted.

One female sales assistant, Anosha, said that she had simply got used to the frequent harassment.

"There are people who come here to buy products and leave, but some people here just to bother and irritate us by pestering and mocking us," she said. "Nowadays this teasing has just become a part of life

and I don't react as I am used to it."

Muslim scholars say they support female participation in the workplace, although with some caveats.

"Islam sets out all women's legal, financial and economic rights," religious scholar Nasir Frotan said, adding, "Women can earn money and own properties and merchandise.

"Islam clearly explains inheritance, dowry issues and how women must be supported women. Islam also insists on women's economic independence and men have to respect such rights given to women."

However, he emphasised that women still had to uphold three requirements during all economic, social and political dealings. These were "wearing Islamic hijab, avoiding mixing too much with the opposite sex and asking permission before leaving the house".

Others argue that women joining the workforce does not need to contradict cultural traditions.

"The participation of women in economic activities develops our country, " said Pariza Rahmani, a social activist. "In many Islamic countries including Iran and other countries, there are many saleswomen who work in shops. Women are the best caretakers of properties and money, but men are spenders... in fact, women are good at economic activities."

Government officials claim credit for the growth of Afghan women's economic power, both as consumers and producers.

"All the developments and achievements of women in the last 13 years are due to the hard work of government and especially the ministry of women's affairs," said Hasan Ali, the ministry's director of economic expansion coordination.

"Today there are 760 economic foundations which are supported by the ministry of women's affairs and run by women... Our ministry is currently working on economic strategies, women's professional activities and also on plans to empower women economically."

But social affairs analyst Mahbooba Saraj warned against complacency, arguing that there had been little long-term planning.

The ministry of women's affairs, she continued, "just conducts some short, ineffective and temporary programmes".

"This ministry does not have an effective and developed system to manage its affairs. There isn't even proper communication and coordination between the different departments. In fact, there is chaos and therefore work is not done effectively."

Fatha Ahmadzai, an advisor at the ministry of women's affairs, insisted that change would take time.

"The laws of our country clearly state that men and women have equal rights in the workplace and that there is no discrimination regarding this issue.

"There are no limitations for working women," Ahmadzai continued, adding, "There are many men who don't know anything about the Afghan constitution, so they are taken aback when they see female sales assistants. The more we expand this profession, the more people will get used to it and it will become ordinary and everyday. When people see changes in society, they get used to them gradually and after a while, they become part of their lives."

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