
DREAMING BRIGHTER FUTURES IN PAKISTAN THROUGH EMPOWERING FEMALE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS



Image: *Bushra Rahim (third from left, front) at a prize-giving ceremony with students and staff of Ujala Primary School, Peshawar, Pakistan*

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In her powerful [2009 TED talk](#) critically acclaimed Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to the danger of having only one single story about a place and its people. In the case of Africa, she talks about the stereotypical image that focuses on a continent full of catastrophes and how pervasive this image has become as a defining cultural marker.

The danger of stereotypes in her view is: 'not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story'. She calls for a 'balance of stories' that will help 'to empower and humanise' rather than the single story that shows a people only in the negative. More recently, joint-2019 Nobel Economics Prize-winner Esther Duflo made a similar point about the [dangers of caricatures](#) of people living in poverty.

In the case of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the country is often portrayed in Western media as one of constant political instability and internal conflict, beset by frequent environmental disasters and with a rather bleak economic future.

This is of course an incomplete picture of this relatively young nation. One that denies optimism for its youth, particularly for the [70+ million young people](#) under-15, about their own futures and that of their country. It is also out of touch with the positive views adolescents have expressed about their own lives, and reflected in a recent [UNDP report](#). Called *Unleashing the potential of a Young Pakistan* the report highlights the 'golden opportunity' to benefit from the 'youth bulge', where almost two-thirds of the population is [younger than 30](#) years of age. Pre-Covid-19, Pakistan was also shown to have a fast [growing middle class](#) and a significant pool of [technology talent](#).

Nonetheless, around a quarter of Pakistan's population lives below the [national poverty line](#). And when using the [UN multidimensional poverty index](#) for 2017-18, this figure rises substantially to just under 40 per cent – although with significant regional variation.

Against this somewhat sombre background, however, is an expanding but not well-documented movement of social entrepreneurs in Pakistan, helping those from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly girls and women, to build optimism about their futures. Their work and the community initiated social enterprises created, offer important but largely untapped potential to help ensure that Pakistan's demographic youth bulge becomes [a driver of growth](#) rather than an economic burden and source of social unrest.

Whilst, there is a substantial Western literature on the important role of social entrepreneurs as change makers, and the ecosystems that are needed to support and scale their work, similar research regarding Pakistan is far more limited and fragmented. Nonetheless, key investigations by the UN Development Programme (UNDP); Social Impact investors SEED Ventures and i-genius; and the British Council, conclude that social enterprises are an underutilised source of funding for gender equity and female empowerment in Pakistan.

Drawing on these investigations and informed by recent research from peak international agencies tackling global challenges, this paper provides a specifically culturally nuanced understanding of social enterprises in Pakistan.

Of particular interest is the involvement and challenges faced by women in establishing and scaling these enterprises and ways these challenges could be overcome, including through greater clarity and harmonising of legislation and regulations regarding the social enterprise sector. Insight is also provided into the frugal innovation operations and strategic partnerships approach of a

grassroots social enterprise in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province located in the North Western region of Pakistan, neighbouring Afghanistan, where one of the authors plays a leadership role.

It is the view of the authors that Pakistan's government has a key role to play in promoting female social entrepreneurs as active change makers in meeting UN SDG targets. However, it must first have the political will to help build the requisite policy, support and coordinating structures for the social enterprise sector. This includes assisting the development of a web portal to create networks/alliances of female social entrepreneurs across all of Pakistan to better scale their endeavours.

A BACKDROP TO PAKISTAN

Pakistan is a relatively young nation, created in 1947 with the end of the British Raj and the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Largely based on religion, two separate states were established – India (Hindus and Sikhs) and Pakistan (Muslim). Millions were displaced and many died as a result of the partition. Until 1971 Pakistan was composed of two regions – West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Civil war led to East Pakistan forming the nation of Bangladesh.

Pakistan is a land of great diversity, with landscapes stretching from coastline, to deserts, to the Himalayas mountain ranges. Its name means '[the land of the Pure](#)' and is composed of letters taken from the Punjab, Afghania, Kashmir, Sindh and Balochistan regions.



With its immediate neighbours being India, Iran, China and Afghanistan, Pakistan holds an important geographic location in Asia and is ranked the world's fifth most populous country. Islamabad, located in the North, is the National Capital. It also has a significant [diaspora](#) – one of the 6th largest in the world comprising many unskilled workers but also [skilled professionals](#), particularly in IT.

Of its more than 212 million people, about [two-thirds live in rural areas](#). And there are many different languages spoken, largely distributed on a regional basis and reflecting the five major ethnic groups. The Punjabi account for just over half the population followed by the Pashtuns and Sindhi. A large proportion of the population can also speak English, which is a co-official language with Urdu.



Image: Women engage in agricultural work, Layyah District, Central Pakistan: By Satsuki Arai/JICA

The country is divided into the four administrative provinces of Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. In addition, there are two territories administered by Pakistan within the larger Kashmir region - Gilgit-Baltistan, comprising the northern portion and Azad Jammu and Kashmir comprising the western portion.

There is also a [legislated quota](#) of a fifth of seats in the Majlis-E-Shoora/National Assembly for women. However, this representation does not necessarily mean a genuine voice of [women in decision-making](#). Furthermore, it does not adequately reflect the dynastic nature of political parties in Pakistan that supports 'female politicians with a strong family background'. As such these women politicians 'may be more inclined toward [maintaining the status quo](#), which is the concentration of power in dynastic political parties, rather than

challenging the system to close the gender gap'. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence of [women driving change at a grassroots level](#) as part of social enterprise development in disadvantaged regions in Pakistan.

The UN classifies Pakistan as a '[Developing economy](#)' and in FY 2019 Pakistan had a [GDP growth rate of 3.3%](#). And whilst heavily dependent on agriculture at the time of Independence its economy has since [diversified](#) with services being the largest sector, contributing approximately a third of GDP. This is followed by agriculture accounting for one-fifth of GDP (and two-fifths of employment) and industry just over a fifth. Textiles and apparel account for more than half of Pakistan's export earnings.

In 2013 the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" was established involving US\$62 billion of investments in energy and other infrastructure projects aimed at economic growth and development for both countries.

Growth in telecommunications has been substantial and reflected in particular in the fast developing digital start-up landscape and the creation of the [National Incubation Center](#) to support this. In 2019 [Mobile cellular subscriptions](#) numbered over 165 million. The [broadband subscriber base](#) is just under 80 million and continues to increase. And whilst there are a number of significant challenges to [doing business](#) in Pakistan the country improved its [World Bank Ease of Doing Business](#) ranking from 136 to 108 in 2019.

Still, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, Pakistan has faced formidable economic challenges, including dealing with a large public debt. And the [IMF](#) has taken a lead role in helping the country to address 'long-standing policy and structural weaknesses' and to 'restore macroeconomic stability'. In 2019 the IMF approved a US\$6 billion loan for Pakistan as part of promoting strong and sustainable economic growth for the country.

PAKISTAN AND THE UN SDGS

Pakistan does not rank highly on a number of UN SDGs. Nonetheless, it was one of the first countries to [integrate the UN SDGs](#) into its national development agenda in 2016. Key features of its implementation strategy and also addressed in its recent [Voluntary National Review](#) are: to promote partnerships across institutions and sectors including civil society; promote gender equity as crucial to achieving all 17 SDG targets; and capture the potential of its youth, leveraging where possible technologies, partnerships and cross-sector innovations.

Pakistan was ranked an abysmal 136 out of 162 countries on the 2018 UN Development Programme's [Gender Inequality Index](#). Inequality is measured across three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. Female participation in the labour market is shown to be considerably

lower for adult women than men and only 20 per cent of working age women are in 'paid' labour, with a negligible proportion in management positions.

There is also a significant gender disparity in education in Pakistan, with almost 60 percent of [girls no longer attending primary school](#) by grade six compared to 49 percent boys. These inequalities are particularly prominent in provinces such as [Balochistan](#) where, as of 2014-15, the majority of women had not completed primary school compared to just over half of males.

Nonetheless, included in Pakistan's key priorities regarding SDG 5–Gender equality, is the encouragement of women entrepreneurs with the provision of interest-free micro finance loans to enable them to start their own businesses, and also development projects with a specific focus on girl education.

Planned Initiatives in the 12th Five Year Plan (2018-2023) include the [creation of Centres for Women's Economic Empowerment and Social Entrepreneurship](#). ICT and skills development workshops are also proposed. In addition, Pakistan's National Incubation Centre (a public-private sector partnership) is conducting 'National SDG Boot-camps' with a focus on: 'advocacy and training platforms for social entrepreneurs and change-makers to accelerate the impact of their activities, so as to fast-track progress on the goals'.

Far less optimistically, Pakistan's Voluntary National Review also cautions that: 'Insufficient financing for sustainable development remains a challenge in difficult fiscal conditions and is likely to weigh heavily on the meaningful achievement of the 2030 Agenda's ambitious targets'. With the Covid-19 pandemic this situation will have inevitably worsened and highlights the imperative of better understanding and leveraging the largely untapped social entrepreneurial talent of women to deliver on the UN SDGs.

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The ambitious targets of the UN SDGs have given greater visibility globally to a category of change makers known as social entrepreneurs. Bill Drayton, the founder of [Ashoka](#), a not-for-profit NGO seeking innovative solutions to global challenges, coined the term. It describes people who use innovative thinking and business principles to create enterprises that address major social problems in ways that benefit the socially excluded and the poor – where the focus is less on wealth creation than on social change. These enterprises can be 'for-profit' or 'not-for-profit'. A famous social entrepreneur is Nobel Peace Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus who founded the microfinance organisation for the poor, [Grameen Bank](#).

Further insight to the important role of social entrepreneurs is provided by Hilde Schwab, chairperson and co-founder of the [Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship](#) who comments that: 'Their work is often carried out in areas

where government and the private sector are unable to achieve meaningful outcomes and involves considerable creativity coupled with pragmatism.'

Of particular interest to policy makers is how to scale the value created by social enterprises within local communities, where they are mostly '[hands-on operations](#)' driven by the ethical impetus of their founders, to the society more broadly.

There is no standardised definition for social enterprises. Nonetheless, the definition proposed by the European Commission and the OECD for the [European context](#) is of broad international relevance. Within this definition a social enterprise is built along three dimensions:

- *an entrepreneurial dimension* (with earned income generated by the sale of goods/services on the market, including through public contracting);
- *a social dimension* (the pursuit of an explicit social aim and delivery of products/services with a social connotation);
- *a governance dimension* (accountability, participation and transparency).

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN A PAKISTAN CONTEXT

Pakistan's Muslim population is the second largest in the world. As such it is important to consider social entrepreneurship and social enterprises within the context of Islamic principles, which emphasise the importance of giving. These principles are reflected in many ways. For example, through Sadaqah (voluntary charity); Hadiyyah (gift); [Zakat](#) (mandatory charity, a religious duty, and which is the Third Pillar of Islam and comes after prayer in importance); [Khairat](#) (the voluntary giving of charity for charity's sake); and [Qard Hasan](#) (an interest-free personal loan for social welfare or for short-term bridging finance).

The people of Pakistan are considered [particularly charitable](#). However, most of their donations go directly to individuals for immediate needs rather than to organisations, such as philanthropies, that aim to make social investments in a structured way to enhance the well-being of the underprivileged.

Playing a key role as a [social and development finance institution](#) for Muslims in poorer countries is the Islamic legal form of endowment, referred to as [Waqf](#) which dates back to the ninth century and which is of particular relevance to Pakistan.

This type of [endowment](#) is: 'a special kind of philanthropic deed in perpetuity. It involves donating a fixed asset which can produce a financial return or provide a benefit'. The donations can be held by a charitable trust and profits reinvested in various ways to serve designated beneficiaries over generations. [The Hammad Group](#), a large pharmaceutical company based in Karachi, is an

example of this type of philanthropy. As part of its operations the company provides affordable medicines and Free Mobile Dispensaries serving 40,000 poor patients per month in Pakistan, amongst other types of community support.

The microfinance sector also plays an important role in poverty alleviation and social entrepreneurship in Pakistan, with the first specialized microfinance institution, [The Kashf Foundation](#), set up in 1996 and regulated by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Kashf is modelled on Grameen Bank and focuses on low-income households with a particular focus on enabling women: 'to become active agents of social and economic change.'

The world's largest interest free Islamic micro-finance organisation, [Akhawat](#), has targeted poverty alleviation in Pakistan since 2001. Religious Places are used for the loan disbursements and are an important way of promoting transparency, accountability and good governance as well as community participation.

Against this record of different enterprises guided by Islamic principles that have been helping to address social and economic challenges in Pakistan is the role played by a number of international development agencies. For example, [The United Nations Development Programme](#) has had a long partnership with Pakistan in seeking to find and implement sustainable solutions to a number of the country's complex challenges. This includes leveraging the problem-solving capacity of Pakistan's youth such as through the [Youth innovation Challenge](#). Likewise, through its [Accelerator Labs](#) to address issues such as social entrepreneurship and female inequality.

Global nonprofit venture fund [Acumen](#) also has a well-established reputation internationally in promoting entrepreneurial approaches as a means of combatting poverty. Its investments in social enterprises and leadership initiatives in Pakistan have impacted many lives. However, in 2018 with the government's stricter [policy towards foreign-funded NGOs](#), Acumen's operations ceased in Pakistan, leaving a significant gap in support structures for social enterprises.

Overall, however, the concept of social enterprise in Pakistan is [not well-defined](#), complicated in particular by numerous Acts, regulations and registration requirements regarding charities, and for-profit and not-for-profit NGOs, including those introduced by the National Counter Terrorism Authority (see Appendix 1). Consequently, there are significant gaps in the overall understanding of the social enterprise landscape, with a 2017 [British Council](#) inquiry commenting on: 'a wide spectrum of social enterprises with different legal forms, differing degrees of market orientation and different approaches to social or environmental missions'.

In contrast, the Government established the flagship organisation '[Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority – SMEDA](#)' in 1998 as part of its capacity building initiatives for this sector. Through its comprehensive sector specific Helpdesks SMEDA provides services across Pakistan 'to budding entrepreneurs and existing SMEs to start and manage their businesses efficiently'.

However, in 2015 the Planning Commission of the Pakistan Government set up its first distinct entity for the promotion of social entrepreneurship when it established the [Centre for Social Entrepreneurship](#). The Centre's purpose is to promote innovation and enterprise development targeting social issues. In particular: 'to serve as an accelerator which would play the role of a Special Purpose Vehicle for instilling innovation and jump-starting social entrepreneurship in the country'. The intention is to fund 25 startups per year.

The Centre firmly supports the Social Impact Investment model where social and educational services are provided that can be scaled up and become affordable to large numbers of people and which generate profits. Yet, although there is funding to support ideation, training programmes are not currently provided. Overall the Centre's operations are quite modest in relation to its stated purpose, even if it is able to secure partnerships with existing incubators as intended.

Also, despite its plans to promote partnerships as part of its strategy to help address the UN SDGs, so far the Pakistan government has demonstrated fairly limited interest in helping to build the sort of [social enterprise support ecosystem](#) advocated by the British Council. One that connects: 'government bodies, microfinance institutions, civil society organisations, local and international support organisations, private sector investors and business incubators.'

Yet as eminent Pakistani development economist, diplomat and the first female governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, [Shamshad Akhtar](#), has argued, social enterprises could be used as a model for empowerment of Pakistani women if '[a gender-responsive entrepreneurial ecosystem](#)' is created, where women entrepreneurs can 'access the resources and support needed to develop their businesses, scale up and make them sustainable'.

EFFORTS TO MAP PAKISTAN'S SOCIAL ENTERPRISE LANDSCAPE

Helping to provide a more complete mapping of the social enterprise landscape in Pakistan, are organisations such as impact investors [SEED \(Social, Entrepreneurship and Equity Development\) Ventures](#). SEED offers a programme providing learning and development support for founders of social enterprises and brings extensive experience working with private and public

sectors in Pakistan. The programme is called [the Social Enterprise Academy](#) and is a franchise of a successful Scottish initiative that is replicated internationally. In 2019 SEED's Founder, [Faraz Khan](#) optimistically commented on: 'a demonstrated growth in women-led social enterprises that is truly at the fulcrum of the social enterprise sector's growth trajectory in Pakistan'.

A constructive but not widely known policy paper, was released by SEED and European based social innovation and entrepreneurship organisation [i-genius](#) in 2014. Called: '[Opportunity Pakistan. Exploring Untapped Potential](#)' the paper focused on the opportunities and challenges facing the development of social entrepreneurship and innovation in Pakistan. Insights from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders were provided, including from government and finance institutions and the Diaspora. In the view of the authors: 'Social entrepreneurship has much to offer Pakistan. Its development will contribute considerably to the economic, political and cultural potential of the country'.

The policy paper identifies a number of ways that the development of social entrepreneurship could be fast-tracked. These include the provision of: 'an online Pakistani network of social entrepreneurs, a database of social businesses and support incubators to enhance scalability'. The engagement of the Pakistani Diaspora was also recommended, through initiatives such as a Social Investment Fund targeted at contributions by Diaspora members to their original communities.

And regarding 'Empowering Women' in particular, the authors proposed the following practical actions:

- *A new education policy for women* to improve the levels of female education and develop their business acumen at the urban and rural level.
- *Media initiatives including social media* would help to change mindsets in the country so that women can be accepted in professional roles other than the traditional roles that seem to be strongly associated with their gender.
- *Social entrepreneurship policy making bodies* in the country should seek to have high level of representation of women.
- An '*All Pakistan Women Social Entrepreneur Network*' should be developed to act as a hub where exchange of knowledge between female entrepreneurs can take place.
- *Access to finance development* should be part of the Social Investment Fund and priority given to them for provision of access to financing from MFIs and other financial institutions. Agricultural credit should also be available to women performing in the agricultural sector.

However, the role of this particular policy paper in influencing the Pakistan Government's position on female social entrepreneurs is not clear.

The British Council with the assistance of SEED has also played a prominent role in helping to map out [the state of social enterprise in Pakistan](#). This case study was part of a wider project looking at social enterprises in Bangladesh, Ghana and India as well as Pakistan.

The resulting 2016 report is based on a 2015/2016 survey of 134 social enterprises. The main findings include that people under 35 led most of the enterprises and that women led over a fifth, which is in stark contrast to the very few SMEs led by women in Pakistan. Significantly, female led social enterprises were also found more likely to recruit women.

The enterprises surveyed were shown to have an economic impact particularly through job creation, and over half had growth plans. About half of the enterprises operated in the education sector.

The main barriers to growth were access to funding, particularly grant funding, and finance; followed by lack of capital and cash flow issues; shortage of technical skills; lack of access to support and advisory services; and low levels of understanding/awareness of social enterprise among banks and support organisations. Additional barriers for women when starting social enterprises included prejudice and discrimination, with barriers to accessing investment and negative cultural attitudes towards women in jobs. These barriers were also identified in a subsequent report.

A key recommendation in the report was that: 'The government should look to recognize a formal definition of social enterprise to facilitate understanding of its benefits to society, and to women specifically, within government and wider society. The government should also create a specific legal structure that could be adopted by social enterprises'.

Also recommended was the facilitation of: 'networking between gender focused social enterprises and women's organisations nationally and internationally with a view to sharing best practice and replicating successful models'.

Regarding training for women social entrepreneurs, the report suggests that: 'This should focus particularly on: financial literacy; business planning; business skills; pitching for funding and investment; and technology' and that female social entrepreneurs raise their profiles through effective use of media and promoting women as role models.

In 2017 as part of its global research on the role of social enterprises in supporting gender equality and women's empowerment the British Council released a further report entitled: '[Activist to Entrepreneur](#)'. In relation to [the](#)

[case study of Pakistan](#) the research showed that: 'In a country where women and girls face a lack of opportunities, discrimination and violence, social enterprise is providing proportionally more leadership, employment and training opportunities for women than the mainstream economy'. However, of concern is that the report also noted once the enterprise grew larger it was less likely to be led by a woman. Also, whilst a number of effective social enterprises working in the area of women's empowerment were identified it was noted that these enterprises were not well known or well networked.

Recommendations made in this report largely echo those made in the 2016 study regarding ways to increase social impact of women social entrepreneurs and enhance their empowerment. These include: facilitating networking for sharing of best practice and replication of successful models; specific packages for training, support investment and mentoring of women; and active recognition and promotion of successful female role models in social enterprises.

It should be noted that the British Council has also set up a [pilot programme](#) on social enterprise in six universities based in Pakistan, with the view to extend the programme to 50 universities. The pilot aims to equip students with the skills needed to be successful social entrepreneurs and to ensure universities are able to support student-led social enterprise start-ups. However, overall, the effective role of universities in promoting social entrepreneurship in Pakistan is difficult to establish.

In summary, there is clear consistency in the barriers, insights and recommendations from the key reports overviewed above. As such they provide an important blueprint for how social enterprises can act as a vehicle for female empowerment in Pakistan. What is needed is the political will of government to implement reforms based on such recommendations through the cross-sector partnerships it has strongly advocated.

CHAMPIONING CHANGE INCREMENTALLY

In its report, ['Moon Shots & Puddle Jumps'](#), the UNDP explains how meeting the UNSDGs will require strategic investments in different forms of innovation – transformative and incremental. *Moon shots* are described as the 'visionary inventions and technological breakthroughs' and *puddle jumps* as the 'incremental advances that support the most marginalised and ensure no one is left behind'.

In relation to 'puddle jumps' the report explores how a number of 'Women Trailblazers' have helped enhance female empowerment in the very conservative and substantially socioeconomically disadvantaged Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Of particular interest to the UNDP is to better

understand how Trailblazers and high impact change makers such as the remarkable [Maryam Bibi](#), founder and Chief Executive of [Khwendo Kor](#), (Sisters' Home), have been able to push traditional boundaries, crowd source indigenous ideas and replicate and scale up what works.

This puddle jumps approach to innovation is also reflected in the important but not well-known operations of The Association of Business, Professional and Agricultural Women (ABPAW) KP Province. This is a grassroots organisation that seeks to improve the circumstances of women and children through incremental changes and to scale up locally derived successful initiatives and processes that can create impact. Some background and insights to the operations of the Association conclude this article.

The Karachi Business and Professional Women's Club was launched in 1954 by Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, the wife of Pakistan's first Prime Minister. The Club was modelled on the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (IFBPW), founded in Geneva, Switzerland in August 1930.

In early 1980s, the Club was renamed as The Association of Business, Professional and Agricultural Women (ABPAW) with a specific purpose to safeguard the rights of all women including those working in the agriculture sector. The scope of membership was also widened to include women from middle-income families as well as those from lower-middle income families. The branches of ABPAW soon spread across the country.

As a women-led social enterprise one of the significant features of ABPAW is the close cooperation between women leaders, which enables the efficient sharing of knowledge, experimenting with new ideas and prompt resolution of issues. The Association provides a platform for young women to be mentored by its senior leadership, which collectively represents more than five decades of entrepreneurship experience.

The KP chapter of ABPAW was inaugurated in 1984 and initially focused on local community needs such as supporting the education of impoverished girls, marriage of girls from underprivileged families, and equipping rural women with sewing and cutting skills to empower them economically.

However, complex bureaucratic procedures and insufficient understanding of the relevant legal regulations meant that this chapter remained unregistered with the Social Welfare Department of KP for many years. And even once registered, there were many obstacles to opening a bank account for the Association. This is consistent with findings of the British Council report '[Activist to Entrepreneur](#)' referenced above which drew attention to the many problems for unremunerated women volunteers, particularly from poorer backgrounds, in

taking informal social entrepreneurship at a community level to become formal NGOs or social enterprises that could have significant social impact.

In 2016, Executive Body elections were held which resulted in the election of a number of professionally qualified women with diverse experience of different sectors. Since then, the Association has gradually transitioned from isolated, small-scale actions to taking a more strategic approach.



Image: ABPAW National and Branch Presidents/Reps: Peshawar; Multan; Islamabad/Rawalpindi; Karachi; Larkana

Three major initiatives currently being undertaken are the establishment of Ujala free schools for street/out-of-school children; the establishment of literacy and skills development centres; and reviving book reading habits amongst primary school students.

Other activities include arranging workshops for women on health & hygiene and economic and political empowerment; arranging training sessions for Ujala school teachers; displaying the work of women artisan entrepreneurs in arts and crafts exhibitions; distribution of food rations in Ramadan (the holy month of fasting); Eid (religious festival) gifts distributions to school students; and health treatment of the poor and people with disabilities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ABPAW provided [relief to the vulnerable communities](#) and distributed rations to those who had lost their livelihood and were severely hit by the lockdowns. These included disadvantaged people such

as daily wagers, single mothers, religious minorities, artists and transgender people.

The Association aims to contribute towards UN SDG 4 (quality education), UN SDG 5 (gender equality), UN SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), UN SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and UN SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

The Association actively engages with the local community and also partners with the provincial government of KP, educational and health institutes, local government, philanthropists, youth and female volunteers.

One of the Ujala schools is housed in a government girls' secondary school building where children from impoverished communities can attend the school in the afternoon. The premises are provided for free and there are no electricity or water charges or the need to buy additional furniture. A similar arrangement exists with a low-cost private school.

Local community members and organisations also donate clothing, provide nutrition advice, as well as other support services. For example, medical and dental specialists from government and private hospitals partner with the Ujala schools and provide their services to the children for free. Philanthropists and individual donors also pay for school meals or bring cooked food to the school and buy school uniforms and shoes. They also pay for the installation of solar fans and water coolers.



Image: Ujala students receiving free uniforms

A major challenge for any social enterprise is how to scale, either through an explicit [growth strategy to reach masses](#) or by [maximizing social impact](#). The Association's approach accords with that proposed by the [OECD and European Commission](#) - to scale widely by reaching out to many people, and to scale deeply, by diversifying the activities.

Through a recent book reading initiative called *Kitab Dost* (friendship with the book) ABPAW is scaling widely. With an aim to revive book reading habits, promote social and civic sense and, improve learning outcomes of government primary school students, the *Kitab Dost* program was piloted in district Peshawar targeting 1000+ students.



Image: Kitab Dost students reading to their classmates

Kitab Dost is an example of home grown/organic Social Entrepreneurship, which originated with the donation of 500 storybooks to the President of ABPAW. Being aware of low literacy rates and poor reading habits in the society, it was decided to read the storybooks in government schools with the help of volunteers, instead of making a library in one of the Ujala schools where only few children could potentially benefit from them.

The Government of KP was invited to trial the idea, and twenty primary schools for boys and girls in Peshawar subsequently became involved. The volunteers would visit the schools once a week to read storybooks to the students and teach ethics and civic responsibilities.

The initiative was so successful that the Education Minister directed that the program be rolled out to the rest of the public schools in Peshawar and as well as other districts.



Image: Kitab Dost ceremony for volunteers – certificates presented by the Minister for Education and Director General Planning Commission (centre R&L).

With regard to scaling deeply, initial screen testing of handicrafts produced by the women, is undertaken by the ABPAW volunteers. After the screening they are trained in quality assurance matters and their products are sold online and through word-of-mouth with the artisans receiving payments for their work.



Image: Women participating in sewing classes run by ABPAW

The short-term impact of the literacy and skill development programme for rural women is measured through skills learnt; self-confidence; economic independence; and the sense of belonging within a women's group.

In the case of the Ujala schools, the immediate impact of the programme on the students is measured through change in the attitudes of children towards life; change in the attitudes of parents towards education; change in mannerism of students; parents' participation; realisation of the importance of girls' education; interest of mothers to send children to the school; and mitigation of violent extremism or extreme viewpoints.

To increase visibility and outreach, a Facebook page has also been created by the organisation to post day-to-day activities. In addition, five WhatsApp groups have been established to discuss daily progress in each thematic area – Kitab dost, Ujala schools, Skill centres, donors and Executive members group and, the national ABPAW group, which comprises of Presidents and General secretaries of all the branches in Pakistan.

By addressing persistent development challenges through resilience, [patient lobbying](#), frugal innovation and strategic partnering with key stakeholders, the Association provides an important 'puddle jump' model for creating other similar social enterprises in Pakistan. It is also an example of how female social entrepreneurs are helping to build brighter futures for Pakistan's disadvantaged and marginalised and its many young.

However, to ensure the potential of these female led social enterprises does not remain underutilised, greater support is needed from government to assist them develop their businesses; navigate the complex legal and registration requirements; and remove impediments to such basic business operations as opening a bank account. The Government SMEDA Theme/Sector Specific Helpdesks referenced above provide an obvious but so far underutilised reference model for this.

A formal network/alliance of women led organisations is also needed for knowledge exchange, learning, strategizing, mutual support and joint actions to drive policy change and implementation that provides brighter futures for the young. Whilst there are models for this from organisations such as the Oxfam Canada global initiative [Women's Voice and Leadership](#) it is essential that Pakistan develops its own models that are best reflect is particular cultural and social dimensions.

In its policy document 'Pakistan 2025: One Nation – One Vision' a strategy and road map are set out for Pakistan to reach its ambitious goals and aspirations to be one of the 10 largest economies in the world by 2047. The Vision rests on seven pillars. These include: People first: developing social and human capital

and empowering women; Growth: sustained, indigenous, and inclusive growth; and Entrepreneurship: private sector and entrepreneurship-led growth.

However, Pakistan will be constrained in realising its vision without genuine collaborations between public and private sectors and civil society. This includes prioritising and supporting [platforms for partnership development](#) which can champion local change makers and local solutions.

NB: The images of children in this article have been provided with the approval of the Ujala and government schools involved.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Fiona is a research and innovation strategy analyst and advisor working with peak organisations around the world including the European Commission, The European Institute of Innovation & Technology, the Rathenau Institute and the Japanese Business University Forum. Fiona has a particular interest in regional capacity building through, industry, government, university and civil society partnerships and technology leveraged social entrepreneurship.

In 2020 and 2019 she was one of a small group of international experts to advise on the pilot funding for the first 'European Universities' alliances spearheaded by President Macron. Fiona also prepared the report for the Japanese Business University Forum's 25th Anniversary International Symposium: '*Toward Inclusive Society. Cultivating Talents in a Rapidly Changing Society*', with contributions from Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus and Alex 'Sandy' Pentland, Media Lab Entrepreneurship Program Director, MIT.

With an eminent bio-entrepreneur she co-authored the popular publication *Überpreneurs: How to Create Innovative Global Businesses and Transform Human Societies*. As a member of the Business Advisory Board for a bio-tech diagnostics company she contributes her extensive international understanding of policies and initiatives designed to maximise research translation, particularly regarding the delivery of better health care.

As part of her commitment to 'paying it forward' Fiona is actively involved in providing high-level professional support and advice to a number of early-stage entrepreneurs from around the world in areas such as food security; simple and affordable medical diagnostics for the unreached; active and healthy ageing; and education to empower young girls and women in developing economies.

BUSHRA RAHIM PHD²

Bushra Rahim is a Fulbright Alumna, featured as [Fulbright Hero](#) in recognition of her work for inclusive education, women empowerment, good governance and entrepreneurship. Millions of children are out of school in Pakistan and in the Fulbright video she is seen visiting community schools and public schools in Peshawar Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan to encourage girls' education. She is founding member of a non-profit organization, [Development Agent for Change](#) that works in five thematic areas: Education and Social/Civic Awareness; Peace building; Public Policy; Advocacy for Democracy and good Governance and, Women Entrepreneurship. She also runs a social enterprise '[Association of Business, Professional and Agricultural Women](#) (ABPAW)', which focuses on education, gender issues, livelihood, and environment.

Bushra is President elect of [Fulbright Alumni Association KP Chapter](#). Her mission is to educate every child and empower every woman and restore peace, harmony and prosperity in Pakistan. She is an Editorial Board Member of *Global Research in Higher Education USA* and *Frontiers of Contemporary Education*. She has featured in numerous national and international media outlets. Her 2019 [Key Note speech](#) at the 9th Global Education Conference addressed the need for leadership in the education of women, how women are filling that need, and her work surrounding the leadership of women's education. She has received national and international awards including from her Alma Maters in the [US](#) and [Australia](#).

Bushra's recent initiative [Kitab Dost](#) (friendship with the book) aims to improve learning outcomes and reduce dropout in government public schools and has been a demonstrated success. In 2020 Bushra became one of 20 distinguished Pakistan US Alumni Network [COVID-19 Heroes](#).

APPENDIX 1

[Examples of laws](#) in Pakistan of relevance to social enterprises.

The major Acts/Ordinances are The Societies Registration Act, 1860; The Trusts Act, 1882; The Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (Registration and Control Ordinance), 1961; The Trade Organizations Ordinance, 1961 and The Companies Act, 2017.

Under the [Eighteenth Amendment](#) to the Constitution of Pakistan enacted in 2010, provincial autonomy was increased and many Ministries at the Federal level were abolished, restructured or devolved to provinces. In light of the Amendment, the social enterprises have to register with their relevant registration bodies/departments in their respective provinces. For example, the Directorate of Industries under the Industries & Commerce Department is responsible for the registration of Trusts under The Trust Act, 1882. Similarly, the Directorate of Industries is also responsible for registering Societies and trade organizations under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 and the Trade ordinance/ Act respectively.

The Directorate of Social Welfare, an attached field Office of the Social Welfare Department, is responsible for the registration of NGOs under The Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (Registration & Control) Ordinance, 1961. In addition, Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) [regulates](#) the licensing of charitable and not-for-profit companies.

Amid national and international security concerns other regulatory mechanisms have been introduced recently. All organizations have to sign Memorandum of Understanding with the Federal [Economic Affairs Division](#) Islamabad if they receive foreign funding, in addition to being registered with the relevant authorities under their respective legal regimes mentioned above. Similarly, all the Organizations have to seek security clearance or seek No Objection Certificates (NoC) from their respective Provincial Home Departments in order to ascertain that these organizations are not performing any illegal or unlawful activities and will not cause any security issue.

The Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) has set guidelines for Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism ("AML/CFT") [Regulations](#) for NGOs and INGOs in 2018, revised in [April 2020](#). The purpose of the Regulations is to maintain the integrity of financial sector as per the recommendations by FATF and relevant International best practices.

Under the new counter terror financing mechanism, introduced by National Counter Terrorism Authority ([NACTA](#)), the organizations who register with Pakistan Centre for Philanthropy ([PCP](#)) are considered Trusted and Transparent. The objective of PCP is “to enhance the volume and effectiveness of indigenous philanthropy for social development in Pakistan”.

To further comply with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)’s recommendation, NACTA has mandated Home Departments of respective provinces to frame a uniform [law](#) for registration, regulation and facilitation of Charities and NGOs/ NPOs to combat money laundering, terrorist financing and other illegal activities related to international financing system. All the four provinces have passed ‘The Charities Registration and Regulation Act’ to register and regulate charities and collection of charitable funds. Under the Act, all NGOs/ NPOs/trusts/ societies/ charities shall register with the Charity Commissions in their respective provinces for proper utilization of charity and donations.

Charities Law

The [law](#) defines charity as “any association of persons, which is established for charitable purpose” and are governed by the Acts mentioned earlier. Charitable purpose is categorized into: prevention of poverty; promotion of education; provision of health services; community development; promotion of arts & culture; human rights; religious harmony; environmental protection and relief of aged, disable or youth.

In light of this law, all organizations whether profit or non-profit, registered for charitable purposes with the relevant government organizations with charitable purpose or in other words social objectives could be considered to be social enterprises.