Decolonizing business studies: local meaning of women empowerment through entrepreneurship and innovation, the case of Pakistan

1. Who we are, and where does our thinking converge/diverge?

We are a group of academics based in Pakistani (Dr Salma) and Western academic institutions.[1] All of us are interested in various dimensions of gender, entrepreneurship, and business research in the empirical context of Pakistan. We got together under the banner of INFACT – introducing futures of academic collaboration

Faiza: Since I currently work on the project, Professionalization of Muslim women in Asia, it is evident that the data and insights of this workshop are also helpful to understand the situation in other regions of South- and Southeast Asia.[2] Building on a vast body of mostly theoretical texts from de: postcolonial and feminist scholarship, "InFACt" strives for reconstructing and rewriting how we (re-)produce knowledge in terms of research methodologies and research ethics. As a part of this initiative, 1. We seek to map the challenges faced within academia when conducting participatory research and producing transformative knowledge? 2. how can we challenge hegemonic paradigms in academic knowledge production and translate epistemic decolonization effectively into our research practice? Therefore, while working towards solutions, we seek to collect best practices for structuring collaborative research processes. It allows both for a reflection on our positionalities in the Global North and the Global South as well as for spaces of translation between the differently produced, contextualized experiences and knowledge.

Dr Salman: my research is truly interdisciplinary with a focus on informal economy, local governance, power relations, women markets and entrepreneurial activities, violence, and affect. I am interested in spaces of women's economic participation, the linkages of the household economy with marketplaces, and the socioeconomic and geographic specificities of these linkages and their implications for development processes. In the context of Pakistan (and South Asia more broadly), which is regarded as Islamic patriarchy, where women exercise agency in specific cultural registers, the power/empowerment debate requires epistemic delinking from the dominant and sometimes irrelevant conceptions of power and empowerment. To this end, I feel the need to revisit knowledge production practices in business studies and entrepreneurship research, value indigeneity as a major element to top-down academic discourses and development frameworks, and understand power and empowerment through local voices.

2. Decolonizing business studies: an introduction to the workshop

Salman: We had aimed to bring together academics, development practitioners and entrepreneurs to generate a dialogue on the specifics of entrepreneurial development in

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Pakistan. We designed our workshop as a mix of asynchronous, pre-workshop questions, and synchronous: online workshop with breakout rooms designed for academics, development practitioners and entrepreneurs respectively. Asynchronous, pre-workshop activities aimed to understand the participants and develop a level of understanding of who they are and how they think.

In bringing academics, development practitioners and entrepreneurs, we aimed to highlight the existing limitations of business studies and development frameworks that are trying to explore and develop entrepreneurial activities in Pakistan. We wanted the workshop space to be of women and for women so that the dynamics of women's entrepreneurial activities and related sensitivities are discussed openly and thoroughly. We intended to deconstruct the ethical and mythical dimensions of empowerment through entrepreneurship. Such a task was central to understanding the dynamics of entrepreneurship, specifically in the context where women's entrepreneurial activities are primarily restricted to the domestic space of the home (Khan, 2020). Instead of apriori application of any theoretical lens or development framework, we sort to unpack how local women perceive and theorize their entrepreneurial actions, their visions of empowerment, and the gendered entrepreneurial spaces they navigate and may (or perhaps not) seek to transform.

 Our understanding of power or empowerment through entrepreneurship is based on critical perspectives on empowerment through development (Cornwall, 2016) and entrepreneurship (Shulkemy, 2010). One of us (MSK) views power as 'power within' that is broader than the narrow conceptions of power as 'power over' and 'power to' (Khan and Syrett, forthcoming). Within this conception of power, actors understand their positions vis-à-vis other actors, and this understanding is simultaneously dynamic, interdependent, and contiguous. This contextual understanding of 'power' and 'empowerment is fundamental to decode geographic particularities of entrepreneurship for empowerment.

Like most social science concepts, entrepreneurship is a contested term that is variously defined and deployed. However, we operationalized entrepreneurship to mean the act of establishing, running and growing a business (Williams and Krasniqi, 2018). This broad definition of entrepreneurship was adopted to encompass women's economic activities both in the online and offline spaces. Such a broad focus was influential in the context of a post-covid entrepreneurial landscape were turning to online ways of doing business, particularly disadvantaged women-owned micro-enterprises.

 Against this backdrop, our workshop was designed to overcome the limitations of online participation within an environment where technology is socially constructed, and women's access to it is often unstable (Khan, 2022 in press). Nevertheless, as a first step, we designed a few pre-workshop questions and gave the participants the options to respond to those questions either through the voice-note functions in the WhatsApp chat or text-only response via email, phone, or WhatsApp messaging. Our initial list of participants had 23 invitees, out of which 14 responded to our pre-workshop questions. With a similar theoretical undertone (decolonizing) but sensitive to the contextual differences between academics, development practitioners and entrepreneurs, we designed three lists of questions for each of these categories. Each group was sent its respective list of questions and were given two weeks to respond to our pre-workshop questions (see appendix 1 for the lists of pre-workshop questions). These questions were designed to understand the influence of perspectives, worldviews and frameworks on the thinking of our workshop participants. These responses led to the workshop, which was designed to have three major activities divided into three

respective sessions. Both asynchronous questions and online workshop activities were designed to seek answers to our major thematic questions below. In some, we wanted to provide an arena where the hitherto marginalized voices of practitioners and those outside the orthodoxy could assemble and, it was hoped, in (metaphorically) speaking together, increase their chances of being heard (Cooke and Kothari, 2003).

Why we need this approach:

Faiza: As explained already by Salman regarding the concept of power, it is not one-way traffic. It is embedded within complex social networks. Decolonizing business studies or knowledge is a much-discussed idea and an urgent question for academics. The pattern of the literature taught in Anglophone academic environments is usually created in the global north and applied in the global South. The data from the South is analyzed through the lenses developed according to the conditions in Global North. Due to the faulty pattern of knowledge production, we have a lop-sided view and results. Since most of the existing published knowledge follows this pattern and continues in this tradition, it is a challenge to break through old habits. The vicious cycle is also not easy to break. Salman and Ahmed´s approach is helpful as their workshop focused included practitioners in the development sector, entrepreneurs and academics. The participants brought experience from the field. Their knowledge about these issues came from first-hand experience, for which the solutions were not available in any handbook. Everyone used their intuition to solve those issues.

Salma : **Five thematic questions for the workshop**

- ➢ Is entrepreneurship through women-owned, home-based micro-enterprises in Pakistan helpful for empowerment or is it only for survival and sustenance?

- ➢ What assumptions of the local academics and development practitioners on the ground guide women's entrepreneurship studies and entrepreneurial development programs in Pakistan?

- ➢ How is empowerment through entrepreneurship in Pakistan viewed by local academics and practitioners who are working on the ground with these marginalized women entrepreneurs in Pakistan?

- ➢ There is a growing focus on innovation through facilitating access to the online marketplace. However, some micro-enterprises can benefit from this focus, while for others, it may be rather disempowering and may further marginalize them. How do we draw attention to this trade-off between empowerment and marginalization posed simultaneously by entrepreneurship, innovation and access of entrepreneurs to the online marketplace?

- ➢ What are the challenges of turning these ideas into practice?

Salman:

3. Our three activities and their consequent emerging themes

This workshop was divided into three interactive sessions where the participants were expected to reflect upon the problems presented to them in a form of practical scenarios (one for each activity). The scenarios were not hypothetical. They were built around real-life empirical examples selected either from the organizer's past research on women

entrepreneurship or shared by the participants in the asynchronous preparation stage of the workshop. Each scenario was linked to the questions asked above. Roughly one hour was allocated to each interactive activity. For each activity, the participants were given a scenario, and questions for reflections around that scenario both in English and Urdu. The workshop was conducted in Urdu for more natural dialogue and clarity of expression from the participants in the language in which they feel comfortable. The details of each case example for activities during the workshop and the questions following each activity are as follow.

Activity1 (one-hour)

In this session, we presented a typical (of Pakistan context) example of a home-based women entrepreneur and asked the participants to reflect upon the questions posed at the end of the scenario. The participants were informed that while reflecting upon questions, they were required to demonstrate their answers with real-life examples from their encounters with women entrepreneurs either during their academic projects or development activities.

Self-employed Shahida's Story

Shahida got married at the age of 14 to a man twice her age, who was unemployed at the time of marriage and just had a family house in the village. Shahida's parents supported them by buying a cow for her to sell milk and arranged a security guard's job for her husband. The couple had both sons and daughters, but all sons were genetically differently-abled while daughters were normal. Shahida earned money by selling milk, but her husband had control over the money. Meanwhile, he also became a drug addict and used to take all the money Shahida had. Whenever she resisted, she had to face violence and abuse and ultimately had to give him money. Her girls grew up. They were good at studies and helped their mother in taking care of their brothers, cows, selling milk and working as domestic helpers in their neighbourhood. Shahida's husband married his daughter to another unemployed man, and now Shahida has to support her married daughter as well. Due to all these issues, Shahida faced mental health issues and is continuously on medication. When she was questioned about what empowerment means to her and does she feel empowered by managing her home-based enterprise? She stated, 'when there is no respect for a wife, what would she do with empowerment?'

Question for discussion:

1. In what ways Shahida's entrepreneurial activity is empowering for her?

   (Shahida ka Karobar karna kin tareeqon se us ko ba ikhtiar bana raha hai?)

2. In what ways Shahida's entrepreneurial activities are disempowering for her?

   (Shahida ka kaam karna, kis tharah us ko kamzor; be taqat; ya be ikhtiyar kar raha hai?)

3. How can thousands of Pakistani women like Shahida be empowered through entrepreneurial activities?(Shahida jaisi hazaron Pakistani aoraton ko ma'ashi sargarmion k zariay kistarhan baIkhtiar kia jasakta hai?)

Salma: Activity 1 Lessons Learnt

Women entrepreneurs should use their capabilities

Women entrepreneurs' should have self-esteem that they are worth something and being married doesn't mean that they should compromise on their intangible assets such as confidence and financial decision-making that leads to their economic empowerment. They should build their capabilities to rely more on themselves rather than their family members.

Awareness regarding rights should specifically be given to men

In Pakistan, the majority of people are unaware of their rights. Currently, development organizations are focusing upon only one group (women) for gender awareness. There's a need for gender awareness and training both for entrepreneurs and their family members (both men and women) to facilitate women's empowerment and enterprise culture. Rather than outside institutions, we should use our internal institutions (mosques, schools and colleges) and clerics to teach gender rights given in Quran and Hadeeth to every man and woman in their language for better understanding and implementation. In this way, we will be able to make men aware of women's rights and gender needs. However, one of the participants discussed that even these clerics have their interests to work for something or not and sometimes it is hard to achieve the development agenda through them.

Financial management techniques and financial literacy are important skills

Business brings empowerment, learning new skills and awareness. Businesswomen have access to opportunities, financial decision-making and financial independence. However, they should be aware of financial management techniques and financial literacy such as saving money for the future especially for the lower middle class and middle-class women to not show all earnings to the family members. Households have both cooperative and non-cooperative models and in non-cooperative models, women need to keep their business income and saving safe, not showing all money they own. Also, in such a way that it should not seem challenging to the men in the family.

Empowerment has differential meanings

In the community, at the grass-root level, the definition of empowerment differs among women. Marginalized women's empowerment is associated with fulfilling their tangible needs, especially that facilitate their practical gender needs, not on gender and power relations per se. Some communities do not welcome NGO workers. If these NGOs focus on women's rights and empowerment, their emphasis is more on infrastructure activities rather than rights and improvement in power relations.

Context-specific empowering activities are acceptable

Context-specific women's empowerment is acceptable in communities of KP. If women follow sharia instructions and societal norms, do not challenge men, do not show overconfidence, show their progress with a positive attitude, gain trust from the community, then their enterprises are acceptable. Women should work in the brackets of religions and social norms. If women's attitude and behaviour is not according to the context and break the brackets, then they face challenges that may result in their disempowerment.

Salman: Gender awareness is required for both men and women, but men should be incorporated as an integral part of the awareness-razing and empowerment through

entrepreneurship programs. People's attitude is also one of the important factors that hinder top-down development interventions.

Faiza: A similar example from Bangladesh is elaborated in the work of Julia Huang, who highlighted that "the architects behind the micro-credit schemes imagined a positive cycle of disruption, in which the new, the market, and the modern release people from the fetters of inefficient customary social practices and relations. Yet they fail to consider the more pernicious effects of dislocating people from existing webs of dependencies without providing alternative, inclusive support structures on which people can rely." (Huang 2020) The Indonesian and Pakistani women I interviewed frequently referred to religion as their anchor for their entrepreneurial activities. (Derichs et al. forthcoming) My research in female madrasas about the religious texts concluded that since many religious texts are patriarchal and misogynist, we cannot look up to religion for women empowerment. However, in practice, most professional women I interviewed, irrespective of their dress choices, unanimously attributed their success to Allah´s blessings and found Khadija, the Prophet Muhammad´s wife, a model for them as entrepreneurs. They engaged with the texts and oral cultural scripts selectively and highlighted those that had their potential. Instead of rejecting the local culture and religious teachings, they reinterpreted the texts and negotiated the cultural script. Most of them expressed their reservations about the term feminism, but their efforts for supporting fellow women are incredible.

Salman:

Activity 2 (case: Rahila, a successful entrepreneur?)

Raheela belonged to a lower-middle-class family residing in a rural area, but she was an educated girl who participated in enterprise development training. She learnt a lot from the training and applied the learning to expand and grow her embroidery business (embroidery by local women and sold to different markets). She employed other rural women into her business, explored the markets and developed linkages. Initially, she faced some restrictions on her mobility, but later she had no such issue, and when other entrepreneurs refused because of an overnight stay in other areas, she was the one who participated in exhibitions in other cities frequently. During these activities, she got involved with another male activist. She then called off her engagement and chose to marry that man, who later refused to marry her. However, her family put restrictions, and all her linkages and networking was forcefully stopped, so was her business. There were also rumours that her family had disowned her. Just because of her decisions, the villagers threatened and did not allow any development activities in their area, especially for girls and women. Based on the underlying themes of this case example, we asked our participants to reflect upon the following questions.

In your experience, is there any gap between theories, implementation plans and real-life situations of women entrepreneurs? *(Ap ke khiyal main jo theories, plans hum ne parhi hoti hain un ka haqiqi (rozmarra) zindagi main bhi asar hota hai kamanay wali aurton ki zindagi par ? ya ap k khial may in dono may koi farq hai?)*

2. What did you do to reduce the gap? *(kiya ap ne ye farq duur karne ki koshish ki? Upnay tajrabay say misalayn daykar upnay jawab ki wazahat kijiay).*

If you have never felt any such gap, what do you think could be the possible reasons for this? Are women´s entrepreneurial activities not presenting them with any interesting facts, or do

they think that the existing theories and development programs are sufficient to understand and contribute to the entrepreneurial problems in Pakistan? *(agar ap ko koi farq laga hi nahi to us ki kya waja ho sakti hai? Kiya ap tamam theories ya taraqiyati kamon ki karkardgi se mutmain hain ke wo entrepreneurship ke issues ko sahee tareeqay se hal kar rahi hain? Ya koi aur waja hai?*

Activity 2

Salma: Lessons Learnt

RAHEELA'S STORY

Need for gender sensitivity: maintaining separation between business and personal affairs

We need to regulate gender sensitivity along with gender awareness. Our main focus should be on the results of development. In this regard, business and personal activities should be kept and dealt with separately. Women's family and personal issues should not influence women's businesses negatively. A woman may face multiple issues even if she is not an entrepreneur, so these should not be linked with an enterprise.

Women's should use those strategies that increase their acceptability as successful entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs usually face many difficulties such as permission from the family, access to resources, mobility and community opposition at the start of their enterprises, but they should not leave their work. With patience, learned skills, ignoring criticism, focusing on their business, and by achieving their profits, women can lower the opposition and make themselves and their work accepted by the community. If women stand against the community, they may make more opponents, so they should respond to their opponents with their success and profitability. This will enable them to become an example for others.

Personal and mental grooming is important to learn

In the initial phase of business and on some occasions, gender segregation is needed to focus more where needed. However, it should not always be an expectation, especially from professional women entrepreneurs, as women need to learn how to deal with different genders, vendors, international market suppliers, so personality and mental grooming are important to learn.

Salman:

Activity 3 (case: Sania's participation in Online Market)

Sania is an educated woman, a university graduate who has recently switched from traditional face-to-face business to the online market. Sania lives in a small town which is different in terms of women's mobility to market. Sania has to rely upon her male relatives to transport her goods from the suppliers, and she also has to rely on her male relatives for posting the goods to the customers who order online. If Sania's business continues or even flourishes, Sania's dependence in terms of both backward and forward linkages will be a major impediment to her empowerment. Furthermore, if Sania relies on a third-party platform with

more established backward and forward linkages, she will become a commission or piece-rate worker.

1. What types of women entrepreneurial ventures in the online market of Pakistan have you seen? *(kitni qismon ke khwateen ke enterprise/ya kaam ap ne pakistan ki online market main dekhai hain, ya ap ko pata hai?)*

2. How a Pakistani woman entrepreneur living in the big cities and small towns (like Sania) are different from each other ? *(kis tarah baray aur chotay shehron main rehne wali pakistani entrepreneurs aik dusray se mukhtalif hain online market main?*

3. What needs to be done to make online markets more accessible, beneficial and empowering for entrepreneurs like Sania ? *(online market ko kis tarah karobari khwateen (jesay sania) ke liye ziada asan, kamyab aur ba ikhtiyar banaya ja sakta hai?)*

Salma : Activity 3 Lessons Learnt

Sania's Story

1. Urban women have more access to resources, facilities and opportunities as compared to rural women. Urban women have better opportunities for online businesses. However, the marketing of products is a real issue for rural women. The use of middlemen in the marketing of the product brings both exploitation and facilitation for many rural women (Exploitation as nominal prices are given to women. Facilitation as women do not have access to large markets). In rural areas, women are not allowed to use the internet even if the facility is available as they do not have the knowledge to use computers, mobiles, and internet connections. Even some women do not have their ID cards. They rely on their male counterparts. Besides dealing with orders, several other activities such as packaging, package delivery, and accessing courier or postal service is also problematic for women in many areas, particularly small towns and villages.

2. Women can excel with men's support. There needs to be a family-friendly approach where women and men work together and activities are divided so that it should benefit both. Exploitation could be there and can be minimized once men realize the role of women's income for their families.

3. The mindset of people in KP is the major hurdle in women's entrepreneurial activities. Even when women are given access to resources, skills and opportunities, men do not allow their women to avail themselves of that chance and threaten women to face the consequences if they go against men's instructions. The mindset of men can change when they see some benefit for themselves.

4. There is a need to make such a policy that could facilitate a conducive environment for women businesses to flourish. In this regard, the development approach should be holistic. It should focus on all associated stakeholders and actors.

5. For online digital marketing, women entrepreneurs need to build their forward and backward linkages. There needs to be timely decision-making for products to make them available to the customer. Digital awareness is one of the empowering steps, and women need to learn how to do social media marketing.

6. There is a need to develop a 'Digital Business Directory'. That directory contains data regarding women's businesses, contact information, nearest vendors, business categorization, companies, banks processes and partnership opportunities both nationally and internationally.

Faiza: In Pakistan, we have seen increased media attention to the women´s march (Aurat March) on women´s day for the last few years.[3] The demonstrations had many provocative placards. Many women entrepreneurs shared that they found it helpful to negotiate and build on existing structures. One example was Amna, who runs a girls´ school in a small village. She was one of the first girls who graduated from high school in her village. After her schooling, she attended a year-long training about gender and empowerment at the provincial capital. Following this, she worked in different NGOs. Since most of the development projects where she worked were funding-based and were often disrupted, she wanted to start her own school for girls as a sustainable solution. If the family did not support girls´ education, she worked on building trust, first by approaching the males in the house and talking to them, following the cultural norms. Moreover, she wore and still wears the traditional clothes of her region to invoke the image of a shared value system. Her audience felt comfortable due to these gestures and agreed to send their girl child to school. Amna shared during her interview that the provocative approach of *Aurat* March may sometimes create unnecessary hurdles in the context of her village. (Faiza Muhammad-din 5/27/2021) For her, it is helpful to build upon existing systems and take smaller steps towards sustainable solutions.

Salma: Key lessons emerging from the workshop discussion

- There is a gap between the existing theoretical understanding of the development frameworks and the local specificities of entrepreneurship in Pakistan. Rather than prescriptive solutions, more locally informed perspectives for empowering women are important.

- All entrepreneurs perceive empowerment differently and for their economic empowerment is the most important segment compared to other types of empowerment in the development sector.

- Rather than implementing different development programmes, we strongly need to facilitate, support and develop a conducive environment for awareness on entrepreneurship and accept women's entrepreneurial activities. It is also important as our new generation expect their wives to share the economic responsibilities with them.

- We need to explore further the extent to which this mindset has changed and what needs to be changed in the future.

- Financial literacy is a missing element that needs to be addressed as many women.

- Gender roles or division of roles should also need to be changed more in favour of women entrepreneurs to reduce the double burden.

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[3] https://twitter.com/AuratMarch; https://www.facebook.com/AuratMarchKarachi/; See also: https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/22/pakistans-feminists-say-will-persevere-amid-increased-threatsb

- The word 'Empowerment' feels challenging, indigestible and unacceptable to men in the context of KP. So initially, if the focus is on entrepreneurship, then the empowerment part should not be introduced at the start. The organizations need to build women's entrepreneurial skills, capacities, create awareness first as empowerment-related activities may create a hurdle for women to avail themselves opportunities.

Way forward:

We identified many areas that require future interventions to understand empowerment through entrepreneurship and facilitate empowerment through entrepreneurship meaningfully. Three of these areas are especially significant in that the first two are missing in the existing academic discourses and development frameworks, whereas the third requires more attention to reframe and resituate the empowerment through entrepreneurship discourse.

1. Need to bridge the disconnect between academia and the development sector. More emphasis on financial management skills for women entrepreneurs in the designs of entrepreneurship development programs and sustained research is required in this knowledge area.

2. Women empowerment through entrepreneurship should be contextually explored and framed within the 'power within' framework.

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