

The Contribution of Higher Educational Institutions towards the Entrepreneurial Intent of Female Students

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Corresponding Author Shereen Ashraf MPhil in European Studies & Mass Communication Article History Received: 16 / 04 / 2025 Accepted: 01 / 05 / 2025 Published: 04 / 05 / 2025	Abstract: This study examined the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in shaping entrepreneurial intention among female students in Pakistan through a qualitative research approach. Interviews were conducted with female graduating students from HEC-accredited universities in cities of Pakistan. Thematic analysis was carried out to examine the lived experiences, unveiling the determinants of entrepreneurial intentions. Findings show that universities offer career-focused courses, such as workshops and seminars, but lack structured entrepreneurial courses that provide hands-on exposure. Interviewees communicated that entrepreneurship is typically not emphasized in education courses, limiting their knowledge, confidence, and preparedness to engage in entrepreneurial projects. Students also identified cultural and institutional barriers, such as societal pressures and a deficiency of mentorship, as significant challenges. Comparisons of international models reveal that entrepreneurial initiatives and ecosystems played a significant role in entrepreneurial attitude, something which is lacking in Pakistan. Fulfilling such gaps through experiential education, mentorship, and facilitation from institutions can foster entrepreneurial intent among women students. Keywords: Entrepreneur Female, Institutions, Higher Education, Intent Entrepreneurial, Women empowerment.
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INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has been broadly regarded as a source of economic growth, social development, and innovation. It is a fundamental pillar of economic development because it generates employment, stimulates innovation, and brings about competition (Acs et al., 2018). In the last several years, entrepreneurship has spread beyond traditional business startups to technology-based entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and women entrepreneurship. Although entrepreneurship has been a man's world in the past, the recent decades have seen a global phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship (Brush, 1992). Women are now contributing to economic development by creating businesses that not only generate income but also address social and environmental issues (Boserup et al., 2013). Women entrepreneurs have contributed significantly to employment generation, poverty alleviation, and gender empowerment (Hussain et al., 2019). However, despite these positive trends, women's entrepreneurship remains comparatively underdeveloped in most parts of the world, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan. Structural, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to hinder women from participating in entrepreneurial activities, limiting their economic opportunities (Kobeissi, 2010).

One of the most influential determinants of entrepreneurship is education, particularly higher education. HEIs are a foundation of entrepreneurial learning since they instill in students the knowledge, aptitude, and confidence required to create and sustain an venture. Universities play a decisive role in shaping entrepreneurial intention through fostering business and management courses, facilitating mentorship initiatives, coordinating networking activities, and providing access to business incubators (Raposo & Do Paço, 2011). Literature demonstrates that exposure to entrepreneurship education positively affects the attitudes of students towards entrepreneurship, their self-efficacy, and risk-taking behavior (Nabi et al., 2018). While entrepreneurship education has gained more prominence in developed countries, it remains sparse and intermittent in developing economies, including Pakistan. The extent to which Pakistani HEIs contribute to female entrepreneurial development is a relatively under-researched area, and therefore this research is of specific relevance.

Gender disparities in entrepreneurship in Pakistan are due to deep-rooted societal and institutional barriers (Mahmood et al., 2012). Women entrepreneurs have to face numerous challenges, including binding cultural norms, restricted access to finance, lack

of exposure to entrepreneurial role models, and institutional support (Byrne & Fattoum, 2019). Many Pakistani women are still bound by traditional gender roles, which limits their autonomy to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Higgins et al., 2013). Also, female students in universities are not exposed to entrepreneurship to the same level as male students. Even though some universities offer courses in business, one can feel the absence of properly designed programs for creating female entrepreneurship. As compared to countries such as the United States, where entrepreneurial education and startup ecosystems are well developed in higher education, Pakistani universities still lag behind in providing practical training, industry linkages, and financial support to prospective women entrepreneurs.

This study aims to investigate the role of HEIs in the formation of entrepreneurial intent among Pakistani female students. By adopting a qualitative, in-depth interview approach, the study makes an effort to discover female students' lived experiences, attitudes, and challenges in becoming entrepreneurs.

Despite all the growing international interest in women entrepreneurship, the knowledge gap about how HEIs in Pakistan contribute to female students' entrepreneurial inclination remains gigantic. The majority of the existing literature related to Pakistani women entrepreneurship revolves around external factors like culture constraints, financial barriers, and family (Khan et al., 2021; Nasir et al., 2019; Rehman & Roomi, 2012). However, there is limited research conducted on the contribution of universities towards shaping entrepreneurial intention for female students. Following a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, this study tries to provide a comprehensive perspective on how female students perceive the entrepreneurial climate of their respective universities.

Besides, the study will compare Pakistan's entrepreneurial education system with global best practices. The United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom have formalized entrepreneurship education programs that actively encourage women to become entrepreneurs (Faoite, 2003; Lynes, 2011; Abreu & Grinevich, 2013). Universities in these countries have formal entrepreneurship programs, mentorship initiatives, and financing support schemes for women entrepreneurs (Sinha, 2005). By analyzing these models, this study explored whether such programs can be introduced in Pakistani universities to create an enabling entrepreneurial culture for women.

The research findings contribute to the debates on gender and higher education. Education is known to be a passport to economic empowerment for women in most societies. However, to thrive, women's entrepreneurship needs education to transition from the academic and offer actual experience, skills development, and access to industry networks. Through the assessment of Pakistan's higher education system's deficiencies, this study aspires to advance policy debate that can fill these deficiencies and enhance entrepreneurial culture.

Finally, female entrepreneurship can make meaningful contributions towards economic growth and social development in Pakistan. However, many structural, cultural, and institutional constraints still exist to deter women from engaging in entrepreneurship. Educational institutions, especially higher education institutions, play a vital role in promoting entrepreneurial intention among female students through providing access to education, mentoring, networking, and access to finance. The existing entrepreneurial ecosystem in Pakistani universities is to be explored in this research, aiming to identify key hindrances

and opportunities for female students. Through resolving these issues, the research aspires to inform policy advice that can guide stakeholders and universities toward creating a better environment for women entrepreneurship. By gaining improved comprehension of the problems and potential remedies, this study aspires to empower Pakistani women to be their own masters in entrepreneurial aspirations and contribute substantially to the economy.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurship is increasingly being considered as a central engine of economic growth, social development, and innovation. Entrepreneurial attitudes are nurtured by higher education institutions (HEIs), which provide students with required knowledge, skills, and exposure to business opportunities (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). In an attempt to cultivate entrepreneurship, it is important to understand how gender dynamics intersect with entrepreneurship education. For female students, entry into the entrepreneurial ecosystem is characterized by unique challenges that are shaped by cultural, institutional, and societal forces. This literature review examines the contribution of higher education to entrepreneurial development, the influence of gender on entrepreneurship education, the entrepreneurial ecosystem for female students in Pakistan, and the main challenges encountered by women in pursuing entrepreneurship. In addition, it specifies the best practices worldwide for deriving lessons in the Pakistani context.

The Role of Higher Education in Entrepreneurial Development

Universities have been regarded as core institutions where entrepreneurial learning would take place, providing platforms for students to acquire theoretical and practical know-how. Entrepreneurship education has gained significant momentum worldwide as universities become aware of their role in equipping students for the realities of entrepreneurship and the practical operation of a business. Empirical studies suggest that entrepreneurship education can have a positive impact on the entrepreneurial attitude, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial intention of students to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Bae et al., 2014). Incubators, formal training courses, networking events, and mentorship programs are all roles that HEIs have in providing resources for aspiring entrepreneurs to succeed. It has been discovered that entrepreneurship education programs specifically designed to develop entrepreneurial intention are capable of enhancing students' self-efficacy in entrepreneurship and problem-solving (Gibb, 2002). To further that end, the introduction of business incubators and mentorship plans in institutions of higher education has been perceived as a primary catalyst for entrepreneurship.

Incubators offer potential entrepreneurs practical support, including office space, access to funds, and exposure to industry professionals, which can be particularly beneficial to facilitate them to go from idea development to sustainable business models. Mentorship programs, on the other hand, allow students to engage with successful entrepreneurs and professionals who can offer insight and guidance in navigating the problems of entrepreneurship (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). Such systems bring robustness to the entrepreneurial environment within universities, as students are able to gain the correct skills to start and maintain their enterprises.

Gender and Entrepreneurship in Higher Education

While entrepreneurship learning is a requirement for all students, it has been found that gender plays a central role in how students approach entrepreneurship. Girls challenge differently from boys, either because of societal expectations or internalized constraint. Research indicates that women are less self-assured, face limited access to mentorship, and are confronted with cultural constraints that deter them from engaging in entrepreneurial ventures (Wilson et al., 2007). Such obstacles are most pronounced in conservative societies, where women's participation is confined to the home and entrepreneurship is viewed as a man's venture. Compared to male students, women are less likely to consider entrepreneurship as a viable career option due to these social restrictions. This diminishment of confidence in their entrepreneurial capacity is further supplemented by societal norms discouraging women from risking loss or stepping into leadership roles (Shinnar et al., 2012).

Besides, women are also less risk-prone in their actions compared to men, partly due to pressures from society that anticipate more from women as the norm for success and stability. Therefore, women students will be less inclined to be entrepreneurs or pursue entrepreneurial ventures, despite the potential economic and social effects.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Female Students in Pakistan

Pakistan's entrepreneurial environment presents unique challenges for female students, particularly due to deeply rooted cultural norms and institutional constraints. The World Economic Forum (2022) ranks Pakistan low on global gender equality indexes, and women are faced with substantial barriers to engaging in business and economic activities. While some Pakistani universities have introduced entrepreneurship courses, overall awareness of entrepreneurial experience, mentoring, and contact opportunities remains limited (Zaidi et al., 2024). Cultural barriers have a large role to play in shaping entrepreneurial intention among women. In Pakistan, women are largely relegated to household sectors by society, and entrepreneurship is a man's line of work.

Such beliefs relegate women away from undertaking initiatives or venturing into something unknown. Even though women students who may be entrepreneurial-oriented do exist, they never get the aid and assistance that is needed for them to set and work toward goals. Institutional gender biases within universities are also part of these problems. Many universities, for example, have courses in entrepreneurship, but these courses are meant for male students with minimal provision for the specific issues faced by women entrepreneurs (Roomi, 2013). While efforts are made to develop gender-sensitive programs and policies, the entrepreneurial climate for women overall in Pakistan remains underdeveloped. Female students therefore have powerful limitations in terms of undertaking entrepreneurship in the guise of no access to practical training, networking, and funding.

Issues Faced by Female Entrepreneurship Students

Certain of the major issues limit female students' entrepreneurial intention in both developing as well as developed countries. One of the biggest challenges facing women entrepreneurs is a lack of mentorship. There is evidence to suggest that women entrepreneurs have restricted access to role models who can provide guidance and encouragement (Brush et al., 2009). Mentorship is particularly critical in entrepreneurship since it helps women to navigate the complexities of business start-up and expansion. The absence of female role models in entrepreneurship

also worsens the situation, with women students not having adequate support groups. Social and cultural norms are also powerful obstacles to women's entrepreneurship. In the majority of societies, including Pakistan, traditional gender roles discourage women from being entrepreneurs and risk-takers. Women are typically expected to prioritize family obligations over career aspirations, limiting their opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Huq & Moyeen, 2008). Moreover, societal expectations place women in a less capable position to run businesses, further diminishing their self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention. Finance constraint is yet another imperative concern for women entrepreneurs. Women struggle to obtain finances since there exist gender imbalances in lending institutions. Financial institutions are reluctant to lend money to women entrepreneurs, particularly in cultures where the economic contribution of women is downgraded (Goyal & Yadav, 2014). In the absence of finances, women entrepreneurs struggle to establish and run businesses, and thus it becomes more challenging for them to become part of the entrepreneurial platform. Finally, institutional frailties, particularly in the tertiary sector, are to blame for the challenge faced by female students. The majority of universities provide theoretical knowledge on entrepreneurship but lack the practical training, incubators, and industry connections necessary to develop real entrepreneurial skills (Henry et al., 2015).

This lack of exposure to the real world also discourages women students from pursuing entrepreneurship since they do not have the equipment and resources required to convert their ideas into viable business opportunities.

Best Practices from Global Contexts

As opposed to Pakistan, the majority of developed countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom have integrated female entrepreneurship into higher education successfully through systematic programs, funding, and networking schemes (Welter, 2011). Such countries have fostered elaborate entrepreneurial ecosystems that provide female students with incubators, mentorship initiatives, funding, and networking opportunities (Welter, 2011). These programs have been discovered to improve women's entrepreneurial achievements by providing women with the skills, knowledge, and self-esteem they require in order to start and expand their businesses.

For example, in America, universities created incubators specifically designed to support women entrepreneurs to provide them with access to industry players, mentorship, and investment. Canadian and British universities have also come up with gender-sensitive curricula for teaching, which aim at addressing the specific needs of women entrepreneurs. Implementing these models can potentially improve the ecosystem for women to become entrepreneurs, ensuring that women students receive whatever they require to thrive as entrepreneurs in Pakistan.

In conclusion, education in entrepreneurship plays a significant role in developing entrepreneurial intention but is often shaped through gendered problems. Cultural beliefs, lack of mentorship, financial limitation in the sense of accessibility, and institutional gaps significantly affect the entrepreneurial desire among women students in Pakistan. Optimum global practices offer some learning which can play a pivotal role in improving women's entrepreneurial climate in Pakistan.

Key Findings

In-depth interviews with female students were analyzed through qualitative analysis and yielded several key findings that

are revealing about the drivers of their entrepreneurial intention and the issues they face. These results pinpoint the disparity between the opportunities provided by universities and the entrepreneurial experience actually gained by female students, as well as the cultural and institutional limitations that limit their entrepreneurial aspirations.

Lack of Entrepreneurial Exposure in Universities

One common thread that emerged from the interviews was that there was a lack of adequate entrepreneurial exposure in universities. While most participants valued that their universities organized career fairs, guest lectures, and workshops, these events were not entrepreneurship-focused. Women students complained that the programs were more geared toward traditional career paths than entrepreneurial attitude or business ownership. Business studies, while helpful in the aspect of theoretical knowledge, were criticized for lacking proper practice application. The participants groused that though they learned concepts in business, there were very few opportunities to engage in real entrepreneurial practice. This lack of experiential training and experience in actual business environments hindered their ability to learn the skills and confidence required to pursue entrepreneurship.

Limited Access to Role Models and Mentorship

Another significant hindrance that surfaced in the interviews was the restricted access to role models and mentorship, particularly female entrepreneurs. The majority of students reported feeling uninspired and uninformed because they lacked successful women entrepreneurs to look up to in the immediate environment or among their friends. The absence of female mentors who would provide them with advice and encouragement was an additional barrier for the students to envision themselves as entrepreneurs. Female participants emphasized that exposure to successful women entrepreneurs might encourage them to start business ventures, enhance their confidence, and overcome the particular obstacles they would face. Having female mentors who would be able to offer guidance and practical advice was always emphasized, highlighting that mentorship is an essential factor in developing entrepreneurial intent.

Cultural Constraints and Societal Expectations

Social norms and cultural expectations were a significant factor in determining the entrepreneurial ambitions of the female students that limited their ambitions. The majority of the participants recounted that they were pressured by their family members to pursue traditional careers in the likes of teaching or government careers, rather than building their own businesses. In most cases, fear of failure and the social stigma associated with embarking on entrepreneurial risks further discouraged them from pursuing entrepreneurship as a career. These cultural constraints, coupled with the belief that entrepreneurship is a man's activity, provided an environment where female students were less likely to embark on business ownership. The social expectations that women face to prioritize their family responsibilities over their personal career goals also affected their career development, diverting them from entrepreneurial activities most times.

Gender Bias within Entrepreneurial Contexts

Some participants noted that they have experienced gender bias in entrepreneurial contexts, particularly in competitions and business pitching events. They felt that male-dominated environments are more likely to devalue their ideas and contributions, leading to frustration and discouragement. Female

students indicated that their ideas were more likely to be dismissed or less seriously considered compared to those provided by their male peers, validating the assumption that entrepreneurship is primarily a man's field. This entrepreneurial gender bias in entrepreneurial settings, coupled with a lack of female role models and mentors, created a barrier to the development of female students' entrepreneurial intention. Female respondents explicated that neutralizing such biases and entrepreneurial settings becoming more accommodating would be valuable in raising women's participation in entrepreneurship.

Need for Institutional Support

Among the notable findings that arose from the interviews was the need for students to have more institutional assistance in their endeavors. The majority of interviewees directed towards a shortage of hands-on entrepreneurial experience and the pressing need for more exposure to start-ups of businesses. Interviewees suggested introducing schemes that go beyond book knowledge alone and provide pupils with room to take ideas to practice and implement these in real situations. Furthermore, the need for incubation facilities and funding was emphasized. The women students called for greater access to funding as well as a more structured entrepreneurship education program that exposes them to mentorship, networking, and industry connections. The interaction between universities and industry professionals was seen as the solution to the provision of practical experience necessary to build confidence and capability in entrepreneurship.

In summary, the key findings of this study are that while Pakistani universities provide some entrepreneurial exposure, there are large gaps in the support provided to female students. Lack of specialized programs, limited access to mentorship, cultural constraints, and gender biases in entrepreneurial settings all contribute to the underdevelopment of entrepreneurial intentions among female students. To overcome these, universities must advance their entrepreneurial education, provide additional hands-on training, and make an environment conducive to motivating and supporting female students to engage in entrepreneurship. The development of inclusive environments with a focus on mentorship and exposure to role models will encourage additional women to take the entrepreneurial plunge.

Conclusion

This study highlights the central role of HEIs in cultivating entrepreneurial intention among Pakistani female students. The study reveals that despite some career development programs offered by universities, they lack well-developed entrepreneurial programs, mentorship, and practical training specifically aimed at women. The absence of entrepreneurial exposure coupled with cultural limitations and gender biases significantly reduces female students' intentions to pursue entrepreneurship.

In order to bridge this gap, the universities have to take a leading role in embedding entrepreneurship into the curriculum through experiential learning, mentorship, and industry partnerships. Policymakers too must support female entrepreneurship by enabling financial incentives, networking, and public awareness programs to negate customary gender norms.

Lessons from global best practices demonstrate that institutionalized support structures, including funding options, business incubators, and role models, can significantly enhance women's entrepreneurial engagement. By replicating the same strategies, Pakistan can create a more inclusive entrepreneurial

ecosystem that enables women to perform their role in economic growth efficiently.

Future research should explore interventions that could enhance entrepreneurial intent among female students. Comparison between universities that actively promote entrepreneurship and those that do not could provide additional information on best practices. Finally, the cultivation of women's entrepreneurship in universities is a multifaceted challenge that must address cultural, institutional, and financial barriers. By empowering female students with resources and opportunities, Pakistan can unleash an enormous talent pool of entrepreneurs that create social and economic development.

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