

# Analyzing the entrepreneurial ecosystem for women entrepreneurs: A study of rural Jamshoro, Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The outcomes of women's access to entrepreneurial resources and opportunities can be very different from those of men. This study aimed to analyze the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro, Pakistan, which includes policy, finance, institutions, human capital, culture, and markets through a gender lens, assess women entrepreneurs' access to it, and examine the effectiveness of its elements. **Methodology:** The study adopts qualitative research methodology. Data were drawn from desk research, 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion with 10 women entrepreneurs in rural Jamshoro, Pakistan. The data were analyzed using Atlas.ti software and coding was done using thematic analysis. **Findings:** The findings show that women entrepreneurs have partial access to the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro. Furthermore, there is lack of awareness and knowledge among women entrepreneurs about available financial resources, lack of knowledge about laws and policies, an absence of familial, cultural, and societal support for women in accessing the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the absence of quality business training and unavailability of physical and technological infrastructure in rural areas, presence of stereotypical attitude toward women entrepreneurs, and limited access to markets and business networks. **Implications:** The existing entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro can be improved through coordinated multi-stakeholder initiatives, adopting a gender-inclusive approach, interventions aimed at increasing awareness about the resources, promoting an understanding about the laws and regulations, making institutions more effective in providing services, establishing public-private partnerships, and providing the women entrepreneurs easy access to market and financial resources. **Originality:** While there have been studies on challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Pakistan, their motivation and aspirations, there is no study conducted on their access to the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a whole.

**Key words:** Entrepreneurial ecosystem, entrepreneurship ecosystem, entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurs Pakistan, women entrepreneurs

## INTRODUCTION

As the gender equality movement gains momentum around the globe and is leading to more rights for women, there has

also been a rise in the number of women entrepreneurs. The world is now acknowledging and accepting the positive role that women entrepreneurship plays in economic development, job creation, gender equality, poverty

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reduction, and sustenance of peace. It is seen as a possible solution to the current global economic crisis (Jarboui and Morched, 2019).

Engaging women in entrepreneurship significantly contribute in sustaining peace as they positively impact the economic growth, sustainability of the country's GDP, improvement of health status, and education. It plays an important role in economic development, job creation, gender equality, poverty reduction, and sustenance of peace (Ambepitiya, 2016). Female business owners tend to use their wealth for philanthropic purposes which lead to the uplifting of the society's well-being (U.S. Trust Insights on Wealth and Worth, 2018). Female entrepreneurs are more likely to spend their earnings for their children's health, nutrition, and education compared to male entrepreneurs (VanderBrug, 2013). In short, investing in female entrepreneurship can be an ultimate solution to almost every major problem in this world.

Despite all the advances and an increase in the number of women entrepreneurs worldwide (Women Entrepreneurship Report, 2017), women entrepreneurs continue to face significant financial, infrastructural, and cultural barriers in accessing entrepreneurial resources and opportunities. The issues facing women have also been underrepresented in the entrepreneurship literature, especially in developing countries (De Vita et al., 2014). The outcomes of women entrepreneurs' access to support and resources are different from those of men (Manolova et al., 2012).

Women entrepreneurs in Pakistan face significant challenges right from starting their business to scaling up its operations. According to the World Bank, Pakistan has the world's lowest rank in women entrepreneurship. Dell listed Pakistan as the second worst country for female entrepreneurs (Anna, 2015). Compared to 21% of male entrepreneurs, the percentage of women entrepreneurs is only 1%.

One might argue that the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are not gender specific and there should be one straight approach to improving the ecosystem irrespective of the gender difference. However, there is enough evidence in literature that shows that these challenges are gender specific and if Pakistan wants to benefit from the true potential of entrepreneurship to solve its ongoing developmental crisis, it needs to create gender specific policies and narrow the gap in access to resources. Eliminating the barriers women entrepreneurs faces at national and international levels and facilitating them to connect to global markets gives boost to inclusion and growth (Abney and Laya, 2018).

This study examines the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) in Jamshoro through a gender lens on it to assess women entrepreneurs' access to it. An EE consists of multiple interconnected elements that facilitate growth and innovation of entrepreneurship within a region (Acs et al., 2017). EEs have gained importance in recent times due to the role they play in policy-making, institutional infrastructures, and regional clusters that support entrepreneurship.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based on the existing research, it has been identified that although there are research studies conducted on women entrepreneurs' access to EE in different countries, there is no study that has been carried out in Pakistan, especially in the context of Jamshoro. Moreover, while several researchers have studied the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Pakistan, their motivations and perceptions; there is not a consolidated study based on the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a whole and how women entrepreneurs access the resources present within it.

To benefit from the true potential of entrepreneurship, it is important to analyze if our entrepreneurial ecosystem equally caters to the women entrepreneurs and establishes support mechanisms that can help them grow and expand their business ventures. The strengthening of women entrepreneurship can not only positively affect the country's economy but can also impact other socioeconomic areas including health, education, and gender equality.

## Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research study is to analyze the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro, Pakistan, through a gender lens. In this regard, the following three research objectives have been identified:

- To examine the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) and its elements for women entrepreneurs.
- To identify which elements of the EE exist and which do not exist.
- To develop recommendations for improving the effectiveness of existing elements.

## DEFINITIONS OF AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

The fundamentals behind the concept of an entrepreneurial ecosystem first emerged between the 1980s and 1990s

when the focus around entrepreneurship research shifted from an individualistic perspective to a broader lens that encompassed the role of economic, cultural, and social actors in the process of entrepreneurship (Aldrich, 1990). Although there is not a widely accepted definition of an EE, scholars, researchers, and practitioners have defined it in different ways and there are many analogies that have emerged including business ecosystem, industrial ecosystem, innovation ecosystem, and entrepreneurial ecosystem (Pilinkienė and Maciulis). The word “ecosystem” has its origins rooted in the field of biology and was later applied to other fields including social sciences, business, and economics (Willis, 1997).

Scholars refer to the entrepreneurial ecosystems as coordinated factors that bolster productive entrepreneurship. According to Kantis and Federico, an entrepreneurial ecosystem refers to elements in social, political, and legal, environments that function in tandem to foster entrepreneurship (Kantis and Federico, 2012). It is the environment that supports the growth of a business (Dodhy, 2016). An entrepreneurial ecosystem means an interconnected system consisting of different elements that foster entrepreneurship in a region; it is the surrounding environment which is beyond the control of the business itself but largely impacts success of the business. Entrepreneurial ecosystems are coordinated attempts to develop environments that are conducive to the success of new businesses (Kuratko et al., 2017).

Audretsch and Belitski defined EE as a network of organizations and institutions that identify and commercialize entrepreneurship opportunities (Audretsch and Belitski, 2017). According to Cukier et al., EEs are bounded within distances, that is, within a range of 30 miles and are developed by people, start-ups, and supporting institutions that constantly interact with each other to help existing ventures grow and support in the formation of new companies (Cukier et al., 2016). Cohen defined an EE as a group of different actors that are interconnected within a specific community which facilitates the development of new ventures (Cohen, 2006). Dubini called these ecosystems as environments where public policies provide incentives to do business which promote diffusion of entrepreneurship (Dubini, 1989).

The concept of EE gained popularity in literature after Daniel Isenberg’s publication on EE and entrepreneurial revolution (Isenberg, 2010). An entrepreneurial ecosystem creates values for individual entrepreneurs through the presence of high-impact companies and exhibits public-private governance (Acs et al., 2017). Delgado et al. studied

the impact of clusters or groups of closely related industries on entrepreneurship (Delgado et al., 2010).

## ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM AND WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

The general assumption behind the functioning of all the entrepreneurial ecosystems is that all entrepreneurs irrespective of their gender have equal access to the elements, resources, and opportunities that lie within these EEs (Brush et al., 2018). However, there is sufficient evidence that shows that it is not the case in reality, especially in developing countries like Pakistan, where women already face a number of unique challenges.

Women entrepreneurs face institutional and cultural barriers (Muntean, 2013) which might not even exist for their male counterparts. Women entrepreneurs do not have the equal access to financial resources as their male counterparts. They have limited access to bank credit due to stereotypical attitudes of bank employees toward female entrepreneurs. Conservative mindsets, suspiciousness, and pre-conceived notions of bank employees toward female entrepreneurs affect their access to institutional finance (Raghuvanshi et al., 2017). Many women entrepreneurs are not allowed to network freely, especially with men due to family restrictions, they have very limited access to resources and opportunities that lie within external networks. They heavily rely on resources within their families for resource acquisition (Lindvert et al., 2017).

The key influencers for women entrepreneurs can also be different than those of men; for example, while markets, money, and management are important for entrepreneurs; for female entrepreneurs, societal structures and family context can be more essential (Brush et al., 2009). For women entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial success lies in achieving quality of life in their communities so they tend to follow the community logic which makes the ecosystem cohesive (Roundy, 2017). Therefore, an ecosystem that is inclusive of women and is women centric is more robust because networks of women entrepreneurs are not restricted to other entrepreneurs only, rather it includes non-entrepreneurs and more women (Brush et al., 2009). A major difference between male and female entrepreneurs is that men usually aim for financial success, whereas financial gains are just one of the many influencers for women to create and grow their business (Manolova et al., 2012).

Women entrepreneurs make a positive impact on their communities and on the lives of other women yet the

structural and cultural barriers put women entrepreneurs at a disadvantage in accessing resources. Since the motivations, influencers, and challenges for women entrepreneurs can be different than those of male entrepreneurs, it is important to see the entrepreneurial ecosystem through a gender lens to bridge the gender gap in accessibility to the EE.

## MODELS OF AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

A number of models of the entrepreneurship ecosystem have been suggested; and every model focuses on a different set of elements. For example, there is the Triple Helix model of innovation that highlights the importance of the relationship and coordinated efforts between industries, government, and universities to achieve sustainable economic and social development (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1995). In Baron and Shane's view, opportunities for innovation are external and they arise from three sources; technological changes, political and regulatory change, and social and demographic change (Baron and Shane, 2008). The network of interdependent factors such as finance, supportive services, mentors, and leaderships is considered to be the heart of the EE (Stam and Spiegel, 2016). The existing literature tells us that collaboration between different institutions and actors of EE is important for successful outcomes. If strong linkages between EE actors cannot develop fully, it can result in systematic failure and can affect future innovations.

Mason and Brown stated that important aspects of an entrepreneurial ecosystem include successful entrepreneurs who reinvest their expertise, time, and money to support new entrepreneurs, knowledge that is shared and accessible, culture, finance, universities, and service providers (Mason and Brown, 2014). Accessible markets, availability of human capital, and finance are three most important pillars of an entrepreneurial ecosystem (World Economic Forum, 2013). An effective and sustainable model of EE does not emerge overnight, instead, it is the result of persistent and coordinated efforts of years (Neck et al., 2004).

The model suggested by Stam includes value creation as part of the system and focuses on casual linkages among different actors of an EE (Stam, 2015). Van de Ven's model comprises four components; institutional arrangements, financial mechanisms, market demand provided by consumers, and research and development, marketing, and manufacturing provided by private entrepreneurs (Van de Ven, 1993).

For this study, we used the entrepreneurial ecosystem model suggested by Daniel Isenberg because it is widely accepted and is comprehensive in nature. According to Isenberg, successful entrepreneurship strengthens all the domains of the existing ecosystem. He has grouped the entrepreneurial ecosystem into six domains:

- Venture-friendly policies
- Financial resources
- Institutional support
- Skilled human capital
- Culture conducive to entrepreneurship
- Supportive markets.

In each domain, individual stakeholders can be identified who have an interest in growth and progress of more companies. For example, in the finance domain, these stakeholders can include banks and financial institutions that lend money to entrepreneurs and who benefit from their growth. In the market domain, these could be heads of large corporations who are interested in partnering or acquiring successful firms. In the human capital domain, these could be universities that benefit from placing their graduates in these companies or from receiving funding for research through academia-industry partnerships.

- Statement of the problem
- Objectives of the study

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The nature of this study is qualitative. Primary data were collected using a combination of focus group and in-depth, semi-structured interviews and secondary data were used to support the literature review and to get an understanding of different elements that exist for women entrepreneurs in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro, Pakistan.

As this study was based on women entrepreneurs' access to the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro, Sindh, Jamshoro was chosen as the geographical area for research. Since there is not an established, accessible, database of the women entrepreneurs in Jamshoro; criterion, snowball technique was used for sampling. Snowball sampling technique is applied when it is difficult to reach the subjects in the population that meet the target characteristics. The current study subjects help accessing other subjects from their networks and the sampling usually continues till the researcher has achieved saturation in data (Burns and Grove, 2005). The criteria for the inclusion in the study include: The woman owns and runs the business whether in partnership or as a sole proprietorship and the business has been in operation for at least 3 years. The researcher asked

in her social circle, contacted lady health workers in remote areas, and used social media platforms to find women entrepreneurs. Many women entrepreneurs suggested names of other entrepreneurs. A sample of 30 women entrepreneurs was chosen from those who fit the criteria and approached for the study.

For the focus group participants, the researcher contacted a non-government organization (NGO) which was running a microfinance program for women entrepreneurs in rural areas. The NGO provided the list of 34 women who received microfinance loans. Twelve participants were randomly chosen from four villages in Kotri. These villages are Muhammad Ismail Shoro, Sache Dino Shoro, Nawaz Palari, Ghulam Shoro, and Ali Muhammad Bareecho.

An interview protocol was developed and used to maintain consistency in all the interviews. The interview protocol was divided into three segments. The first segment included the demographic questions; age, education, marital status, no. of children, and field of education. The second section included questions on business data; type of business, prior entrepreneurial training, industry, source of seed funding, number of employees, geographical area of operation, and expansion plans. The third segment was further divided into six sub-segments. Each sub-segment included questions about each element of the ecosystem relating to their experience of accessing them, their knowledge and awareness about them, their satisfaction level, and challenges faced during their interaction.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 women entrepreneurs to understand their interaction with the ecosystem. The interview protocol was used to conduct these interviews; however, probing strategies and additional questions were used to get the clarification when needed. All the interviews took place either at the respondent's workplace or at home. The interviewees were first briefed about the purpose, objectives, and the nature of the study to get the relevant input. The interviews were audio recorded with prior permission from the respondents. The researcher took notes while interviewing about any observations that she made. These were conducted in Sindhi, Urdu, and English depending on the respondent's preference. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Theoretical saturation is a point in the qualitative enquiry when no new data are being found and the researcher is confident that a category is saturated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Each interview lasted for 90 min on an average. All the interviewees were translated into English and written down.

The focus group participants were invited for the focus group discussion with the help of the secretary of the local organizing committee. Two women could not make it due to personal commitments. The focus group was conducted in the government school in Sache Dino Shoro. The discussion was audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The researcher took notes of what she observed to facilitate the analysis later on. Later on, the discussion was transcribed and listened to repeatedly.

The data were analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Coding was done using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on identifying themes or patterns within a data set (Guest et al., 2012). First, main themes in each narrative and similarities, differences, and repetition of words in the transcriptions were identified. Next, similar themes were grouped together. Then, themes (codes) were organized into broader categories consistent with the objectives of this study. Last, the original narratives were reread and compared to the final categories/codes with it to ensure accuracy and consistency.

## FINDINGS

### Policy

It was noticed that the cultural and societal barriers can affect the implementation of the policies. Some women entrepreneurs mentioned that even if the government initiates entrepreneurial programs or training, women in their localities will be reluctant to participate because of the opposition from their family members which shows that the policy framework can only work effectively if women receive the societal support.

On the other hand, some government initiatives are predicted to have promising outcomes. For example, in the Finance Supplementary Bill 2019, the income tax on banks' lending loans to small businesses was reduced to 20% from 35%. This will encourage banks to offer more financial products to small enterprises. However, further reduced taxes or incentives to banks for specifically lending to enterprises run by women will increase financial inclusion for women entrepreneurs. Following are the major themes that were identified under "policy:"

### Lack of Knowledge about Laws and Policies

When the respondents were asked about their knowledge of laws and policies, most of them did not know what kinds of

policies existed and how they could help them. It was noticed that women who had business education or had been part of some kind of business training were more aware about the laws and regulations of doing a business than those who had not received business education. An interviewee said:

*“There was a lawyer in a start-up that we were sharing the space with. He helped us with registering our business. He also explained the relevant laws to us which was very helpful.”*

### **Lack of Tax Incentives**

An interviewee said,

*“There is no incentive from the government. Not for women entrepreneurs. Not even for male entrepreneurs. The foreign transactions have become very difficult for us. If there is a transaction, it has to first go through a certain bank and then is deposited into our account. It has made it very difficult for us to deal with foreign clients.”*

Respondents were asked to suggest some initiatives that they would like to see in the policy landscape or programs they would like the government to initiate. Most women entrepreneurs suggested entrepreneurial training programs, especially related to technology, networking opportunities, financial programs, and provision of tax incentives.

## **FINANCE**

All the respondents used informal sources of finance. Approximately 60% used their own savings while 40% borrowed from their family members and friends. Most women entrepreneurs lacked knowledge about financial intuitions and showed reluctance in engaging in formal borrowing. Following are the main themes that were identified in the “finance” category:

### **Lack of Knowledge and Misinformation about Financial Institutions**

Respondents expressed reluctance to borrow from the financial institutions and lacked knowledge about the kinds of available financial resources, requirements, and procedures to acquire external financing. Here is an excerpt from an interview:

*“I don’t want to take a loan or get any investment. It is just all unnecessary long procedures. I don’t want to get into all this hassle.”*

### **Investment Bias toward Women**

Respondents reported that they have faced bias from the investors only because they doubted their ability to run a successful business whereas same assessment criteria are not used for male entrepreneurs. Investors tend to judge men on their potential while they judge women on their experience and successful track record. Women entrepreneurs are also restricted from accessing male-dominated networks and miss out on funding opportunities. Navigating through patriarchal structures is also very challenging for them.

The findings show that the prejudice against women entrepreneurs still exists. Investors tend to have preconceived bias toward the ability of women entrepreneurs are generally more inclined toward investing in businesses run by male entrepreneurs (Brooks et al., 2014).

## **SUPPORTS**

The respondents were asked about their accessibility to the physical infrastructure, the quality of the infrastructure in the areas where they run the business operations, the support that they have received from, and their perception about the institutions including universities, business incubators, and business accelerators. The interviewees especially those living in remote locations and the focus group discussion respondents complained about poor infrastructure and how it affects their day-to-day business operations. Under the “supports” category, following are the key themes that were identified:

### **Weak Infrastructures**

Electricity shortage, increased taxes of prepaid network services, and absence of safe and cheap public transport posed challenges for women entrepreneurs. Transport was the biggest infrastructural issue for women living in remote areas. Women said that there is no public transport even closer to their villages and they often have to take a very long walk to take a rickshaw in the cases of emergencies. Given their income, even rickshaws are not a feasible option on a regular basis.

### **Services such as Careem and Uber are Helping Women Entrepreneurs Manage their Commute**

Some women said that services such as Careem and Uber have made it easier for them to commute. They shared about the problems they used to face before these services existed, for example, they had to rely on men in their family

to go for meetings or to go to market and other means of public transportation were not a viable option for them. Since the launch of Careem and Uber, they can easily travel without relying on other people which saves their time. An interviewee said:

*“Careem has made it so easy for me to manage my commute. I don’t have to align my schedule with my father’s schedule and I can go to the market whenever it’s feasible for me.”*

### **Online Tools and Technological Infrastructure Can Facilitate Women-run Businesses**

ICT plays a very important role in the empowerment of women entrepreneurs in Pakistan. ICT facilitates women in starting new business without face-to-face interactions which works well in traditional societies where women have limited mobility and privacy issues (Sardar et al., 2019). Women explained how online business provides them safety and privacy as compared to having a physical outlet for their venture.

*“I started an online business because I don’t have permission to run the business otherwise. I can’t have a store or a shop so having it online is very convenient, effective, and safe.”*

Women in remote areas expressed that they would like to learn to use a computer and social media dynamics so they can expand their business and reach customers in different parts of the city or the country. A respondent said:

*“Right now, all my customers are either from my own village or by nearby village. I can’t reach people in other cities or villages so I have limited client-base. I have heard that with online business, you can reach a bigger audience, however, I don’t know how to do that. I think if I get training about it, I will be able to use the internet for my business.”*

### **NGOs Have the Reach in the Local Communities**

NGOs have a good reach in the remote communities through community mobilization and organizing, they are a good source of providing support to women entrepreneurs in areas which might go unnoticed otherwise. Some women entrepreneurs shared that the only support they have received is from local NGOs. This support ranges from small size microfinance loans to business training to financial literacy workshops. An interviewee shared,

*“An NGO in our area helped some women in starting their business. Most of these women were widows and had*

*nowhere to go and it was because of the NGOs support that these women can now make a living for themselves and their children. We have never seen the government doing anything for us ever. They only come when they need votes, make big promises and then never return.”*

## **HUMAN CAPITAL**

To assess the availability and accessibility to skilled human capital, participants were asked about their entrepreneurial experiences, prior training, educational experience, and how easy or difficult it is for them to find trained people to work for their business. Following are the main themes that were found from the responses of the participants:

### **Business Education and Training Help Women Entrepreneurs**

Respondents who received business education or entrepreneurial training shared that it helped them with understanding basics of starting and doing a business, however, they had to find support in understanding more advanced matters. Women entrepreneurs who had never received a training mentioned discussed how entrepreneurial training programs can help them improve their business and explore more opportunities. Participants were asked what kind of training they think would help them. Most of them mentioned training related to financing, e-commerce, business expansion, and marketing and online promotions.

### **Need for Gender-specific Entrepreneurial Trainings**

Women entrepreneurs who had undergone entrepreneurial trainings mentioned that all those training programs do not cover the distinct challenges they specifically women go through, for example, getting the familial and societal support, responding to stereotypical attitude of investors, harassment that they face on an everyday basis in markets or from other stakeholders in the supply chain, and operating in a male-dominated business environment. They expressed how they have to learn to navigate through these challenges on their own and if they get appropriate training based on the ground realities, they can be better prepared and operate their business in a much more effective manner. A respondent stated:

*“We used to have two training sessions everyday which was very helpful. They trained us on marketing, communication strategies, and finding investors. Mentors from within*

*Pakistan and abroad conducted these trainings. But these training sessions didn't talk about gender specific challenges for women."*

### **Lack of Practicality in Business Education**

The respondents emphasized on the role of universities in entrepreneurship. Those with business degrees complained about the lack of practical approach in learning. However, they did find that studying business helped them in the basics of starting business and stressed that the knowledge was not enough. Respondents with technical background said that if they had been taught about entrepreneurship during their education, they could have more sound knowledge about doing and managing a business. An interviewee stated:

*"We didn't even know how to make the business model. We knew nothing about entrepreneurship. I and my business partner are self-taught entrepreneurs."*

Highlighting the lack of support for innovation and creativity in the universities, a respondent said:

*"The problem starts at the university level. If we want to work on something innovative, the resources are not very available for us. During my studies, I was not allowed to go out. The kind of content I wanted to develop for my software, I needed to seek external help. I was not being taught new software languages in the university. And I was not allowed to go out and get help from software houses in the market."*

### **Limited Access to Skilled Human Capital**

Women entrepreneurs highlighted the importance of having access to skilled and specialized human capital. They mentioned how lack of access to business networks affects their access to skilled workers. They also expressed how the lack of business knowledge made it difficult for them to run their business initially and how they solved the problem with external support. A respondent mentioned:

### **Preference on Hiring Female Employees**

Participants described that they prefer to hire female employees because they want to extend support to other women in their communities. They also mentioned that they feel more safe and comfortable working with women as compared to men. A respondent said:

*"Many women in my neighborhood are poor and have limited means of survival so I try to help as much as I can. All my workers are widows because this is one way, I can support them. It also makes them feel good because they have pride that they are doing the hard-work and earning money for their kids. They have a sense of purpose now."*

## **CULTURE**

The cultural aspect came up in almost every segment. Women expressed how societal norms, skewed religious beliefs, and male dominance affect every part of their business. The findings show that the restrictive cultural and the societal norms inhibit the growth of women entrepreneurs. Women also expressed how balancing between their responsibilities at home and at business is very challenging for them. Following are the key themes in the element of "culture:"

### **Familial Support Effect the Business-related Decisions**

Women entrepreneurs described how their family's support plays a big role in their decisions related to their business. Many women entrepreneurs expressed that they did not get enough support from their family members because their families did not see entrepreneurship as a possible career choice. Some respondents also mentioned that many of their decisions about their business depend on the kind of support they receive from their family members. According to Cesaroni and Paoloni, families play an important role in shaping one's career decision. Hence, the degree of the family support that women entrepreneurs get impacts the key decisions in starting and expanding their business (Cesaroni and Paoloni, 2016).

We observed that especially young women entrepreneurs who started their business because of their interest faced challenges in convincing their families in the initial stages. Furthermore, their families thought that doing a business should be a part-time commitment so they did not fully encourage them to choose entrepreneurship as a full-time career. Talking about her decision of expanding her business operations, a respondent stated:

*"My family still thinks I am doing my business as a hobby and that I will end it as soon as I get bored of it. They don't understand that I really like doing business and I want to continue doing it for the rest of my life. They keep telling me to apply for jobs as do a part-time business. I want to*



*expand my business to other cities but I don't have enough support from my family, especially from my father so I have to wait for one more year until I can do it on my own."*

For women entrepreneurs who received their families' support expressed how it helped them in their business. A respondent stated,

*"In the beginning, my father didn't agree with my decision of starting a business but after sometime when he saw that I was genuinely invested in my business, he started supporting me. He even found contacts in his own circle to help me grow my business. I don't think I could have come this far without his support."*

### **Patriarchy and Male Dominance**

Women explained how dependence on male members of their family and lack of freedom to make independent decisions limit their capacity to grow and expand their business, as evidenced by the quote below:

*"My husband didn't allow me to do business because he thought I would not listen to him any more if I started earning. He still doesn't let me use my money in the home because it hurts his ego."*

Another respondent stated:

*"My husband used to say that a woman's earnings are not auspicious. He believed that the religion prohibits women to go out and earn so he never let me do business. When he died, I didn't have any means of survival. And this is how I started my business to feed my children."*

### **Stereotypical Attitudes toward Women Entrepreneurs**

The respondents mentioned about the problems they face while dealing with male investors. Most of the investors are men and they prefer to invest in businesses led by men because they doubt women's potential and ability to run huge businesses.

The sociocultural environment, especially in male-dominated societies, poses serious challenges for women entrepreneurs (Nasir et al., 2019) as described by a respondent below:

*"The first question I am asked in any investors meeting is 'What are your marriage plans' and if you get married,*

*what will happen to our investment. Because they assume that we will end our business after marriage."*

Blaming the stereotypes that male investors have toward female entrepreneurs, a respondent stated:

*"Blame goes to the stereotypical mind-set of male investors. They don't think we are reliable enough. They don't think we have the potential to make it big."*

### **Harassment and Inappropriate behavior adds to the Stress of Women Entrepreneurs**

About 60% of women entrepreneurs said that they have encountered inappropriate behavior or harassment while managing their business operations. Such incidents add to the challenges that women entrepreneurs face and affect their stress level, mental health, and self-confidence. Talking about one such incident, a respondent said:

*"People misjudge you. I have been misjudged so many times. I had meetings with investors but instead of asking me about my business, they asked me personal questions. They were not interested in my business; they were just interested in talking to me. It is very disappointing. You are not only investing your time but your efforts too. You make presentations and are very passionate about your business but in the end, you find out they don't even care about your business. Women have to be very careful about these things. They have to make sure that the people they are reaching are reliable. This is an added stress."*

Some women entrepreneurs also discussed how being inappropriately touched in the market places affects their ability to function for the rest of the day. Respondents who were running online businesses shared about the unsolicited advice they receive on their business page about how they should behave or not post their pictures or cover their heads. They also mentioned the non-serious messages that they receive from men who are not interested in buying the products but just in talking with them. An interviewee stated:

*"8 out of 10 times when I go to the market to do the purchases, I am inappropriately touched by the passers. It makes me so uncomfortable but you can't do anything about these things. The market I go to is very crowded but that's the only place where I can get cheap raw-material. If I buy it from the fancy shops, maybe I will not be harassed as often but I will not make any profits as the material is expensive. I think only women face these issues; I don't think male entrepreneurs have to go through it every day."*

## MARKETS

Participants emphasized the importance of and need for support from business networks and better access to markets. They also expressed how crucial online networks could be especially for online businesses. Following are the major findings in the “markets” category:

### Online Networks are Vital

They also explained how being connected to other women entrepreneurs through Facebook groups is an excellent form of emotional support for them through highs and lows of their business. Women entrepreneurs are inclined toward supporting other female entrepreneurs through shared resources. Platforms such as Fempro, She Means Business, and Connected Women – Pakistan are some popular online networking platforms that are helping women access shared resources.

### Limited Access to Networks and Markets

Restrictions on mobility leave women entrepreneurs with limited access to markets, business networks, and suppliers. The findings show that the women have to seek permission from male members of their family (husband, father, or brother) every time they go out and often rely on them to take them for meetings with vendors and suppliers. This dependence creates several issues and delays. They do not have access to business networks so they do not know what is going on in their industry. Women cannot freely talk to suppliers and vendors because all of them are men. An interviewee stated:

*“I did not know a lot of people and didn't have a strong network. In Pakistan if you belong to a traditional family, you are required to restrict your network. I was not allowed to go out a lot or share my number with men which means I couldn't directly communicate with suppliers or shop keepers for raw material. I use my husband's phone to call a supplier because my husband doesn't let me use my number for it. I have to wait till my husband gets home to communicate.”*

### Absence of one Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Can Result in Ineffectiveness of the other

The focus group participants said that they were given training on skill development which included stitching and embroidery. However, they cannot make a living from

those skills because they do not have access to markets. They cannot reach the customer because they are not allowed to go out and they do not have access to technology to do the online business. Hence, even though they received the institutional support from an NGO and the trained human capital was present, it did not lead to the desired results because two other elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, that is, accessible markets and the infrastructure were absent.

### Diversity in Training within the Same Area Can Prevent Market Saturation

Since all the women were given the same kind of training (stitching/tailoring training), all the women started stitching their own clothes and hence no one within that village paid for tailored clothes. As a result, the market became saturated because most women entrepreneurs were running the same kind of business and selling the same product, whereas the demand became almost zero. Instead if the NGO had taken in account women entrepreneurs' access to other elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem before delivering the training and diversified it, it could have prevented the market saturation.

### Lack of Knowledge about the Markets

While some women said that they learn the market dynamics through the internet and have a Facebook page to interact with their customers and market their product, the rest did not know how to use the internet to search about market trends. They lacked knowledge about the markets, needs of the customers, and current trends in their industry. Even those who used the internet said that the knowledge was not enough. They said that they need help with understanding the markets and marketing their product, reducing the costs, and ways of economical marketing techniques. An interviewee stated:

*“I didn't know about marketing. I didn't have enough money to hire professional marketers or pay for advertisements. My family didn't support me either. My 3 children were very young at the time when I started my school. I used to go from one home to another and tell people about it. My children used to go with me because there was no one at home to look after them. This is how I used to do marketing.”*

Another interviewee said: *“Our customers bargain with us because they think our product is not that advanced and that we will take whatever is offered only because we are women.”*

## Recommendations

Below are some recommendations for improving women entrepreneurs' access to the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro, Sindh:

- Making the lending of microfinance loans more transparent and tracking who is the end user of loans and addressing gender discriminatory practices in lending loans.
- Encouraging government institutions to buy a certain percentage of items from women run businesses annually.
- Translating laws into local languages so women entrepreneurs can comprehend it and scale up their businesses lawfully.
- Having more women in decision-making and advisory boards to ensure gender inclusiveness in policy-making process.
- Establishing Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Jamshoro.
- Provision of specialized financial schemes for different sectors and industries with adequate training and support on upgrading the existing technology and materials. Specializing the financial support industry wise can help increase the accessibility. Experts within these fields can solve industry-related problems.
- Initiating more gender-based research and data to guide the practices for evidence-based policy-making and program planning.
- Introducing tax benefits and export incentives for women entrepreneurs and companies that purchase from small and medium enterprises run by women.
- Using coordinated working strategies and partnerships between different elements of the ecosystem.
- Mobilizing the community through culturally sensitive awareness and outreach programs to increase the acceptance and societal support for women entrepreneurs.
- Collaborative networks of likeminded people and organizations to empower women by connecting them with entrepreneurial opportunities and resources.
- Online platforms with resources for women entrepreneurs, details on start-up events, available grants can feature success stories.
- Assisting women in reaching global markets and organizing export workshops to educate women entrepreneurs on the procedures, laws, and opportunities to boost export knowledge.
- Improving ICT to enable women access bigger markets, decrease the costs, and tap their potential in tech-related businesses. Women entrepreneurs who are based in rural areas of Sindh lag far behind in the use

of modern technology in their business and are using outdated methods for marketing, production, and sales. With ICT interventions, women entrepreneurs can scale up their businesses and increase their revenues.

## CONCLUSION

After analyzing the data in this research study, it can be concluded that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Jamshoro, Sindh, for women entrepreneurs' partially present and women. There is a greater need for the elements to function together. Access to finance and cultural issues are major problems that women entrepreneurs face. For future research, we recommend an analysis using quantitative data to know the actual scale of the problem, exploring gaps between functioning of different elements of EE and analysis of entrepreneurial ecosystems in other cities or provinces.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview protocol

Name:	Age:
City/Taluka:	Education:
Marital status:	Number of children:
Name of business:	Type of business:
Years in business:	Initial funding source:

1. When did you establish your business? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Why did you start this business?
3. What were the challenges you faced in establishing this business?

### Policy

4. What do you know about the laws, policies, and regulations of doing business?
5. Do you face any difficulty in comprehending these laws and policies? If yes, please specify.
6. Does lack of proper and complete knowledge about laws and policies hinder your business?
7. What kind of support have you received from the government?
8. Do you find the tax policies favorable for women entrepreneurs?
9. What kind of initiatives do you think the government can take to facilitate women entrepreneurs?

### Finance

10. What sources of finance are you aware of?
11. Have you used any source of external financing for your business?
12. How satisfied were you with the process and requirements of accessing it?
13. Did you face any discrimination in the process based on your gender? If yes, please share details
14. How do you think the process can be improved?

### Institutions

15. What do you know about the institutions that support women entrepreneurs? For example: NGOs, universities, or business incubators?
16. What kind of support have you received from institutions?
17. How good is the physical infrastructure in your area?
18. What infrastructural challenges do you face in your business?
19. How do you commute for business-related purposes?

### Human capital

20. How do you hire your employees/workers?
21. Do you think there is sufficient skilled human capital or trained workforce?
22. What kind of difficulties do you face in hiring employees/workers for your business?
23. What kind of entrepreneurial/business training or workshops have you attended?
24. How did the training help you?
25. How can training be improved?
26. If you have received business education, how has it helped you in your business?
27. What kind of training can help you in your business?

### **Culture**

28. How supportive has your family been in your business?
29. What kind of cultural barriers did you face to start your business?
30. How do you think the cultural and societal norms affect the entrepreneurship for women in Jamshoro, Sindh?
31. How do you think the culture supports creativity and innovation for women?
32. Do you think that entrepreneurship is seen as a desirable career for women in your community? Please explain your answer
33. Are there opportunities for the creation of new businesses for women?
34. What kind of challenges do you face in day-to-day business operations?

### **Markets**

35. How important are business networks in entrepreneurship?
36. What kind of access do you have to networking opportunities?
37. Which business networks are you part of?
38. How well aware are you about the markets? Please explain your answer.

