UNHCR's skills project empowered refugee woman to earn at home amid coronavirus outbreak

QUETTA, 08 April 2020 – Saleema Habibullah, an Afghan refugee, has faced enormous struggles in her lifetime. Despite the tragic losses that she experienced, she leads a life free from fear and full of hope for the future, even in the most difficult of times.

“I was only twenty when all the men in my family where killed in a bombing incident in Quetta,” Saleema lamented. She described how her paternal uncle was so heart-broken that he died from a heart attack.

At the time, she fought for her family – a paralyzed aunt and cousin, whom were her only remaining relatives – by taking a bold step to leave her home and seek opportunities. Thanks to UNHCR’s Safe from the Start (SFS) programme, she learned new skills, such as embroidery, tailoring and kilim-making, and applies them daily.

The new skills enabled Saleema to become a master trainer at UNHCR’s programme being run by its partner. She has also established a centre at her house to provide skills to girls and run a small business. Saleema earns from the job and home-based business.

“Even at this challenging time, when the coronavirus outbreak has affected the country, I’m able to earn a decent living while staying at home,” she said.

Generously funded by the United States of America in 2019, the SFS is a livelihoods, hygiene and sexual violence awareness-raising project. Its aim is the economic empowerment of vulnerable women in the Afghan refugee community in Quetta.
Since the start of the programme in 2016, SFS trained 740 beneficiaries in marketable skills such as kilim and carpet weaving, tailoring, hand embroidery, machine embroidery as well as computer and English language courses (for literate beneficiaries).

All trainees participate in numeracy, literacy and health classes as well. A nursery is also available for young children accompanying their mothers during the day. Most of the beneficiaries are not only skilled artisans but aspiring female agents of change.

Originally from Kunduz in northern Afghanistan, Saleema could not continue her studies beyond primary school due to poverty. However, her life took a turn for the better when she got the opportunity to become a trainer with SFS. Today, she’s the sole bread winner in her family, paying off all of the heavy debt that they accumulated over time.

At first, her community didn’t respond well to her decision to pursue skills training. In fact, they didn’t even approve of a girl leaving the home, but Saleema stood firm against the frowning faces and unfriendly gestures. She kept working hard, learning new skills.

“Someday, I look forward to becoming a successful businesswoman,” mused Saleema. She says that women should be brave, lead prosperous lives and pursue their dreams.

By Humera Karim, UNHCR, Quetta, Pakistan

Photo credit and caption:

Afghan refugee, Saleema Habibullah, pursues her dream of promoting the empowerment of women through skills training at home. © UNHCR/Humera Karim