

**Barriers and Prospects for Women Entrepreneurs in Khyber  
Pakhtunkhwa: Insights from District Charsadda**

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the problems and prospects of women entrepreneurs of KPK particularly in District Charsadda. Yet the women in KPK face multiple challenges, being restricted from finance and markets, socio-cultural issues, a lack of education, lack of training and regulation constraints to women in business. These barriers are the focus of this study, which aims to review those challenges, evaluate government schemes already underway, and recommend measures to boost female entrepreneurship in the region. According to literature Women Business Development Centers (WBDCs), Kamyab Jawan Program, SheMeansBusiness initiative has been launched but their success varies. The results indicate that economic constraints are a significant obstacle, compounded by culturally established gender norms that curtail women's freedom of movement and authority. Furthermore, insufficient education and cumbersome regulations restrict enterprise formalization and growth. The results suggest the need to promote adoption of gender-sensitive financial products, improve education and training exchange programs, and engage communities in addressing sociocultural issues. There is a need to both simplify, improve and benefit from digital technology in regulating procedures, which will support female entrepreneurs. Recommendations for targeted policy interventions and program development in order to promote women economic empowerment are raised based on the findings of this study. Proposed future work includes: Longitudinal studies and comparative analysis Sector specific studies for further understanding and support of women entrepreneurs in KPK. This research adds to the available literature on women's entrepreneurship of Pakistan and acts as a baseline for policy makers, practitioners, and academics interested in the development of gender-inclusive economy.

**Keywords:** Financial constraints, socio-cultural barriers, education and training, government initiatives, economic empowerment, digital technologies, Women Business Development Centers, Kamyab Jawan Program, SheMeansBusiness.

### Background of the study

The importance of women entrepreneurs as a key driver of economic growth and social progress is increasingly being seen worldwide. They contribute to every aspect of society from job creation and innovation to poverty reduction and the promotion of more equitable societies. Women's Tendency to Start-up Have Shot-up Academics and researchers also come with data of high growing numbers of women entrepreneurship rates between 2001 and 2023 in 30 GEM countries, as from 6.1% for 2001- 2005 and up to 10.4 % for 2021 - 2023 (GEM, 2024). This increasing number reflects the rising influence of women in the world of startups.

Women-owned enterprises in most developed economies are growing and performing well. In the United States, women-owned firms amounted to 42% of all firms as of 2019, with an economic impact estimated at \$1.9 trillion (American Express, 2019). For instance, they are more likely to survive, with 77% still in business after five years compared to only 71% of male owned firms (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2020). For example, in France, the Netherlands and Hungary, the rate of women's startups has doubled, or more than doubled, in the last two decades (OECD, 2021). The high rates of women already owning business are particularly high in South Korea, Japan, Puerto Rico, Lithuania and Thailand (GEM, 2024). These statistics seems to show just how far women have come in building and maintaining businesses in the developed world.

Emerging markets also exhibit the transformational effect of women's entrepreneurship. In low income countries, for instance, women tend to show greater entrepreneurial intentions (28.2% intend to create a business) than in high income countries (only 11%) (GEM, 2024).

In several emerging nations, women are also more likely to be necessity entrepreneurs, those pushed into business because of a lack of jobs or few options to find formal work (World Bank, 2021). For example, women entrepreneurs are progressing the agricultural and technology sectors in Africa, notably through food security and economic empowerment (African Development Bank, 2020). Women in the developing world plough back much of their earnings (90 cents of every new dollar) into the education, health and nutrition of their families, producing meaningful spillover effects for society (UN Women, 2021). In Latin America and the Caribbean, more than two-fifths of global-market-servicing entrepreneurs are women, indicating that women are participating in international trade (Inter-American Development Bank, 2020).

Women entrepreneurs, however, continue to deal with specific challenges at work, which may restricts their success. Although women have been advancing in entrepreneurship in great strides, they still face many challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed. These barriers are socioeconomic, financial and institutional faced in starting, growing and maintain businesses.

The enduring gender gap in access to finance is one of the major hurdles. Loans, venture capital and external capital in general are not easy to acquire for women entrepreneurs due to insufficient collateral, restricted credit history and gender bias from investors' side (World Bank, 2021). Women led-enterprises could be seen to be at higher risk and either pay a higher cost for credit in terms of loan terms or be declined a loan by a financial institution (International Finance Corporation, 2021). This financial barrier can seriously impede innovation and cut short the expansion of women-owned firms.

There are also socio-cultural challenges that loom in the entrepreneurship journey of women. The role structure according to traditional gender roles and expectations in society may discourage women's mobility, access to networks and decision-making ability (Brush & Hisrich, 2006). In large parts of the societies women are expected to put commitments towards family before ambition exhibited at work, reducing the women's time and resources for being entrepreneurs. These social norms could further complicate balancing work and family for women.

Institutional and policy constraints add to the complexity of the environment for women entrepreneurs. Lack of appropriate regulations, absence of conducive policies, and poor institutional support might work together to establish a climate in which women entrepreneurs may find it tough to compete on an equal footing with men (Verheul & Thurik, 2001). Complicated procedures to register businesses, discriminatory laws, and a shortage of access to business development services could place a disproportionate burden on women-owned businesses.

### **Background Information on the Success of Women Entrepreneurs in Asia and Pakistan**

Asia's Women Entrepreneurs ascendance in Asia is a major transformation of the economic landscape of the region. The growing importance of women's economic development in recent decades, women are being recognized for their contributions to innovation, jobs and economic development. For example, according to an International Finance Corporation (IFC 2023) report, closing the gender gap in entrepreneurship in Asia could add an additional \$2.5 trillion to the economy, estimates the IFC. This is indicative of the price she has to pay for being a women in the business world.

In India, women entrepreneurs are gaining significant ground, especially in technology. Programs such as "Startup India" have also led to higher participation of women in entrepreneurship with a growing number of women-run startups in the country. 47% for male) (NASSCOM, 2023) also shows an increasing trend from the few years. Research has found that there is also a thriving female entrepreneurship spirit in China as many as 20% of enterprises are believed to be female-owned. This upsurge has made much impact in the country's growth and development (World Bank, 2022). The Chinese state has taken measures to boost women's participation in the labor market and the environment for female entrepreneurs is ameliorating.

In the Philippines, women own nearly 69% of microenterprises and are thus key drivers in the local economy (Asian Development Bank, 2022). The Philippine

government has already implemented programs catered to support women-owned businesses, like the Gender and Development (GAD) budget which sets aside budget for enterprises that aim to promote gender equality in business.

There are various reasons for the success of women entrepreneurs in Asia, supportive ecosystems and government initiatives being some of them. States have pursued policies to support female entrepreneurship. In the Philippines, for instance, initiatives have been developed to bolster women-owned ventures, leading to a fertile business climate.

There are other important factors underpinning the ascendancy of women entrepreneurs in Asia – availability of education and training. We provided women with business skills training to allow them to start and run businesses. Other organizations like Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) and Asia Foundation have been working on training female entrepreneurs aspiring for more background and resources (Asia Foundation, 2023). Though improvement is seen, there are still several obstacles faced by Asia's women entrepreneurs. One of the big bottlenecks is access to capital. Women's-owned businesses are observed to face significant challenges in obtaining access to finance due to a low level of collaterals, limited credit history and gender-based discrimination by potential creditors (International Finance Corporation, 2021). Female entrepreneurs 30% less likely to access funding World Bank (2022) an investigating of women entrepreneurs conducted by World Bank (2022) study found that women entrepreneurs are 30% less likely than men to access funding.

The conditions there mirror some of the difficulties and successes of women in business in Pakistan. Although female entrepreneurship in the country has been on the rise, accounting for about 10% of startups, several hurdles still remain. Women own only 8 percent of the more than 5 million small and medium enterprises in Pakistan. Gendered cultural and societal expectations often render women unable to fully participate in entrepreneurship. The Pakistani government is working to combat these issues through programs to facilitate women in doing business. Programs such as the Women Business Development Centers (WBDCs) offer training and resources to support the success of women business owners.

Yet, obstacles such as lack of entrepreneurship financing, social pressure and proper networks continue to hinder success. Collateral shortage and systemic bias in the financial sector make it particularly hard for women to secure loans. Moreover, social norms may exert pressures that curb women entrepreneurial aspirations. There is a dire need of focused interventions, policy adoptions and attitude change in the society for realizing the potential of women entrepreneurs in Asia and Pakistan.

### **Problem Statement**

Women entrepreneurs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), especially in District Charsadda, encounter various problems which limit their start-up and growth of business (Khan, 2022). Despite the potential contribution of women's entrepreneurship to local economic development and empowerment, there are numerous barriers to women's human capital (Ali & Hussain, 2023).

First is access to finance continues to be a significant barrier. Female entrepreneurs in Charsadda face challenges in access to loans and credit, lack of collateral, low financial literacy and systemic bias among financial institutions (UN Women, 2021). Women might be perceived by banks as riskier borrowers, and be offered more expensive loans or turned away (World Bank, 2022). On the other hand women are sometimes considered as inferior business managers which adds to the problem by making them less successful in acquiring the funding that they need (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Efforts such as the Refinance and Credit Guarantee Scheme for Women Entrepreneurs by the Bank of Khyber and the USAID, UNDP, and SRSP microfinance initiative are helping but their coverage and impact require further expansion (Siddiqui, 2022).

Second, women entrepreneurs face substantial constraints from social and traditional gender practices. In fact, among the Charsadda society, women are more expected to fulfill their domestic responsibilities than their professional needs (Shah, 2023). These cultural norms may restrict women's mobility, and access to networks and mentorship, MBA whose association is pivotal to the success of an entrepreneur (Ahmed, 2022). Women in the WRSs can only operate businesses from home because of the patriarchal mindset and societal norms that do not support women in business, hence they cannot balance work and home life (Iqbal, 2023).

Furthermore, the lack of education and training opportunities for women impedes them from developing skills of sound business management. Golden Ring Song By Tommy Ljunggren Many of the women of Charsadda do not have the opportunity to receive quality education and take part in proper vocation training programs, which would teach them the basic skills and knowledge needed for entrepreneurship (Khan, 2013). This lack of education hampers not only their confidence but also their strength in the market place (Zafar & Malik, 2023). Initiatives such as the launch of "SheMeansBusiness" by KPITB and Meta (Facebook) and SEED for digital marketing and financial management are working to address this gap, however, a more holistic and localized approach is required (Asia Foundation, 2023).

As well, there are significant regulatory and administrative hurdles to overcome. Women-owned businesses typically struggle with cumbersome registration procedures and absence of favorable policies that suit their special needs (Government of KPK, 2022). This can also deter female small-scale entrepreneurs from registering their businesses and hinder their growth and competitiveness in the market (UNDP, 2023). Amendments in KP Commerce and Trade Act 2021 are required, if the process of registration of businesses led by women is to be made smooth (Ali, 2023).

#### **Aim of the Study**

This study aimed to explore the hurdles encountered by women entrepreneurs of District Charsadda, KPK, and to unearth the possible mechanisms that can contribute towards efficacious entrepreneurial performance and financial uplift.



### **Objectives**

To identify the obstacles related to access to finance confronted by women entrepreneurs in District Charsadda.

To investigate the socio-cultural factors influencing women entrepreneurial activities in the region.

To examine the regulatory and bureaucratic constraints impeding women's business creation and growth in KPK.

Recommendations for women entrepreneurship in District Charsadda Policy interventions supporting women entrepreneurship are scarce and inadequate.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is highly relevant for a number of reasons, it addresses the stated objectives, and it adds to the body of knowledge on women's entrepreneurship in difficult settings.

First, by identifying the obstacles that restrict access to credit, evidence from this study is expected to provide information to the financial institutions and policy-makers about the unique needs and difficulties of women entrepreneurs in District Charsadda (UN Women, 2021). The identification and understanding of these barriers is critical in the development of products and services that are specifically targeted at increasing women's access to capital and hence, business growth (World Bank, 2022). The results may be used to help structure policies that challenge systemic biases and advance gender-inclusive financing (Khan & Ahmed, 2023).

Secondly, analysis of socio-cultural factors affecting women entrepreneurship seeks to understand the cultural preferences and perceived appropriate behavior that facilitate or discourage the involvement of women in the business process (Shah, 2023). This knowledge is critical to the development of culturally appropriate interventions that challenge limiting norms and enable women to seek careers in entrepreneurship (Iqbal, 2023). Drawing attention on such socio-cultural dynamics can potentially sensitize local actors also for a more supportive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs (Ahmed, 2022).

Thirdly, assessment of the availability and effectiveness of education and training schemes are likely to highlight the deficiency in the skills and knowledge of women entrepreneurs in Charsadda (Khan, 2023). This evaluation can be useful in designing customized training programs to meet the special requirements of women's enterprises and make them competitive in the market as well (Ijaz & Karim, 2024). Stakeholders can optimize resources and enhance the quality of entrepreneurial education for women by knowing the effects of the existing programmes (Asia Foundation, 2023).

Fourth, examination of the regulatory and bureaucratic barriers will illuminate some of the barriers encountered by women entrepreneurs in conducting business in KPK (Government of KPK, 2022). This assessment feeds into policy overhauls that simplify business registration, cut red tape and design more conducive regulatory environment for women-owned businesses (UNDP, 2023). By pointing to these challenges, the research can offer valuable inputs for policy action that creates a level playing ground for all entrepreneurs (Ali, 2023).

In short, the study's recommendations for focused intervention and policy implications will give basis for the mechanism on how to support women entrepreneurship to the District Charsadda. These proposals may provide a basis for the sectorial approaches of government departments, nongovernment organizations, and other partners in enhancing HEWE and sustainable development in the area (Ali & Kristensen, 2012). This research could contribute towards a more fair and supportive environment for female entrepreneurs in KPK by suggesting possible evidence-based responses.

### **Literature Review**

The importance of women's entrepreneurship as a powerful driver of economic growth, poverty alleviation, and social change worldwide is receiving ever greater attention (Ahl, 2022). Essentiality women entrepreneurship in developing countries are confronted with barriers to formal employment which render entrepreneurship an essential route to economic independence and empowerment (Kabeer, 2021). However, the women entrepreneurs in the region face various obstructions in initiating, developing and expanding their businesses (Ali & Hussain, 2023). This study is an investigation into the specific problems of women entrepreneurs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, more specifically District Charsadda. KPK is unique in such a way that its socio-cultural norms, security related issues, economic aspects etc. (Bashir & Ahmad, 2023). It is an attempt to capture and compile literature to develop an understanding on the major challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the region and the possible opportunities they can exploit.

### **OVERVIEW OF WOMEN IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN PAKISTAN**

Pakistan has a population of more than 240 million people but has one of the largest gender gaps in economic participation (World Economic Forum, 2022). Although women make up almost 50% of the population, the female labor participation rate is well below the international average. A very few Pakistani women are found to be involved in entrepreneurial arena indicating unexploited potential of women empowerment (Razak & Khan, 2023). According to Pakistan Startup Ecosystem Report (2023), women-led startups contribute only 10%- 12% of the total startup ecosystem in Pakistan.

This differential also highlights the necessity for targeted interventions and initiatives to safeguard for the prevention of female empowerment and assure the creation of a more diverse entrepreneurial ecology. Realizing the potential, Pakistan government with assistance of international bodies has implemented various initiatives in order to foster women entrepreneurship such as the Women Business Development Centers (WBDC) by SMEDA and "SheLovesTech" programs (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). These initiatives were launched to give women grants, trainings and mentoring, but there is still need to increase its effectiveness and reach.

### **Problems of Women Entrepreneurs in KPK**

Female entrepreneurs in KPK, and District Charsadda, in particular, confront a maze of problems, which can be generalized into four categories; the financial, socio-cultural, education and regulatory barrier.

### **Financial Constraints**

Financial access is a major obstacle for women entrepreneurs in KPK. Conventional banks are generally risk-averse and influenced by gender biases, resulting in women playing it hard to obtain loans and investments (Naseem & Shafique, 2023). Further, constraints of low-operational efficiency, minimal collaterals, financial illiteracy and ignorance about financial products act as obstacles in availing credit by the SMEs. Most women entrepreneurs borrow from personal savings, family loan or micro finance to run their business (Khan, 2022). Microfinance has been identified to be an appropriate methodology for catering to the financial needs of the pov-erty-stricken poor

According to the proper studies, microfinance does not reach the poorest women of womenfolk of poor level (Khan & Sadiq, 2022). USAID, UNDP & SRSP initiated programs in KPK to finance interest free micro finance loans and business management trainings for small entrepreneurs (Siddiqui, 2022). The Bank of Khyber also provides Refinance and Credit Guarantee Scheme for Women Entrepreneurs for their financial convenience. But the need for financial services is much larger than current supply, and more creative financial intermediation is required to support women led-businesses in the region (Bashir & Ahmad, 2023).

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers**

Socio-cultural customs and customary gender roles have a strong limiting effect on women's entrepreneurship in KPK. Pakistani society, especially within KPK, is predominantly patriarchal and values women in households and caregivers (Shah, 2023). These constraints restrict women's mobility, their networking opportunities and power over decisions. Family responsibility pressures women entrepreneur to stay at home rather than embark into business venture (Iqbal, 2015). The cultural bindings like inflexible pardah (veil) and izzat (honour) further deter them to participate in business.

Yet, there is some evidence which indicates that women are not only resisting these social norms by unleashing entrepreneurship but are also employing it as a means of empowerment and independence (Kabeer, 2021). Through digital platforms women are able to overcome mobility and the constraints of socio-cultural; it helps in becoming an independent entrepreneur from the household (Naseem & Shafique, 2023).

### **Inadequate Education and Training**

According to the study of Khan (2022) a large number of the women in KPK do not have access to quality education and technical/vocational training programs. Their low level of education limits their capacities in terms of financing, selling the product



or adopting new technologies. This gap is intended to be narrowed by KPITB and Facebook (Meta) with their "SheMeansBusiness" program that will provide KPK women entrepreneurs with digital marketing and financial management skills (Asia Foundation, 2023). "It's working great with me." SEED is also extending support to home-based women entrepreneurs of KPK in terms of business development support and digital literacy. These initiatives illustrate the need for focused skills development and mentorship to enable women to become successful entrepreneurs (Zafar & Malik, 2023).

### **Regulatory and Bureaucratic Obstacles**

Women entrepreneurs in KPK face legal, legal and bureaucratic obstacles that prevent them from formalizing and developing their companies. Cumbersome business registration procedures, corrupt system, and absence of supportive policies are few of the discouraging factors for women who want to become an entrepreneur (Government of KPK, 2022). The lack of information regarding government schemes and guidelines only adds up to their plight. Enhanced and smooth processes, gender sensitive policies, and their effective enforcement are required for a better pro-women businesses regulatory environment (Ali & Hussain, 2023).

### **KPK, The Land of the Pure and the Brave and where are the Women Entrepreneurs?**

Despite these challenges, women entrepreneurs in KPK have a potential to play a great role in regional economic development and peace building. KPK is culture-rich province and there is a demand for local products, which create opportunities for female involvement in handicraft, textiles and other creative jobs (Bashir & Ahmad, 2023).

The emergence of digital technology and ecommerce platforms provides new opportunities for women to sell their products and services beyond the reach of local markets. Women entrepreneurs can also be a force for social change and for empowering other women in their communities. If they get jobs and become role models for others, other women will get encouraged to fulfil their dreams and that includes defying gender stereotypes. In addition, economic empowerment of women can foster increased social cohesion, and stability in a region marked by conflict and insecurity (Kabeer, 2021).

### **The Role of Microfinance**

Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) have an important role in offering financial services to women entrepreneurs in Pakistan and in unprivileged areas of KPK in particular where traditional banking is inaccessible. MFIs provide small loans, savings provisions and other financial services for the consumption needs of poor women (Khan & Sadiq, 2022).

It has been revealed that through MF, women-owned small enterprise based profitability can be increase, it raises household earnings and encouragement to women's economic power (Naseem & Shafique, 2023). Kashf Foundation, a dedicated

microfinance institution, lends 100 percent of its loans to female-led businesses. But caution should be taken so as to make sure that microfinance packages are developed to empower women and to facilitate sustainable development of businesses rather than imposing credit as a burden on them (Ali & Hussain, 2023).

### **The Impact of Digital Technologies**

Digital enabling is reshaping the WEscape (an innovative digital platform) in Pakistan, especially in areas like KPK that have strong socio-cultural barriers and immobility constraints. The proliferation of mobile phones, internet, and e-commerce platforms has afforded new opportunities for women to initiate and expand home-based businesses (Asia Foundation, 2023). Women are being trained to use these technologies as part of digital literacy programs and online training courses to engage with the digital economy (Zafar & Malik, 2023).

Social media networks are also creating opportunities for women business owners to connect, promote their goods and harvest information and support. The COVID-19 crisis only acted as a catalyst fostering further uptake of digital technology by women entrepreneurs, showing their resilience and characteristic adaptability (Bashir & Ahmad, 2023).

### **Government and NGO Initiatives**

The government of Pakistan, in collaboration with international organizations and NGOs, has introduced various women entrepreneurship programs in KPK. These initiatives include:

**Women Business Development Centers (WBDCs):** There are various WBDCs functioning around KPK, to provide training, counseling, and business development services to women entrepreneurs by SMEDA (Ali & Hussain, 2023).

**SheMeansBusiness Program:** KPITB and Facebook (Meta) are partnering to train women on digital marketing and financial management (Asia Foundation, 2023).

**SEED Program:** SEED builds capacities of home-based women entrepreneurs in KPK by inculcating business and digital literacy (Zafar & Malik, 2023).

**Microfinance Programs:** USAID, UNDP and SRSP are also giving interest free micro-credit loans and business management training to women entrepreneurs in KPK flood affected areas (Siddiqui, 2022).

**Prime Minister's Youth Business Loan Scheme:** This scheme provides young entrepreneurs soft loans with special provision for female entrepreneurs (Government of KPK, 2022).

**Kamyab Jawan Program:** With special emphasis on the way women entrepreneurs should be encouraged to come in entrepreneurial sector, this initiative is about giving financial and technical support to young entrepreneurs (Ali & Hussain, 2023).

**Women entrepreneurs financing initiative (We-Fi):** In partnership with global partners we-fi is seeking to improve the access to nourish services for women entrepreneurs of Pakistan.

They also reflect increasing awareness and acceptance of women's entrepreneurship as a driver of economic growth and gender equality. Yet there is need for more targeted and sustained action to dismantle the systemic barriers and work towards a genuinely enabling environment for women entrepreneurs in the KPK.

### Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations

#### Conclusion

Female entrepreneurs in KPK, specifically District Charsadda, have to deal with numerous issues that limit the economic empowerment and growth of their enterprises. Yet the potential of women entrepreneurs and their businesses to support economic development in local communities is often hampered by a range of constraints such as a lack of access to finance, socio-cultural factors, lack of education, technical services and regulatory barriers. Government projects including the Women Business Development Centers (WBDCs), Kamyab Jawan Program and the SheMeansBusiness program indicate attempts to tackle these obstacles and to foster entrepreneurship among women. Yet performance of these programs is mixed, and wider-ranging measures are necessary to establish a genuinely enabling ecosystem for women in business.

The findings of this review of literature emphasize the need to take into account the complex issues women entrepreneurs have to face. By adopting interventions and policies that support targeted groups, the potential of women entrepreneurs may be even further developed leading to economic growth and social development in KPK. The necessity of a multi-partner movement including government, NGOs, and the community is paramount in overcoming the structural obstacles that are in the way of women.

#### Discussion

Socio-Cultural and Economic Constraints the problems relating to women entrepreneurs in KPK are related with socio-cultural and economic settings. Access to finance remains a major challenge where women find it difficult to secure a loan because traditional banks are often biased against them based on their gender. The dependence on microfinance has been somewhat alleviated but it's not an elixir of life. "Access to affordable finance remains elusive for many women entrepreneurs who are being charged high interest and given small amounts that cannot help them grow their businesses.

Socio-cultural constraints only add to their financial woes. Women here are often still confined to traditional gender roles that relegate them to domestic duties, restricting their access to entrepreneurship. Society generally looks down on women taking up roles that they are not traditionally supposed to assume which can be a deterrent for women to join businesses. Further, women lack access to education and training that provides the skills needed to manage businesses well, market products effectively, and understand finances.

Regulatory hurdles and red tape are also substantial. Women entrepreneurs frequently face cumbersome business registration procedures and lack enabling policies suited to their specific needs. [It's] one reason why many would-be entrepreneurs are dissuaded to register their businesses and miss their opportunities for growth and access to global markets.

Despite these challenges, some efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) look promising. Programs such as WBDC's, along with digital literacy efforts, offer critical resources and training to women entrepreneurs that are vital to assisting them in breaking down some walls. Nonetheless, there is scope to widen the scope and impact of these programs so they effectively meet the varying needs of women entrepreneurial potential across KPK.

### **Recommendations**

Some of the recommendations which can help creating more conducive environment for women entrepreneurs in KPK are the following:

**Increase Access to Finance:** Financial institutions must design gender-sensitive financial products that cater specifically to the needs of women entrepreneurs. Such supports can also be in the form of reduced interest rates, affordable repayments and customized financial education programmes aimed at empowering women on financial management.

**Enhance Education and Training Programs:** Government and NGO should team up to develop and implement cut-edge programs to equip women with entrepreneurial skills. Such programs ought to be geared around business management, digital marketing as well as financial literacy, thus empowering women to be able to compete effectively in the market place.

**Overcome Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Publicity campaigns must be initiated to break through the prevailing gender stereotypes that should limit women's role in entrepreneurship. Involving community leaders and male relatives in such discussions may be instrumental in shifting attitudes and creating a more conducive environment for women.

**Balraj Pannu Simplify Regulatory Procedures:** The government should ease the business registration mechanism and do away with the red-tape that impedes women

entrepreneurs. This consists of a single window service provider for the registration of businesses and business support services specifically designed for women.

**Embrace digital:** By promoting digital platforms, women entrepreneurs can seize new opportunities to sell products to new markets. Digital capacity building should be integrated in training programs provided to women to enable them use the technologies efficiently.

**Promote Networking and Mentorship:** Developing networks for women entrepreneurs can promote the exchange of knowledge, mentorship, and even co-working. Support and guidance can be very valuable and programs that link potential women entrepreneurs with women business mentors have an important role to play.

If these recommendations are adopted and implemented, KPK can significantly transform the landscape by fostering an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs to overcome challenges and make a meaningful contribution to the region's economy and society. It is important for everyone – government, NGOs, private sector – to join forces in driving towards these goals and focus on the support and celebration of women's entrepreneurship as a key part of KPK growth narrative.

In case of District Charsadda, KPK, the women entrepreneurs face financial problems, socio-cultural hurdles and lack of education and training, and stringent regulations. However, despite such obstacles they exhibit resilience and creativity and strong aspirations for contributing to the economic growth and peace-building of their communities. There is a need to design and implement interventions that are tailored to the needs and challenges of women entrepreneurs in KPK in order to fully unleash the entrepreneurship potential of women. These interventions should include:

Enhancing financial inclusion: Offering gender-sensitive financial products and services, encouraging financial literacy and ending gender discrimination in lending.

Tackling socio-cultural norms: Dissemination of information on the advantages SEA brings about for them and society at large, promoting gender equality at school and in workplaces, and mobilizing community leaders to encourage women entrepreneurship.

Improved education and training: Provide customized training that covers specific skills gaps for women entrepreneurs, as well as increased promotion of digital literacy and mentorship.

Reforming regulations and policies: Streamlining procedures for registering businesses, cutting through bureaucratic red tape, and developing gender-sensitive policies, which help women-led businesses.

Using digital technologies: Promoting the uptake of e-commerce marketplaces, training in digital literacy and access to online markets.

Building support systems: Building a supportive ecosystem between government, NGOs and the private sector through which to support women entrepreneurs.



### **Implications of This Study**

There are a number of implications for policymakers, practitioners and researchers from the study findings.

### **Policy Formulation and Implementation**

The research has implications for targeted policy intervention aimed at addressing the challenges confronted by women entrepreneurs of KPK while operating in the province. The research findings can help policymakers develop gender-based economic policies that promote women's access to finance as well as education and training. This could result in a more inclusive economic development in the region.

### **Program Development**

The mapping of obstacles and opportunities for women entrepreneurs serves as a guide for NGOs, and development agencies, with respect to which women entrepreneurs and what support participants should target. Financial literacy, digital training and mentorship programs can go a long way in lifting their entrepreneurial skills and helping them to become economically empowered.

### **Community Engagement**

The researchers emphasize the value of community assistance in addressing sociocultural limitations. Involving community leaders and men in conversations about women entrepreneurs can change norms and foster a culture more favorable to women.

### **Business Ecosystem Enhancement**

If regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles are removed, their findings can go a long way in changing the business environment here in KPK. Efficient systems and encouraging policies can help more women become official entrepreneurs, boosting economies with new jobs.

### **Academic Contributions**

This research supplements the body of literature on women entrepreneurship in Pakistan with empirical evidence of the issues that women in KPK encounter. It may be used as a benchmark result and a motivation for future work on this topic.

### **Future Directions**

Some of the possible future research lines which could be derived from the implications of this study are:

### **Longitudinal Studies**

Further research could be conducted in the form of longitudinal research on women entrepreneurs' overtime and the related progress. This would offer clue on the long-term effect of different interventions and the changing picture of problems that beset women.

### **Comparative Studies**

Comparative studies across geographic locations in Pakistan or across countries with comparable socio-economic status may reveal best practices for the promotion of women entrepreneurs. Knowing what works in other settings can support better policy and program design.

### **Impact Assessment of Programs**

Some research on the effectiveness of government- and NGO-sponsored programs in support of women-owned businesses would be useful. Evaluation of the program outcomes is important for further developing available interventions and finding the weak points in the progress of the system.

### **Focus on Technology and Innovation**

With the ongoing development of digital technologies, it might be of value for future research to consider how women entrepreneurs of KPK propitiously apply digital technologies in business. This might involve research into e-commerce, social media marketing or the use of digital platforms to network and collaborate.

### **What Are Men Doing in Women's Entrepreneurial Activities?**

Such research would also be useful to explore the influence of male family members, such as fathers and husbands or leaders of community, and to determine whether his role has been supportive or deterrent to the women in executing their businesses. Knowledge about these dynamics can contribute to improving community engagement strategies.

### **Sector-Specific Studies**

Further studies could be devoted to specific sectors in which female entrepreneurs are particularly present, such as the handicraft, agriculture or services. Developing an understanding of the specific sector-level challenges and opportunities can help to provide more targeted support.

Scholars can develop the findings of this research by exploring the following future research paths that lead to the development of understanding of women entrepreneurship in KPK and over KPK, as well. This work in progress will feed heavily into the future identification of successful interventions to enable women and further economic sustainability in the region.

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