

Mehreen Raza*

Inam Ullah Leghari†

Lived Experiences of Women Entrepreneurs Regarding Socio-Cultural Constraints in Entrepreneurship in Southern Punjab, Pakistan

Abstract

The research paper investigates the socio-cultural constraints faced by women entrepreneurs during startup and expansion of their entrepreneurial ventures in Ahmedpur East of District Bahawalpur through documenting their lived experiences. The research is primarily a multi-sited ethnography and utilizes qualitative research methods such as in-depth semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions on collecting primary data from a selective sample of 25 entrepreneurs ascertained through sampling technique. The study highlights gender-specific socio-cultural challenges such as social perceptions and biases, work-life balance, patronage of male family members, restricted mobility owing to Purdah and low recognition and payment of women's work etc. as prime reasons that hinder not only women participation as entrepreneurs but also inhibits their engagements and choices in entrepreneurship. Socio-cultural factors not only systematically impact women's social interactions and decision-making but transform into multiple other challenges that women fight and struggle with while making their space as entrepreneurs.

Key Words: Ahmedpur East, Entrepreneurship, Gender, Lived Experiences, Multi-Sited Ethnography, Socio-Cultural Challenges, Southern Punjab, Women Entrepreneur.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship worldwide is associated with economic growth and contemplated as one safe route towards poverty alleviation for countries fighting poverty (Ray and Ray 2011). Women entrepreneurship specifically is under much research from researchers from all backgrounds as women entrepreneurs, by creating jobs and social security not only for themselves but also for many others, can become the solutions to economic crisis (Aslam, Latif and Aslam 2013) and can be seen as means to pave ways towards ensuring financial autonomy and self-fulfilment (Ali, 2018).

Entrepreneurship tends to grow unevenly in different setting across the world and appears in many forms and manifestations (Mueller 2007). 21st century has called for the inclusion of context (external socio-economic and cultural conditions as well as environment along with others) of an individual to understand the diversity in the process and operation of entrepreneurship across the globe (Müller 2013). The inclusion comes with a postulation that individual's immediate environment not only holds diverse possibilities and opportunities but also challenges for entrepreneurship. Leclair (2014), while proposing a strong co-relation of diversity factors such as culture and gender with entrepreneurship, explains how gender may also partially impact the entrepreneurial activities and may result in slowing down the process. Since a common theme in anthropological studies is change hence acknowledging that people and culture are continuously evolving; therefore, the role and influences of and upon entrepreneur cannot be ignored and neglected.

It is pertinent to investigate how the diversity of gender interferes in encouraging or discouraging entrepreneurs in a specific socio-cultural context. Adapting the feminist perspective, this research paper specifically intends to study the impact of the diversity factor such as individual's immediate cultural environment on women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship and focuses on the challenges and constraints which are unique to gender segregation and cultural division of role.

Literature Review

Contested and dynamic connotations of the concept and process of entrepreneurship in scholars have

*M. Phil Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

†Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: inam.leghari@qu.edu.pk

probably added more complexity towards developing a universal consensus of the concept. The term “entrepreneurship” means different things to different people. Earlier scholarship implied entrepreneurship either as initiating and managing a small business (Petrin 1994) or “pursuit of opportunities” (Shane and Venkataraman 2000) or related it with innovation, the creativity of ideas, new endeavours for economic growth (Audretsch, Kuratko and Link 2015). Many of the provided definitions relate entrepreneurship with a business venture/endeavour whereas also mentions “the ability/capacity or willingness” which refers to the willingness and ability of an entrepreneur to either innovate, imitate, initiate, develop and manage the venture hence making the role of entrepreneur central to the whole process.

It is vital to understand that the concept of entrepreneurs just like entrepreneurship cannot be narrowed down to someone who innovates, initiates, or gets things done. Entrepreneurs operate in all sorts of socio-economic and cultural contexts. They fit the category “entrepreneur” because they fight against great odds and find ways to exploit opportunities. Enterprise-less or informal ventures with lack of technology and finance or self-employment models are no less of entrepreneurship. Preset criteria and prejudged characteristics simply cannot be used to negate or validate the existence or chances of the success of entrepreneurs (Zoltan, et al. 2019). Each entrepreneur is different as they reflect the diversity of customer’s needs, new commodity or way of production of the same commodity (Montanye 2006).

Entrepreneurship needs to be envisioned as an economic behaviour and as a process which is very much embedded in other social processes. A process that is deeply connected to and shaped by certain socio-cultural conditions as well as is a key factor in explaining and directing the existing socio-cultural environment. If any new endeavour that is created or influenced because of one’s culture is also considered as an entrepreneurial venture (Simpeh 2011) then there is a need to consider the social and cultural processes in which the entrepreneurship originates, or the entrepreneurs operate. Culture mirrors the social, economic, and political complexities of an individual. Thus, it is the cultural environment that can lead to entrepreneurial attitudes which may provide encouragement to venture creation behaviour. Norms and traditions are crucial in inhibiting or encouraging entrepreneurship within any given cultural context (Mah 1995).

An Entrepreneur’s context is both ‘an asset and a liability’ for nature and extends of entrepreneurship. Welter (2011) argued that the context in which the entrepreneur operates not only provides them with opportunities but also set boundaries for their action. Context helps to understand how and why entrepreneurship happens and who becomes involved. All contextual structures such as heritage, culture, social networks, technology, and expertise along with education, play an important role and define conditions for entrepreneurship. Besides the role of socio-cultural factors, entrepreneur’s subjective perceptions, along with other gender differences, also play an important role in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour. However, individual demographic and economic conditions bear little impact (Minniti 2010). Allowances must also be made while making cross-country comparisons with different level of economic developments where family support and personal problems impact both negatively and positively not only the firm performances but also the ability of women entrepreneurs to struggle and cope with such problems. In either way, the performance is not only hampered but effected (Welsh, Kaciak and Thongpapanl 2016).

Women entrepreneurship specifically is recognized as an economic activity and involves the participation of women who not only think of a business idea but also initiate it through effective organizing of limited resources, manage risks and survive hardships (Vinze 1987). The study is considerate of all such women who took social or financial or cultural risks in exploiting, arranging, or organizing existing resources at hands and made use of all available resources to earn extra cash.

Entrepreneurship is a social activity and gets influenced by gender-based constraints. Decisions pertaining to occupational choices are made in keeping the social context of the household. Hence the contextual factors such as social as well as economic contexts influence not only women entry into entrepreneurship but also their aspirations, motives and activity rates in entrepreneurial ventures. Women occupational activity is much lower as that of men because of additional domestic burdens and responsibilities. Their preference of household over the outside environment and mobility away from home has a negative impact not only on their entry into entrepreneurship and their employment growth (Estrin and Mickiewicz 2011).

In countries like Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, women are found to be absent from public commerce activities. They are encouraged to participate in activities within private domain. This seclusion and restriction in mobility and operation in the public domain is coped culturally with the provision of alternative opportunities for income generation. South Asian women are found to be engaged in exchange activities in the field of handicrafts and farm products (Papanek and G 1982). 70% of the enterprises of women of Pakistan are home-based, informal and micro in size with one person in charge. Replication of ideas in specific sectors such as garments and handicrafts have increased the concentration of women in these sectors (UNDP 2016).

Women-led businesses or enterprises is not a novel idea in Pakistan. However, economic activity is still majorly tilted towards men. The statistics for women engagement are not very encouraging, and the situation seems to be further digressing every passing year. World Bank Development update report (2017) placed Pakistan among countries with least representation of women entrepreneurship that is only 1% which was reported up to 5% in 2012 by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM). Both the reports confirmed entrepreneurship as a tough path for Pakistani women because of the numerous challenges and obstacles women face as entrepreneurs. United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) in one of its country reports in 2016 shared that only a handful of women can start and sustain their entrepreneurial venture in Pakistan. Those who can are either driven with dire economic crisis and necessity. Moreover, women-led businesses cannot expand or foster further without the support and patronage of male members. Without the patronage of male members, women in reserved and conservative cultures refrain from opting big entrepreneurial or non-conventional ventures (Harbi, Anderson and Mansor 2009). This calls for attention if cultural expectations and social roles have any role to play in determining not only the nature and involvement of the entrepreneur.

Culture allows men alone to enter the domains of business and exchange, inhibiting women from handling any significant monetary transactions held or happening in the public domain (Shaheed 1992). In Pakistan, women after marriage often live-in big families, and the honour of the family precedes over matters of individual interest. The decision to enter entrepreneurship is restrained and influenced by the expectations and experiences women have in their social world (Muhammad, McElwee and Dana 2017). The social category of household and family play a pivotal role in decision-making regarding matters of personal choice. Other demographic factors such as age, married life, family hardships and low incomes may also have strong impacts upon women towards launching new entrepreneurial ventures (Ali, Soomro and Kumar 2015). Roomi & Parrott (2008) classified socio-cultural related challenges as gender-related challenges. The assigned traditional roles and perceptions of family members influence women entry and participation as entrepreneurs. The Women are able to stand out and fight against the socio-cultural barriers are met with other challenges such as of lack of supportive networks and professional guidance and support (Hasan 2020).

Aslam, Latif, & Aslam (2013), while studying the women entrepreneurs of Bahawalpur classified problems into three main categories such as entrepreneurial/business problems, social problems and technical problems. All the gender-specific and socio-cultural problems of context share a negative relation regarding the working capacity of women entrepreneurs. However, the argument remains contested as research confirms that women react differently to institutional pressures and also bring in different coping strategies for survival and success (Yunis 2019).

However, there is a need to explore to what extent women are influenced and impacted by the socio-cultural matrix and what role it plays in shaping and determining the level and scope of women participation in entrepreneurial ventures. This paper tries to bridge the research gap in Southern Punjab by providing lived experiences of women entrepreneurs and socio-cultural challenges and constraints faced by them in the selected locale of Ahmedpur East.

Methodology

This paper includes findings of research conducted from October 2019 to January 2020 and is primarily qualitative in nature. It can be termed as a multi-sited ethnography since it includes responses of home-based women entrepreneurs from multiple geographical locations from Tehsil Ahmedpur East, i.e., Union Councils of Kotla Musa Khan, UC Skhail and UC Ahmedpur East Urban of

Tehsil Ahmedpur East of District Bahawalpur. The sample size considered was of 25 women entrepreneurs ascertained through using a combination of convenient as well as purposive sampling techniques. The identified sample targeted women entrepreneurs active in household-based micro-level entrepreneurial ventures in specific sectors. For the purpose of convenience, no limitations were drawn towards the type of venture or industry. Methods and techniques employed are in-depth semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions for the purpose of data collection. Participant observation and informal discussions as additional techniques were used for validation and triangulation of collected information. Data were analyzed by categorizing information into themes and subthemes that evolved from the collected data. Prime thematic categories took into account content analysis of group of words or responses with similar meanings connotations and used clustering for grouping categories with shared similar observed qualities. Gender remained the overarching theme whose relation was studied in relation to the socio-cultural matrix. Experiences of women are added with minimum distortion using pseudo-names to ensure confidentiality. It is pertinent to understand that the responses quoted in a research paper are opinions, points of views and experiences of women entrepreneurs and cannot be generalized over a large population.

Locale

Ahmedpur East of District Bahawalpur in South of Punjab was selected as the locale for the research work. District Bahawalpur is located in the eastern border of the south of Punjab and till 1955 was known to be the capital city of Bahawalpur state (Vandal 2011). Ahmedpur East is also popular by the name of Ahmedpur Shirqia in Urdu where Shirqia stands for its eastern location. District Bahawalpur is further divided into seven tehsils under the local government administration set-up. Ahmedpur is the second most populous and largest tehsil of Bahawalpur. Ahmedpur East was selected as research primarily for two major reasons. First being the cultural heritage centre for the state of Bahawalpur, Ahmedpur East is known for its handmaiden handicrafts, hand-embroidered clothes and multiple other cultural items of utility such as pottery and utility products from palm date leaves. The products since are produced by local women who work from the domains of their private spheres; therefore, the desired research study could help me approach and document experiences of those women entrepreneurs who have capitalized on this available opportunity and have launched their own small-scale enterprises. The second reason for opting for Ahmedpur East was due to the increasing focus of government-supported initiatives regarding women entrepreneurs in Ahmedpur East. The interventions helped in ruling out the institutional and structural constraints and provided an opportunity to explore those constraints of women entrepreneurs that are inhibiting and stagnating their participation and expansion as entrepreneur's despite being provided with structural and business management skills support.

Following tables provides pertinent profiling details of the women entrepreneurs who were considered for the purpose of data collection;

Table 1. Nature of Entrepreneurial Activity (Source: Fieldwork, 2020)

Head	Nature of Entrepreneurial Activity	No. of Respondents
Textiles and Garments	Dress Stitching (Tailoring)	04
	Fancy Dress Designing	01
	Hand Embroidery	02
	Adda Work	01
	Boutique work	01
Beauty care	Beauty Parlor set up	03
	Beauty care services – Hina Tattoos	01
	Hand Knitted Woolen home products	01
Cultural Utility Products	Hand-Woven Palm Leaves Products (<i>Chabi, Mohra/Peeray</i>)	02
	Hair Accessories (fancy and simple <i>Paranda</i> Making)	01
Livestock	Livestock Farming	02
	Poultry and Livestock	01
Multiple Services	Dress Stitching and Beauty care services	04
Food and Catering	Food Stall (Snacks and winter/summer beverages)	01
Total		25

Findings and Discussion

Socio-cultural constraints refer to struggles of women entrepreneurs against social perceptions, assigned gender roles and the sexual division of labour and all other constraints that women face in a specific cultural context. Following socio-cultural constraints were documented while recording lived experiences of women entrepreneurs.

Fighting Social Perceptions and Bias

Social perceptions within a society are those popular behaviours regarding how one should conduct oneself in day-to-day life. They are strongly influenced by the social norms and traditions of a given area. Abidance of socially approved behaviour and its exhibition is one vital reason affecting women visibility in the public domain. Out of 25 interviewed women entrepreneurs, ten explicitly mentioned how social perceptions are a hurdle for them while operating their enterprises. Many agreed that specific line of work was chosen because it is socially acceptable and found appropriate for women to participate in. The perceptions of distant relatives, neighbours and community members play an active part in deciding how women should engage and participate in productive activities.

One of the women respondents mentioned that those works that demand excessive mobility are discouraged and looked down upon. "Women who indulge in such works are called with names like *lafani* (*wanderer*) and *awara* (free loamer, characterless as well) behind their backs". She is seen as a careless woman who does not care about her home and children and has deviated from her prime responsibilities of being a dedicated mother, wife, and daughter. Women are only allowed to step into economic roles if they ensure that the rest of the role-playing will not get disturbed and effected.

Another respondent working in hand made garments explained that men think that working women spoil the environment when they move out of the house, they get corrupted too that is why they can work as much as they want by staying inside the house, but they can't go outside."

The third respondent told that "when we go out for work, not only we hear all kinds of talks, but our relatives create hurdles by first telling us not to go out then they resisted for us getting a formal education. Just to put a stop to their talk, we sisters accompany each-other everywhere and move in the company".

Often, women left what they initially wanted to opt as an entrepreneurial choice because the work chosen did not get social approval. Social bias against the work of palor was found in selected locales. The work is considered menial and immodest. The immediate family even if permits, the distant relatives, will keep highlighting the work as inappropriate. A 35 years old respondent recounted.

"people never remain silent; they are keeping one thing or another. When I wanted to start my beauty palor, my brother-in-law insisted that this work is not good as the girls who come in palors are not of good characters. So, I was discouraged from starting palor work. I take notice of their objections and do not ignore them. I think why to give them a chance to talk, so I keep clear where I go and do proper veiling to not give them a chance to talk".

It was interesting to find that women recognize each-other as enemies and say that it is not the men but women who keep an alert eye of who is going where and doing what. It is the women who are reinstating social perceptions by practising these social perceptions and exercising them against each other.

Expected Gender Roles and Work-Life Balance

Before explaining the dynamics of work and gender roles, it is important to understand the different connotations attached to the concept of work in Ahmedpur East. Locals classify the work as *Ghar ka Kam* (domestic work), *Mazdoor* (paid labour) and *Apna Kam* (self-initiated venture). Domestic work is unpaid and is considered a responsibility and obligation by women where *Mazdoor* and *Apna Kam* are for the purpose of income generation and hold commercial value. Culturally, women are not expected to manage the economic responsibilities of the household; therefore, their efforts are considered secondary to those of men.

In the social fabric, women are envisioned as the primary caretakers of the home and family. Their identity is subject to the status they hold with their male kins. Many consider marriage as a responsibility and explained that marriage is a full-time job. Women from a very young age are socialized to support mothers in household chores and to attend their male relatives such as father and brother's everyday life needs. On inquiry about daily routines of young single entrepreneurs, many addressed that they help and support their mothers in household chores. However, it is still the mother who takes the prime responsibility of all those tasks at home. Young women entrepreneurs' motive to enter entrepreneurship is to utilize their self and time in meaningful activities where extra cash comes as an additional incentive. The transition of a girl into a homemaker brings a major shift in her responsibilities. A young entrepreneur dealing in livestock explained that "I never handled livestock in my mother's home, however, here my mother-in-law made me learn every little detail about livestock. Now I bring and prepare the fooder and manage the livestock fulltime". The routines of married women are tougher than other others. It is not only the added responsibility but the expectations of mother-in-law and relatives in law that requires them to invest their best energies towards husband and household.

It was found that women always prioritize family overwork. Anything that influences family life is avoided or discontinued. Women very often complained about a shortage of time because of the roles and responsibilities assigned to them within the family fabric. The married women irrespective of their dwellings were found to be heavily engaged in managing household chores such as cleaning, cooking, and washing from early sunrise till late night. The entrepreneurial work or work other than household chores is managed in the remaining time or after completion of all assigned chores.

Women entrepreneurs tend to opt for such entrepreneurial ventures that ensure their presence at home to simultaneously supervise home, children, and work. Moreover, they are interested in flexible hours and manageable workloads. It was interesting to find that women themselves hesitate to enhance their skill levels or increase workload because that may deviate their attention and level of dedication from home and children. The women living in joint families and with younger kids are burdened more with household responsibilities than those who are single or whose children are grown-ups and can handle themselves. For the former, earning extra cash is not a choice but a condition to make ends meet. The entrepreneurial work recognized as "*Apna kam*" is considered as "additional burden" and marriage is understood as "responsibility."

35 years old married entrepreneurs, with young children, working as a dress designer in a local dwelling described.

"I have an intention to expand my work, but now my children are too young, and the responsibility to look after them is upon me. I did not even go for cotton picking because my little girl is too young. I take care of my children and have livestock, therefore manage them too. Besides that, whatever work my sisters-in-law [*bhabi*] assigns me, I do that as well".

Role of Family and Patronage of Male Family Members

If support and patronage from family especially can encourage a woman to become an entrepreneur, then lack of it can cause multiple constraints in launching or managing an entrepreneurial venture. Many women see it as support may it be moral, physical, or financial from the family members. Women were found to fight back social perceptions if family extends its support. Lack of support, however, means the issue of work-life balance, the tension in family relations, restricted and controlled mobility, constrained time for work and a lot of self-effort to make the venture work. It also includes constant efforts to prove self-worth. This is one of the reasons that women tend to engage in ventures that are low risk and involve minimum investment. Women would engage in ventures where the requirement for investment and dependency over male family members is almost equal to none. They would try managing within their available resources, such as utilizing the already learned skills and social networks to earn extra cash to support household expenditures. However, some dependencies are unavoidable and such dependency over family male members transforms into dependency in accessing finance, markets for raw materials and equipment repair of equipment or for visiting clients or labours. It is this dependency that refrains women from thinking about further expansion in entrepreneurial activity. Such dependencies may increase two folds if the girl is single or married with young children. Age is also a defining factor in increasing or decreasing dependencies. The older the

women, the more relaxation she will enjoy in mobility. Only the presence of male kin supports chances of early expansion in women entrepreneurial ventures.

An unmarried young entrepreneur of 22 years who recently changed her field of work described her experience as tough and narrated.

“My brothers do not like Parlor work neither they like that I go out somewhere to work. When I started my work, my brothers got very angry and did not support to continue this work. So, I opened a stitching centre, but because of lack of support, I could not continue that work too”. Another unmarried young entrepreneur dealing with Hina tattoos for brides narrated that I was not allowed to learn or start working for one whole year. To stop me from working, my father stopped talking to me for the whole 06 months. My brother did not care much but would order us around. Now I am just doing basic work of Hina tattoos from home because I am not supported”.

Another beautician working in UC Skhail remembered her challenges by saying.

“Before marriage, I was prohibited from doing jobs or working outside the home. I wanted to start my own parlour for so long but was told to begin it after marriage. After marriage, my mother-in-law did not like me working, she said do household chores first. That is your prime and only responsibility. Later it was economic necessity that I had to start something of my own”.

“I cannot expand my work because I have no male [husband or son] to help me along, my husband has his own work, he supports me whenever possible, so I have one day in whole week when I drop off work to my workers” recalled another entrepreneur operating for more than 12 years in business.

Low Payment or Recognition

Cultural valuation of work is also considered prejudiced. The efforts of women in economic roles are graded as of less commercial value since many of the tasks are performed from within the domains of the household and have supported/supplementary status as compared to the tasks performed by men. The cultural valuation in a larger spectrum impacts the payment and recognition of these women as active labour force and work partners. Place of operation as well as who is providing the services and what is being provided play a significant role in deciding the criteria for payment. Women operation from home deal with limited clientage, i.e., family members, neighbours, distant relatives, and villagers. Their scope for operation of business and service provision is limited to the female population of the locality. Everyone is familiar with each other and shares a social bond. It is the demand of the social ties that women share with other women as a member of a particular society to grant favours and attend to special requests. The women entrepreneurs since are mostly dealing with their kinship groups; therefore, accept whatever payment is offered by those who wish to take their services. Women entrepreneurs complained that our women folks do not count the effort that we put in finishing a certain product but will insist on paying less than expected by constantly reminding one of the social ties and relationship”. A young widow designer narrated that my clients know I am needy still they insist me to lessen the payment. Moreover, they will seek errors in my work and remind me that I should charge less because I am sitting in a remote setting and my skill level is also not at par with a male tailor”.

Another entrepreneur whose brother is in the same business recalled that my brother has never faced the problem of payment as the service rate is fixed in the market however our clients come to us with an already in the placed expectation that we would charge two to three times less than the price. This demotivates us to spread out our work as women clients are all the same everywhere”.

The women entrepreneurs who are working at the small level are given little prestige, questioned in terms of the quality of service they provide and constantly are insisted to lower down their payment in exchange of the service provided. It was found that in rural settings, the skill set of beautician holds little social prestige and holds little or no utility value as compared to tailoring or other utility product preparation.

“In cities, parandas are expensive. I got my first order because we had a social bond, it became inexpensive and affordable, but the effort I put was no less than the effort placed in the market product”. Women do not recognize that effort. They are willing to pay a high price in the market but not to working women. So, income is meagre as compared to the effort placed” narrated one respondent.

Restricted Mobility and Institution of Purdah

Patronage of male family members has a strong co-relation with the cultural ideal of *Purdah*. Institution of Purdah as a broader concept impacts women mobility in stranger and unfamiliar zones. Women may roam around freely in those domains that are familiar to them but avoid and hesitate to enter domains such as markets and far-flung fields or streets, transport that are unfamiliar or new to them. The same principle is applied in social interaction and networking. Women avoid going to market and establish linkages with people who are unfamiliar to them or may seem a threat to their safety, but they are content with establishing clientage within their social circle, may go to those relatives' home within the same village where everyone is either related or knows each other. Female-specific - vocational schools or collage are soon understood as familiar or known spaces; therefore, women master their fears of unknown and access these spaces without any worry. By the same principle of Purdah, women may only interact with men who are related to them by marriage and blood.

“My husband brings the raw material or helps to repair the machine, but he is posted in Karachi, so I have to request someone else to get my work done. Needles and threads are easily available, but at times it gets troublesome, I live alone with my kids, at times there is no one around to help bring grocery or things of need. My kids are young; I cannot leave my home unattended”, responded one entrepreneur.

Women entrepreneurs engaged in palm date products (*chabbri* makers) recounted;

“We purchase palm leaves [bonthra] once from the market as per requirement. Who so ever is going to market will bring for others? Inside the village, we know everyone; therefore, mobility within is not much of an issue. We all are related. If someone’s raw material gets finished, we ask for it. If we go ourselves to cut it, we take someone along or go in groups of two to three and go to the distant fields to cut [bonthra], then we soak it in water then colour it then slightly wet palm leaves are used to prepare baskets and other things. We are not allowed to go to stranger’s land or too far-off fields, men accompany us when we go to markets, in my case, it’s my mother who is accompanied by my brother to bring dry palm leaves from the market. It’s available at Basti Chowk market”.

The cultural segregation converts into multiple other challenges for women where at times, the financial transactions with male buyers are either handled by man or in the presence of men. Similarly, women do not cross these boundaries because culture rationalizes that the rule is made for the benefit and security of women. Many women lose the confidence to make their own decisions and shy away from taking risks. Purdah is since linked with honour and prestige of men; therefore, elder women and men keep a vigilant eye on all the activities of the women and supervise them to abide by the boundaries provided by the culture. The prescribed boundaries not only make women invisible from the larger cultural spectrum but also take away many work options/choices from them. Women are left with limited choices and are forced to choose from the given and socially approved choices. Institution of Purdah also restricts women entrepreneurs’ clientage and market opportunity.

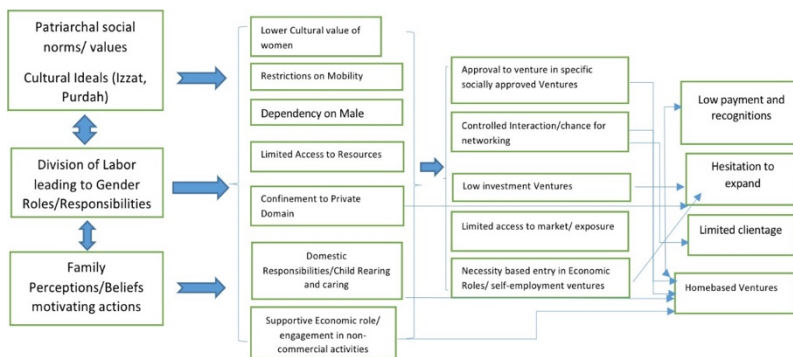


Figure 1: Social Challenges for Women Entrepreneurs (Source: Fieldwork, 2020)

Summary and Conclusion

This multi-sited ethnographic research signifies that social perceptions regarding appropriate

behaviours and cultural ideals such as Purdah come out as the most challenging constraints for women entrepreneurs of tehsil Ahmedpur East as these social perceptions shape and construct not only women's identity but also determine their social interactions, division of labour and actions in day-to-day life. Social bias and limitations towards certain professionals, male relative dependency along with matters of restricted mobility further inhibits their participation and engagement as entrepreneurs.

Social perceptions may curtail down all unusual behaviours as abnormal or rebellious and reinstate culturally approved social values and norms to maintain social harmony among social structures and institutions. The gender-specific social prejudices not only lay down limitations in choices regarding work but also define social roles and behaviours of men and women in a social setup. Women are assigned as caretakers and guardians of household and family, whereas men are assigned with the role of protector and provider. Women, therefore, tend to reciprocate and fulfil family utility and substance needs of the family. They choose work options that require them to supervise home and family simultaneously. Women see family responsibility and dependency on male family members as other prime reason that inhibits their growth and grooming as women entrepreneurs.

It is also documented that the struggles of women entrepreneurs differ with reference to their social backgrounds and status in society. Age and civil status are two defining factors for women entrepreneurs that may encourage or discourage their journey as entrepreneurs. The household burden and family responsibility increase two-fold for married women, whereas mobility is more controlled and restricted for young and unmarried girls. Social prejudice towards working women leads to problems such as restricted mobility, low payment as a workforce, limited opportunity, and clientage as well as work-life balance. The above-mentioned reasons give women more reason to invest limited energies in their personal entrepreneurial ventures and confine them within households. It was found that opting entrepreneurial activities are not a choice for them but a condition to meet ends and support their partners in managing household expenditures by earning some extra cash.

Patriarchal culture through patterned activities excludes women from very crucial economic activities and confines women to production and productive activities within the private domain. Hence women have limited opportunities to earn cash. Moreover, women are socially conditioned to adjust and accept their traditionally assigned roles. It is because of the above-mentioned socio-cultural constraints that women see entrepreneurial work as an additional burden and added responsibility and hesitate to take financial risks to expand their already existing micro-sized ventures.

The research proposes that a representative sample of women entrepreneurs working at household level must be involved before designing short- and long-term entrepreneurial projects. This will not only help in gauging the seriousness of the variety of social problems faced by women entrepreneurs of south Punjab but of Pakistan. The inclusion will enable these women to develop and identify the community as well as cultural relative and supportive coping mechanisms to overcome the existing social and economic challenges. Women entrepreneurs in groups are found to be in much stronger positions to manage security, work-based mobility and access to market problems. Therefore, such communities where women are operating as one business group for the provision of a specific cultural service should also be considered as successful case-studies. However, it is also imperative to understand that social matrix and context shapes and conditions the occupational choices and intentions to grow as entrepreneurs. Without addressing the social biases and prejudices prevalent among society at large, the women entrepreneurs cannot be freed from the culturally defined shackles, which hamper their growth as entrepreneurs to much extend.

The research directs attention towards the invisible women entrepreneurs who as support units are contributing to the survival and wellbeing of their families. The future researches need to explore the coping strategies of women entrepreneurs to address and fight the prevalent social and cultural challenges especially in countries with weak economies as women with different social and economic contexts respond differently to the challenges faced. The research due to time limitations contains itself to the gender-based challenges that stagnate women growth and their aspirations towards expansion as entrepreneurs. However, to understand their lived experiences, there is much scope to study the struggles behind their failures, success and survival.

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