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Exposing the ‘Dark Side’ of Jua Kali Entrepreneurial Spatial Contexts: Lessons from Rural Kenya

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Abstract

This paper exposes the ‘dark side’ of entrepreneurship by examining the everyday spatial context challenges facing *Jua Kali* women entrepreneurs in rural Kenya. *Jua Kali* is a Swahili term, referring to an informal economy whose unlicensed enterprises operate in open-air marketplaces, literally ‘under the hot sun’. This study relies on 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews with *Jua Kali* women entrepreneurs from Vihiga and Kisumu counties in Kenya and supported by observational evidence captured in fieldwork photographs for illustration purposes. This study shows the major spatial context challenges women face in *Jua Kali* include forced evictions and marketplace demolitions; lack of proper marketplace infrastructures; illegal leasing of public spaces, physical intimidation, violence and sexual abuse, which undermine their entrepreneurial activity. Interpreted through a feminist intersectionality perspective, the findings reveal how spatial contexts simultaneously intersect with gender and class dynamics, neoliberal urban policy and political powers, patriarchal societal structures, and institutionalised informal arrangements and practices in the *Jua Kali* marketplaces to disadvantage women entrepreneurs. In a nutshell, these study advances theory and practice by bringing forth an in-depth understanding the everydayness of entrepreneurship and extends critical entrepreneurialism debate on the ‘dark side’ of entrepreneurship that suggests, by itself, informal sector entrepreneurship does not ameliorate the negative effects of subordination and poverty for women in marginalized Global South contexts. Rather it reproduces structural and contextual constraints that trap women in the same old conventional structures of misogyny in rural Kenya.

Key words: *Jua Kali*, spatial context, informal sector, dark sides, women entrepreneurship

1. Introduction and Problem Statement

The review of mainstream entrepreneurship literature largely presents a dominant ontological foundation of entrepreneurship which bear individualist notions of ‘entrepreneur’ and functionalist notions of ‘entrepreneurship’. The functionalist notion emphasizes entrepreneurship as a mode of value creation premised on the typology of wealth creation and profit maximisation as the primary goal of entrepreneurship which in turn essentialises the individualist notion of the entrepreneur’s role as the discovery and exploitation of profitable entrepreneurial opportunity, and venture-growth orientation (see Schumpeter, 1934; Kirzner, 1973; Shane and Ventakaraman, 2000; Du Rietz and Henrekson, 2000; Lafuente et al., 2020). As such, entrepreneurship is portrayed as a desirable, flexible, and emancipatory pathway to women’s empowerment from conditions of subordination, thereby emancipated from shackles of poverty to empower others and to generate a range of benefits for the economy (Rindova et al., 2009; Dy Martinez et al., 2018; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). This false promise of entrepreneurship is intertwined with contemporary neoliberal post-feminist ideals of upholding individual responsibility for one’s own socio-economic status (De Benedictis and Gill, 2016) that emphasizes individuality, agentic skills, and self-governance to reap the material rewards of entrepreneurship (McRobbie, 2009; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). This neo-liberalist grammar of entrepreneurship (Gill, 2017) often ignores the prevailing structural and contextual constraints

to women's entrepreneurial performance such as gender discrimination, inflexibility of self-employment due to caring and domestic responsibilities, and lack of welfare benefits in informal sector entrepreneurship (Treasor, Jones and Marlow, 2020).

Increasingly however, recent streams of critical entrepreneurialism research have de-centered some of the dominant assumptions of entrepreneurship by addressing entrepreneurship's dark sides, its contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions to reveal what is cynical and sinister behind the 'smiling mask' of entrepreneurship (see Ogbor, 2000; Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Marlow, 2020). Other studies have shown the contextual embeddedness of entrepreneurial activity and that contexts (spatial, historical, temporal and institutional) do enable and constrain entrepreneurial activity (Welter, 2011; Pankhe and Welter, 2019). Similarly, other studies have highlighted the diversity of entrepreneurship, its heterogeneity and differences (Baker and Welter, 2016; Welter et al., 2017) and rendered visible the multiplicity of entrepreneurship beyond the Silicon Valley (Aldrich and Ruef, 2019). Although the critical streams of research on contextualizing entrepreneurship research have undoubtedly gained traction over the past decade (Foss et al., 2018; Essers et al., 2017; Welter and Baker, 2020), the bulk of these studies are conducted in Western contexts which does not present the structural context-specific peculiarities especially apparent in the rural sub-Saharan African context.

In Kenya, *Jua Kali* (the informal sector) provides up to 80% of the country's employment, with more 62% of the informal enterprises led by women (KNBS, 2016). Yet, their enterprises are concentrated in feminized sectors where they remain significantly smaller, less profitable and of low growth potential. Often, *Jua Kali* women's entrepreneurial underperformance is largely attributed to their own personal traits, business characteristics and socio-cultural constraints (Mwobobia, 2012; Ondiba and Matsui, 2019). However, the broader spatial contextual challenges facing women entrepreneurs on a daily basis as they carry out their everyday entrepreneurial activities in open air-marketplaces, is still mostly absent from much of the mainstream entrepreneurship debate (see Trettin and Welter, 2011; Baker and Welter, 2020). The dearth of research on the spatial context challenges facing women entrepreneur from the Global South requires further research attention. Thus, this makes this study's objective and context a timely and justified investigation.

2. Methodology

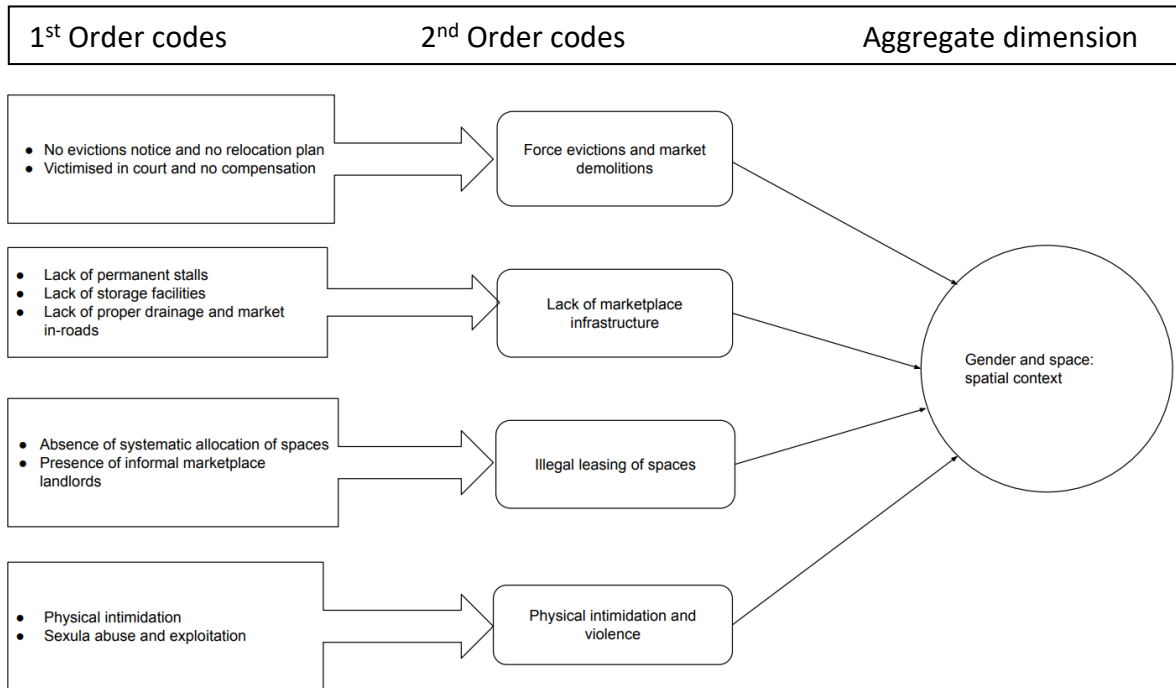
This study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm, which acknowledges that reality is multiple, complex, local, specific in nature and multi-layered (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2014). As such, this study adopted a qualitative research approach which is exploratory in nature and adopts an inductive style in data collection and analysis (Ponterotto, 2005; Hussain, Elyas and Nasseef, 2013). This paper draws on 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews with *Jua Kali* rural women entrepreneurs and supported by observational evidence presented in the fieldwork photographs. Participants were recruited via purposive and snowball /chain referral methods, which are non-probability sampling strategies widely used in qualitative research for identification and selection of informant-rich cases (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Accordingly, 27 women were recruited via purposive sampling, The remaining 13 women were recruited through snowball strategy, based on the recommendations and initial contact made with participants earlier recruited via purposive sampling. The research context for this study is Vihiga and Kisumu County which are both located within the Lake Victoria Basin in Western Kenya. By virtue of their wider rurality, geographical and socioeconomic diversity and with the largest informal marketplaces in the region, the two contexts are chosen to bring forth an in depth understanding of the *Jua Kali* women entrepreneurship in rural Kenya. The research setting were four trading locations

– homebased, and roadside, open-air and itinerant spaces – from which *Jua Kali* women operate (see Table 1.0 for a description of these spatial contexts). The generic question that bound the interviews was ‘What made you start a business in *Jua Kali*?’ followed by other open-ended questions regarding the nature of their business, the main challenges faced in *Jua Kali* marketplaces, the impact of the geographical location of selling *Jua Kali* spaces and county government urban planning policies on their businesses. Due to the women’s very limited or no understanding of the English language, all the interviews were conducted in their vernacular dialects (Kiswahili and Kimaragoli). This allowed the women to use their own everyday language and incorporate their own words in describing their entrepreneurial experiences (Barriball and While, 1994; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). This allowed the women to use their own everyday language and incorporate their own words in describing their entrepreneurial experiences (Barriball and While, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). With the participants consent, field photographs of the varied women’s enterprises were taken, and all interviews were audio-recorded except for two (one woman entrepreneur and one policy maker) who did not give their consent for personal reasons. Whereas the average interview’s duration with the policy makers was 45-50 minutes and were conducted within the normal office hours in their workplace offices. The average duration for interviews with the women entrepreneurs were varied depending on their place of trading which were characterised by various contextual peculiarities that influenced the interview timelines as discussed in the next section on fieldwork sites. All data was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, three-order coding done in NVivo 12 Pro following Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), analysed thematically and interpreted through a feminist intersectionality perspective (Crenshaw, 1989; Rodriguez et al., 2016).

3. Findings

Following data coding and thematic analysis, the findings were grouped into four major sub-themes shown in Figure 1 below. The study shows that *Jua Kali* women entrepreneurs are confronted by a myriad of spatial context challenges in open-air marketplaces. The major spatial context challenges women face in *Jua Kali* include forced evictions and marketplace demolitions; lack of proper marketplace infrastructures; illegal leasing of public spaces, physical intimidation, violence and sexual abuse, which undermine their entrepreneurial activity as below discussed.

Figure 1: Evidence Data Structure



Source: Author's illustration

3.1 Forced Evictions and Marketplace Demolitions

Evictions and demolitions of the *Jua Kali* marketplaces are carried out by county government due to various urban planning policy directives on gentrification and infrastructure projects. Most women said they were not aware of any evictions notice as Atieno narrated,

'I didn't know Oile would be demolished, I wasn't aware of any eviction notice given. These demolitions were an ambush. I received a call from my neighbour's son at midnight that the market was being demolished to come save my property. I quickly came on bodaboda(motorbike) found the town was already in chaos, women were bewailing the destruction of their property and police were everywhere firing tear gas canisters at us. I saved nothing, not even one item. (Atieno)

Contrary to the evictions and settlement procedure (United Nations, 1997; GoK, 2009), forced evictions and marketplace demolitions are carried out by local government authorities, women are often not given notice to vacate, neither are they relocated to alternative marketplaces, and they are victimised when they seek legal redress from courts and not compensated. As such, this leaves a lot of women in unfathomable financial distress, but also these heavily impacts upon women's physical and mental health well-being for themselves and their families.

3.2 Lack of marketplace infrastructure

Based on my observational evidence captured in fieldwork photograph (see pictures 1 and 2) and participants response, poor spatial physical attributes and infrastructural configurations of the marketplaces which inhibits women's entrepreneurial performance. Overall, the marketplace infrastructure is neither well-built and designed as evidenced in the lack of permanent stalls/shades, lack of storage facilities, lack of proper drainage systems, marketplace in-roads and streetlights.



Picture 1



Picture 2

3.3 Illegal leasing of *Jua Kali* spaces

Women also mentioned about ongoing underground business of leasing out county and municipal stalls and public spaces by informal marketplace landlords. Emphasising this point, Sarah said,

The stalls are not free, and we don't pay directly to the municipal council. We pay to the owners of the stalls (many are owned by men) who get the lease from the municipal then rent it to us. So, we are only sublets, it shouldn't be that way, but they do it under cover. The selling of stalls and spaces in this market is a lucrative business on its own, because we pay rent, but they only pay a small portion of it to municipal (Sarah)

This finding shows that Jua Kali spaces are contested spaces and power laden. The illegal leasing of informal marketspaces which are meant to be accessible for all the public reveals the gender power imbalance and class dynamics operational in the open-air marketplaces which leaves women vulnerable and financially exploited.

3.4 Physical Intimidation and Violence

Women indicated they encounter various incidents of physical intimidation, and violence which take different forms in their day-to day operations from sources and perpetrators from *Kanjo* (tax officials), as well as fellow workers (male counterparts) and other criminal actors in the marketplaces. With regards to physical intimidation, Akinyi said,

I feel we (women) are discriminated everywhere even here in Jua Kali, and we go through very different struggles from men especially when it comes to getting selling space. I had space in Kibuye, the next day two guys came and forcefully took my space and there's nothing I could do' (Akinyi)

With regards to violence and insecurity, Fanisi said,

You see here in the rural we have no streetlights; it's become so risky and insecure on the roads past 7pm. Many women have been robbed off their money, their belongings taken, and some are sexually harassed and even raped. (Fanisi)

In addition, few participants mentioned the issue of sexual abuse in the marketplace, particularly those in the fishing business. The issue of '*Jaboya*' which in local dialect means 'sex for fish'. Gladys narrated,

Those issues of men asking for sexual favours are there, it's just that they are not things people talk about. But it's not uncommon or an abnormality, it's just the way it is – almost like silently culturally accepted. Like those who agree to have Jaboya are guaranteed for fish bags especially when there's scarcity of fish in the market (Gladys)

3 Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has presented and discussed the empirical findings on the different spatial contextual challenges encountered by *Jua Kali* women in the open-air marketplaces. This includes the challenges women face due to forced market evictions and demolitions; lack of marketplaces infrastructures; illegal leasing of public spaces and physical intimidation and violence whose effects cumulatively undermine women's entrepreneurial activity in the informal sector. This study's findings are important for theory and practice because they bring forth an in-depth understanding the everydayness of entrepreneurship and the extend critical entrepreneurialism research on exposing the 'dark side' of entrepreneurship by examining the spatial contexts challenges facing women entrepreneurs in informal sector. Theoretically, through a feminist intersectionality analysis (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2016) the study pulls together strands of theoretical frameworks from the gender studies and economic geography disciplines to demonstrate the simultaneity of gender and class dynamics intersecting with neoliberal urban policy and political powers, patriarchal societal structures, and institutionalised informal arrangements and practices to constrain women's entrepreneurial

activity. Overall, the findings are relevant for policy makers on the improvement of informal marketplace infrastructure to create better working conditions for women entrepreneurs.

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