



Going global – going digital. Diaspora networks and female online entrepreneurship in Khartoum, Sudan

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ABSTRACT

The link between transnational migration and new information and communication technologies (ICTs) is of crucial importance for the way small-scale entrepreneurs in African cities capitalize on development. In Khartoum, well-educated women increasingly start businesses through digital mediation (communication mediated through digital devices such as networked computers and smartphones) by making use of social media platforms to develop digital communities and to sell typical female consumer goods, including cosmetics, garments, fashion accessories and perfumes. Although these bottom-up practices of e-commerce start as local in outlook and only partially materialize in the digital space, they have become important game changers in an environment where Sudanese entrepreneurs are often excluded from the world economy due to conventional gender norms and economic restrictions and sanctions. Through Sudanese business partners in the diaspora, some female entrepreneurs in Khartoum have built a network of transnational relationships that supplies them with international products for their online sales in Khartoum. Other female entrepreneurs benefit from the growing Sudanese diaspora to expand their area of operation and to sell their traditional perfumes, cosmetics and *tiyab* to an international public. It is argued that global digital connections offer a new dimension on how small-scale entrepreneurs in African cities could capitalize on transnational migration, which could provide new opportunities for improved well-being and bottom-up development. As such, the article makes an original contribution to debates about ICT for development, female entrepreneurship and changing practices of cross-border trade in the digital age.

1. Introduction

Decades of debate have focused on the potential of transnational mobility for local development and poverty alleviation (Eversole, 2005; Faist, 2008; Glick Schiller and Faist, 2010; Lopez, 2015). Several authors have indicated that in times of globalization, local development is increasingly played out in a matrix of connections and linkages, extending livelihood opportunities beyond the particular locality where people are based or reside (Zoomers, 2018; Zoomers and van Westen, 2011). These linkages have been intensified with the introduction of the internet and a plurality of digital media – theorized as ‘polymedia’ by Madianou and Miller (2012). New information and communication technologies (ICTs), and social media in particular have shaped, transformed, and intensified economic transactions across the globe. Indeed, all over the world, mobile phones and other digital communication technologies have triggered the rise of electronic commerce (e-commerce) in which goods, products, services and funds are bought and sold through the internet (Graham et al., 2015; Moriset, 2020; Oncini et al.,

2020; Wringley and Currah, 2006). Amazon (United States-based) and Alibaba (headquartered in China) are among the well-known online marketplaces in the global e-commerce industry connecting consumers with producers and suppliers through an integrated online system of classified websites. An African variant, Jumia, has become the number one e-commerce marketplace in Nigeria (Nkwo and Orji, 2018) and is gaining ground in the rest of the African continent. Much like the Chinese online platform Amanbo these platformshave become key players in African e-commerce. By shrinking trade barriers between Africa and the rest of the world and fostering linkages with global markets they are expected to offer new development perspectives for African entrepreneurs.

Apart from these e-commerce giants there are also numerous African examples of urban business ventures and retailers opening web shops and other online commercial activities through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Mukolwe and Korir (2016), for instance, show how women in Kenya use Facebook to post items for sale in the Kilimani Mums marketplace. They are the African variant of the

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Yummy Mummy Facebook groups in the United Kingdom in which mainly young mothers buy, sell and swap consumer items that are especially for mothers (Littler, 2017). Another interesting example is the Senboutique website, an online platform that Senegalese migrants use to buy groceries for their families in Dakar in order to be able to control the allocation of remittances for specific household needs from a distance (Blanchard, 2013). These are interesting examples of the innovative ways in which African merchants manage to expand their horizons beyond the city where they reside. Building on diaspora networks, globalization and technology, they are the pioneers of a new type of enterprise culture¹ that is growing in importance, but still understudied in an African context. Especially from a social science perspective, little attention has been given to these different macro and micro types of e-commerce and the complex ways in which they may contribute to improved well-being and social change for men and women, as advocated for in ICT for development (ICT4D) discussions (Chen, 2004).

To scrutinize the way bottom-up practices of e-commerce have generated new socio-economic opportunities for urban women in Africa, this article focuses on female online entrepreneurs in Khartoum. Building on former practices of cross-border trade and their gender-specific position in Sudanese society, these female entrepreneurs navigate user-friendly platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to run their businesses from home and to sell a wide range of typical female consumer goods – including cosmetics, garments, *tiyab*², fashion accessories and perfumes – in and beyond their local network of relatives and friends. They capitalize on digital connections for marketing purposes and for the spatial extension of their businesses across national and regional borders. Through Sudanese business partners in the diaspora, online entrepreneurs in Khartoum have built a network of transnational relationships that supplies them with international products for their online sales in Khartoum. Other entrepreneurs benefit from the growing Sudanese diaspora to expand their area of operation and to sell their traditional perfumes, cosmetics and *tiyab* to an international public. It is argued that global digital connections offer a new dimension on how small-scale entrepreneurs in African cities could capitalize on transnational migration, which could provide new opportunities for improved well-being and bottom-up development. Although these forms of online entrepreneurship start as local in outlook and only partially materialize in the digital space, they have become important game changers in an environment where Sudanese entrepreneurs are often excluded from the world economy due to conventional gender norms and economic restrictions and sanctions. Due to the multiple and multifaceted digital connections with the diaspora and global markets, the online entrepreneurs' practices of e-commerce have transformed the entrepreneurial landscape of Khartoum and beyond.

The paper builds on four months of ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Khartoum, from November to December in 2014 and 2015, followed by online engagement and follow-up visits.³ During fieldwork, a

¹ Studying cosmopolitan young Egyptians in Cairo, Peterson (2011: 173) describes the enterprise culture as “a particular kind of organizational system in which people take creative and imaginative approaches to problems, thinking outside the box and taking risks. When these efforts are successful, they are said to exhibit the entrepreneurial imagination necessary to move the country forward.”

² This is a typical Sudanese dress for married women and comprises a long bolt of fabric that is wrapped around the body and head. For an historical account on the role and meaning of this dress for the intimate and public life of Sudanese women see Brown (2015).

³ The geopolitical climate of Sudan is in constant flux and at a cross point of transformation since the fall of president Omar al-Bashir on April 11th 2019 and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. These national and global events took place after the main fieldwork for this paper was finalized. Although they are expected to further shape the dynamics, rhythm and directions of the type of entrepreneurship analyzed in this article, they are not yet reflected upon in detail here.

triangulation of online- and offline research methods were combined to maintain contact with almost fifty respondents, most of whom were recently married women and young mothers who use a smartphone to run a business from home. Together with my Arabic-speaking female research assistant, Wala, we visited our respondents at home for conducting interviews and participant observation.⁴ We asked questions about the history and organization of their business, their networks and interactions with the Sudanese diaspora and the possibilities and challenges that their business has offered. To follow up on these personal conversations, I extended participant observation through my respondents' online activities, ‘going digital’ and becoming a member of their Facebook pages and participating in other online vending platforms and WhatsApp conversations.

This article continues with a brief overview of the main theoretical discussions on female entrepreneurship, cross-border trade and the supposed impact of ICTs on development. The theoretical part is followed by a brief historical overview of the engagements of women in informal entrepreneurship in Sudan. Subsequently the article provides empirical insights in the various ways in which the online entrepreneurs of Khartoum capitalize on transnational migration and how digital engagement with the diaspora contributes to the success of their businesses. The paper ends with some concluding reflections on the meaning of female online entrepreneurship for development.

2. Female entrepreneurship, cross-border trade and ICT for development in Africa

Since precolonial times, African women have played a pivotal role in local and regional trade activities (Chalfin, 2000; Clark, 1994; Cornwall, 2007; House-Midamba and Ekechi, 1995; Kinyanjui, 2014; Kiteme, 1992). Women usually participated in the local market and other locations close to home with the petty trade of agricultural produce and homemade food and textiles. The spatial reach of African women's market activities has been gradually extended through the practices of cross-border trade (Desai, 2009; Toulabor, 2012) and the so called “suitcase trade” (Peraldi, 2005) or “shuttle trade” (Yükseker, 2003). African women who travelled for personal reasons such as pilgrimage or family visits returned home with their luggage filled with consumer goods to resell on the local market (Evers Rosander, 2005). In a context of globalization, these women have further expanded, restructured and changed their practices of cross-border trade in order to be able to capitalize on global connections and transnational networks and to give new impetus to their businesses (Huynh, 2015; Sall, 2017; Sylvanus, 2013). They transformed from regional to international actors, becoming key players in international trade through the import of Chinese low-cost commodities to African countries. However, the role of ICTs in the socio-economic as well as spatial transformations of women's cross-border trade and its significance in terms of development is still up for debate.

In more general discussions on ICT4D, mobile phones have been considered important mechanisms for bottom-up development (Aker and Mbiti, 2010; Donner, 2008; Kleine and Unwin, 2009). The ICT4D paradigm especially stresses the transformative potential of mobile phones for poverty alleviation (Carmody, 2012). In terms of entrepreneurship, improved communication opportunities and access to markets and other supply chains as well as the low entry barriers have been emphasized as important advantages to create new digital development opportunities for Africans (Burrell, 2016; Donner and Escobari, 2010; Taura et al., 2019). Overå (2006) has for instance highlighted how informal traders in Ghana have gained greater efficiency in coordinating their activities due to more frequent, rapid and direct communications with business partners. Indeed, as also stressed by other African

⁴ Apart from the name of my research assistant, all respondent names were changed to pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

scholars, due to the informational and communicative power of new ICTs, entrepreneurs have gained access to resources and marketing strategies that otherwise would not have been available to them (Mukolwe and Korir, 2016).

From a gender perspective, mobile phones have been widely promoted in development circles due to their potential to provide a means for empowerment, self-reliance and women's autonomy (Gates Foundation, 2015).⁵ As mentioned by Carrick and Kleine (2019: 104) “the figure of the female tech entrepreneur running a start-up in an African capital is an image that has been lionized and much reproduced by donor agencies”. Social scientists have followed this narrative by stressing that ICTs are important for the further development of female entrepreneurship and women's participation in the market economy (Bolat, 2019; Webb and Buskens, 2014), especially given that digital technologies allow women to establish a global commercial network from home is considered an important attribute to enhance women's socio-economic maneuvering space (Steel, 2017). Also, the fact that digital entrepreneurship can be done from anywhere and at any time offers a specific flexibility to women to become economically active without jeopardizing the balance between work and home life (Mukolwe and Korir, 2016). As such, ICTs have created a window of opportunity for women to become economically active in diverse ways and to be involved in commercial dynamics that expand across the globe.

At the same time, the positive impact of new ICTs and digital technologies on development in general and development for women in particular should not be overrated. In the words of Ali (2019: 110), they run the risk of “falling into the trap of uncritical cyberoptimism” (see also Archambault, 2017). Indeed, the ICT4D paradigm has been criticized for putting a blind faith in ICTs and casting development as a linear process that all countries are supposed to follow (Smith, 2018). As also mentioned by Carrick and Kleine (2019), the paradigm too narrowly focusses on economic growth instead of falling back on more alternative approaches towards development such as the capabilities approach of Sen (1999) that considers development as a process of freedom in which people are able to live the life they value. Another recurring criticism is that the development potential of ICTs is limited as long as local power relations and inequalities remain in place (De Bruijn, 2019; Donner and Locke, 2019; Schwittay, 2008). New ICTs do not offer a blueprint model for gender equality and female empowerment as their specific development outcomes are very much differentiated and unevenly distributed. Compared to men, women may struggle more with issues of access to and concrete know-how on how to embrace the technology, networks, and knowledge in a successful manner (Irene, 2019). From this perspective, there is an urgent need for more in-depth research looking into context-specific dynamics in relation to ICT4D.

Several scholars have argued that African new media technologies and platforms (Cage, 2015; Donner and Locke, 2019; Larkin 2018) and digital entrepreneurs (Bolat, 2019; Steel, 2017) have their own logic, dynamics and characteristics that may differ from their counterparts in the rest of the world. An edited volume on digital entrepreneurship in Africa (Taura et al., 2019) shows that digital entrepreneurs in Africa, trying to capitalize on the new digital media revolution, struggle with weak basic infrastructure, limited access to digital technologies, corruption and other political and economic inefficiencies. The editors (Taura et al., 2019) argue that digital entrepreneurship in Africa is booming, but that it is not yet sufficiently studied how – and under which mechanism – this growth may (or may not) translate into transformative change processes. Such studies should start from what Mavhunga et al. (2016) call “an African focused perspective”, critically analyzing the ways technologies, many of which are developed in a Western context, are reimaged, reinvented, restructured and

appropriated in an African context. In the empirical remainder of this paper, this “African perspective” will be taken as a starting point of analysis in the focus on female online entrepreneurs in the city of Khartoum. I will look at how this relatively new form of female entrepreneurship is embroiled with existing social infrastructures of more conventional forms of cross-border trade and scrutinize how the women capitalize on digital connections with the diaspora to become important actors in the global world economy.

3. Women and informal entrepreneurship in the city of Khartoum: A brief overview

Entrepreneurial activities in Sudan are shaped by the geopolitical climate of the country. Since the start of the Islamic authoritarian regime of President al-Bashir in 1989, the Sudanese government has attempted to implement some general policies to liberalize the market and to attract foreign capital. At the same time, his government has had to deal with serious deficits of foreign currency due to the economic sanctions of the United States for sponsoring international terrorism (<https://african.business/2020/10/trade-investment/new-economic-era-for-sudan-as-us-lifts-sanctions/> consulted 18 January 2021). Although most of these trade sanctions were lifted in October 2020 during the time that fieldwork took place, it was hardly possible to transfer money out of or into Sudan because foreign cash transfers through international banks were forbidden and the procedures to transfer money via Western Union were very strict. In addition, the separation between North and South Sudan in July 2011 has put mounting pressure on the budget of the Sudanese government. As Sudan lost almost all of its oil revenues to the Republic of South Sudan, representing up to 75% of its incoming foreign exchange (James, 2012), the consumption prices of basic foodstuff such as bread, vegetables and sugar tripled. Eventually Sudanese people came to the streets in December 2018 as the government again increased food and fuel prices and overall economic conditions deteriorated tremendously. These street revolts shaped the so-called “Sudanese revolution” and in April 2019 replaced the 30 years dictatorship of al-Bashir with a technocratic transitional government sharing power between military and civilian groups (Zunes, 2020). Inflation rates continued to skyrocket, reaching almost 50% in 2019 (IMF, 2019). Further spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic and a transition government lacking the needed foreign currency to recover, an inflation of 168% was calculated in August 2020 (UN OCHOA, 2020). In combination with rampant unemployment rates, it continues to be hard economic times for Sudanese families of different social classes.

Several African scholars have indicated how the collapse of formal institutional structures and successive economic crises have paved the way for rising numbers of informal economic and commercial activities (Geschiere and Konings, 1993; Lindell, 2010; Meagher, 2010). MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000). For instance, they indicate how many Congolese have turned to what they call the “second economy” in which legal, spatial and institutional boundaries are permanently contested and transgressed in search of profitable commercial opportunities in circumstances of state decay, economic crisis and civil violence. Also in the case of Sudan, informal economic activities are dominant, especially in the ever-expanding capital of the country (Brown, 1990; Sahl and Assal, 2000). Chevillon-Guibert (2013) vividly describes how economic decline has impacted the development of a number of local markets in the capital of Sudan and the increase of informal economic activities of new urban dwellers – including the Zaghawa migrants from Darfur – who attempt to make a livelihood in this rather hostile urban environment. In contrast to many other sub-Saharan African countries, most of these market traders in Khartoum are men.

In the highly Islamized Sudanese society it is frowned upon if women work outside the home or intimate sphere of the *harem* and interact with

⁵ The same argument is made in studies on women's involvement in digital finance (see Kusimba, 2018 for a critical review).

men in public spaces such as the market (Boddy 1989; Hale, 2001; Nageeb, 2004; Willemse, 2001). Compared to men, women selling in the streets and public markets or *aswak*⁶ of Khartoum are a minority. The tea ladies from Darfur and South Kordofan are well known for transcending these gender divisions due to a dire economic need (Badawi et al., 2008). Other socio-economically disadvantaged women have also started to sell in public markets due to the harsh economic situation in the country (Pitamber, 1999). Initially, most of these female economic activities took place close to the home, but over the years and in order to extend and respond to changing market opportunities, connections with international markets have become paramount.

According to Chevrillon-Guibert (2016) manufactured goods in the *aswak* of Khartoum and other major cities in the country were provided through the cross-border trade networks with neighboring countries such as Libya, Chad, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Due to the liberalization of the Sudanese markets in the 1990s, new commercial avenues with the Gulf States, and Dubai in particular, have been opened for low-cost manufactured goods from China and elsewhere (Chevrillon-Guibert, 2017). With the economic rise of China in the 2000s, Sudanese merchants also started to import directly from China by shipping containers filled with low-cost Chinese manufactured goods to Sudan or more particularly to “souk Libya”, a wholesale-market in Khartoum, from where they distribute retail products to other smaller markets across the city and beyond (Chevrillon-Guibert, 2017).

Sudanese women have been involved in this growing internationalization of commercial activities through suitcase trade practices. Since the end of the 1980s, and with the growing migration and increasing commercial interaction between Sudan and the Gulf States, women accompanying their husbands or other male relatives on family visits and the *hadj* to Mecca started to come back from their journeys with small amounts of textiles and beauty products. Back in Khartoum, these suitcase traders called *delaliat*⁷ resold their consumer goods – that were largely unavailable at local markets in Sudan – to their friends, relatives and neighbors on installment. The *delaliat* went from door to door or strolled the offices of private and public institutions to sell their “modern” cloth, kitchen equipment, jewellery and cosmetics to a female audience. Like the tea ladies described above, their visible participation in public trade has been highly contested. As became clear from informal conversations with several Sudanese women, the *delaliat* are generally criticized for selling their products in public. By being away from home they are supposed to have less time to dedicate to their household and children and as such jeopardize their reputation as ‘straight Muslims’, ‘responsible mothers’ and ‘good housewives’. At the same time, the *delaliat* gradually lost their monopoly over international manufactured goods as ever more Sudanese traders started to directly import from China (Chevrillon-Guibert, 2017). In addition, and as will be further elaborated in the next section, the growing importance of digital technology also offered new opportunities for women to concur with the *delaliat* modus operandi and to be involved in transnational trade.

4. Female online entrepreneurship in Khartoum

In Sudan, mobile phones have become part of the communication landscape since the 2000s (Brinkman et al., 2009). Almost simultaneously with the introduction of the mobile phone, the internet has gained ground in Sudan and expanded in use over the past two decades. The Internet Live Statistics (2020) websites estimates that the percentage of internet users in Sudan increased from 0.1% in 2001 to 26.4% in 2016. In January 2020, there were 13.38 million internet users, basically accessing internet through mobile phones (62.3%), laptops and

desktops (37.2%) or tablet computers (0.5%) (Kemp, 2020). Although overall internet penetration is still relatively low compared to other countries in the region, and no specific gender-segregated data are available,⁸ the internet – and social media in particular – has become an important player in the social and political lifeworlds of Sudanese women (Ali, 2019; Kadoda and Hale, 2015). The introduction of digital technologies and the growing popularity of smartphones have also opened a window of opportunity for Sudanese women to start up online businesses from their homes in Khartoum.

Hala is one of these female online entrepreneurs,⁹ whose case I will use as a vignette throughout these empirical sections to illustrate some of the general dynamics of these new, female online enterprise cultures.

Hala is a Syrian refugee who came to live in Khartoum with her husband and five children in the summer of 2013. Before war broke out in Syria, she had never had a salaried job as her husband had a well-paid job as an engineer in Damascus. As he could not find a job in Sudan, Hala started to work in a school in Khartoum in order to be able to pay the school fees for their children. Through her contact with the Sudanese mothers at school, her idea grew to start a business in Syrian cotton. She consulted her brother, who flew to Saudi Arabia with his family, to set up an international trade network. He helped Hala by providing her with the start-up capital her business required and by transporting the commodities that their family members and friends in Syria purchase from markets. Hala makes careful selection of the items – on the basis of the pictures she receives on her smartphone in Sudan – and her Syrian relatives and friends organize the cargo. Once her brother has sent the money for the selected items and for the transport by cash transfer from Saudi Arabia, the cargo is shipped to Sudan. In Khartoum, Hala takes pictures of the Syrian items and uploads them on her Facebook page and to her WhatsApp groups, trying to sell her products (Interview Hala, 6 December 2014).

Over the last couple of years, the type of female online entrepreneurship described in Hala’s interview excerpt has become a popular socio-economic activity among women living in Khartoum who have access to the internet and can afford the costs of a digital connection. Selling and buying through the internet has become an important alternative to the physical purchases made at urban public markets. When we visited Hala back in 2015 she reflected: “I feel the climate here in Sudan imposes the women to prefer scrolling through Facebook and request what they want and order delivery at home as it is easier for them than buying from the market” (Interview Hala, 12 November 2015). She indicates that in Sudan, “as you can see, all the people hold their mobile phone and watch WhatsApp and Facebook 24 hours”. This permanent digital connection of a number of Sudanese women living in Khartoum has inspired her to sell her products through social media.

It is mostly well-educated urban women who studied at prestigious universities in Khartoum who have started to experiment with the possibilities of selling consumer goods including cosmetics, garments and fashion accessories through digital mediation. Like Hala, some of them had no work experience at all, and others stopped their salaried jobs as soon as they got married, became pregnant or gave birth to their first child. A minority of the research participants combines the activity of online entrepreneurship with a white-collar job, such as Rehan, who

⁸ One might expect huge differences between the number of women versus the number of men having access to internet, but none of the available sources or the telecommunication companies themselves collect gender-segregated data in their statistics.

⁹ Although Hala is not a Sudanese citizen, like the majority of the female online entrepreneurs I have interviewed, I selected her case to introduce the online vendors under study because as an “outsider” she has the capacity to reflect on some of the particularities of online entrepreneurship in Sudan, especially compared to Syria.

⁶ The Arabic for market is *souk* (singular) or *aswak* (plural).

⁷ The information on *delaliat* (singular *delalia*) is based on interviews and informal conversations, as to date I could not find academic studies on this subject.

benefits from her part-time job as a bank officer in that she has access to a network of clients, start-up capital, hard currency and a favorable exchange rate to maintain her online business of clothing and accessories that she brings back from family visits to Egypt (Interview Rehan, 29 October 2015).

With their smartphones, the women take pictures of the commodities they would like to sell and together with their telephone number they upload them on digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Interested clients establish contact with the vendors by phone or chat and make a specific arrangement to see the products and to potentially buy them at the vendor's home or from delivery boys. In both cases a physical meeting takes place so that payment can be made in person. In this sense, the online interactions are generally centered on marketing and communication prior to a sale taking place.

Digital connectivity is also a crucial asset for bringing variation and originality to the local gamut of consumer goods. As Hala explained: "In Syria you have a lot of variety in the market, you can buy stuff coming from all over the world, whereas in Sudan, all the stuff in the market is coming from China, so it is very difficult in Sudan to find something unique and that is exactly what encourages women to sell unique things through the internet in Sudan" (Interview Hala, 12 November 2015). In the same vein, many other vendors indicated how products from Egypt, Syria, Turkey, the United States and Europe did not need extra branding, as the quality of these goods seemed to be guaranteed by the fact that they came from abroad.¹⁰ As already illustrated by the case of the Zaghawa traders and the *delaliat* described above, one of the key strategies to become a successful entrepreneur in Sudan is to sell international products that are not locally available. In the next section, I will elaborate how the online vendors maintain digital connections with Sudanese migrants in the diaspora in order to reach this goal of internationalisation and global outreach.

5. Transnational networks and disruptions in global connections

Many studies on African trade have indicated the instrumentality of personal ties and social capital for the successful operation of informal enterprises (Hart, 1988; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000; Meagher, 2010). In the case of female online vendors, these networks are not just locally based but expand throughout the diaspora. Abrar, for instance, a young mother selling Western clothes and accessories in Khartoum, counts on her network of Sudanese relatives and friends in the diaspora to ship containers from China, Thailand and the US filled with "trendy" products to Sudan (Interview Abrar, 7 December 2014). The same is true for Sarah. She relies on the cooperation of her Sudanese female friend in Spain who buys at stock sales in Madrid to send back to Sarah, enabling her to sell a unique range of shoes and handbags on the online platforms in Khartoum (Interview Sarah, 24 December 2015). Their experiences are illustrative of how online vendors can appeal to, often female, relatives and friends in the diaspora for logistical support in the supply of commodities and the provision of access to foreign currency. Most of these Sudanese business partners share equally in the profits of the online enterprises and are in daily communication with the online entrepreneurs in Khartoum through WhatsApp and other online applications.

Although these transnational connections are crucial for the smooth running of the business, the entrepreneurs' testimonies show that these ways of "going global" also contain significant risks and challenges. The biggest challenge is related to the transfer of foreign currency. As

¹⁰ The idea that products from abroad are more unique and of better quality often builds upon local perception and discourses about consumption markets. During the research I discovered several times that products marketed as "coming from abroad" were locally available or were of the same poor quality as Chinese low-cost commodities offered at the local markets.

indicated above, international money transfers to Sudan are hardly possible due to sanctions and other economic restrictions. Access to a foreign bank account, through relatives living abroad or working for an international organization in Sudan, is probably the easiest and cheapest way to make international payments. But as only a few vendors can benefit from such a gateway, most of the online entrepreneurs fall back on a personal web of connections to transfer money. Sarah explains how she transfers money through migrants in Spain who want to send remittances to their families in Sudan. The migrants bring the remittances to Sarah's business partner in Madrid, and their families then collect these remittances at Sarah's home in Khartoum. As Sarah disburses money in Sudanese pounds (SND) that she earns by selling her products, her partner in Madrid can use the collected euros to purchase new merchandise. Although Sarah's *modus operandi* is illustrative of how vendors can transfer money to their business partners in the diaspora, in terms of logistics and timing it can be a quite challenging practice. Because of the daily fluctuations of the value of the dollar on the black market in Sudan, entrepreneurs run the risk of losing capital in these financial transactions.

Currency fluctuations also affect the businesses in other ways. Abrar, for instance, complained about the way the continuous change in value of the Sudanese pound makes it difficult to maintain reasonable prices in a highly competitive market: "Sometimes you think that your dollar is worth 6 SND and then suddenly you come in Sudan and it is 8 SND. This is how you run the risk of losing big amounts of money or not being able to sell your clothes because other people offer [the same clothes] more cheaply because they bought their merchandise at another period of time" (Interview Abrar, 7 December 2014). In addition to the entrepreneurs' daily struggles with currency fluctuations, unclear tax policies further expose the entrepreneurs to the risk of losing capital. Hala, the Syrian woman introduced in the former section, complained about the way changing tariffs of import duties made it difficult to determine the actual price of her merchandise: "If you have good relations you can handle the issue for the custom clearance in a good way. But if you have no good relations always the cost of custom clearance is double. Yesterday, I have my colleague (...), she brought 80 kilos from Thailand. She paid 800 SDG [for the cargo] while I brought 17 kilos from Syria and they charged me 1000 SDG for custom clearance" (Interview Hala, 12 November 2015). Hala's example shows how negotiable import duties and other price fluctuations seriously affect the potential success of the online business of many of the entrepreneurs under study.

Another challenge in bringing in products from abroad is related to the transportation of the merchandise. The easiest way to do so is by carrying the merchandise in the luggage of travelers. But as most online entrepreneurs do not travel physically to purchase their goods, this *modus operandi* might create challenges with finding the right number of migrants travelling to Sudan at the right time. In addition, this form of "suitcase trade" might become very expensive due to the costs of overweight luggage fees, airport fees and taxes. Finally, suitcase trade does not allow the vendors to transport a huge amount of products. As a consequence, the vendors who can afford to have shifted towards the shipment of goods by post or container. This shipment of merchandise has some extra costs and has confronted many of the vendors with problems of timing. Several vendors described how delays in the arrival of products resulted in issues of overstock and significant losses of capital as the products arrived off-season at a time when consumer demand for the products had already disappeared.

To sum up, price fluctuations in foreign currency, shipping delays and negotiable tax procedures as well as other disruptions in global connections and digital connectivity (see also Pype, 2019) pose serious challenges for the entrepreneurial aspirations of online vendors and their capacity to maneuver in international markets. Those who managed to cope with these frictions of internationalization have become successful entrepreneurs, earning a significant amount of money with their business. Abrar, the entrepreneur who ships containers from Thailand and the US, is an example of such a successful entrepreneur. As

she reflects upon the way her business changed her life she indicates that with the money she makes through her business she can do whatever she wants: “I can travel with my own money, but I can also support my sister and brother, I can go to the supermarket with my own money and when I want to go to a beauty center I just go” (Interview Abrar, 7 December 2014). Because these are expenditures for which it is hard to ask for money from her husband, it gives her a certain autonomy over her life. As is also reflected by many other entrepreneurs, the fact that their business provides them with money to support their own extended families is considered a big achievement and an important indicator of the success of “going global” with their online businesses.

6. Enterprises of scale? Expanding markets towards the Sudanese diaspora

The online entrepreneurs in Khartoum do not only call on a global network of connections to access commodities that are not locally available. They also rely on a transnational community – and in particular the growing Sudanese diaspora – for extending their area of operation and attracting clients beyond their direct geographical surroundings for local products. Especially for the more traditional Sudanese products – such as local perfumes and cosmetics as well as typical Sudanese female dresses – the online entrepreneurs have the potential to globally market their merchandise through digital mediation. This argument can be illustrated best by the case of *toob* designers as all over the world, Sudanese women are trying to access Sudanese *tiyab* that, just like Sudanese perfumes, are considered a strong identity marker for the womanhood of married Sudanese women (Brown, 2015).

The handicraft of *toob* design is a traditional occupation for women in Khartoum. They buy the basic fabrics at the local market and decorate them with colorful prints and additional ornaments of pearls and textiles. For those entrepreneurs who have access to digital technologies, the marketing of these handmade products has become much easier as women can take pictures of their newly decorated fabrics and market them through digital mediation. As a consequence, the *toob* industry has become an increasingly competitive field for all kinds of women experimenting with selling and designing *tiyab*, inspired by images circulating on the internet. In such a competitive market, online advertising to an international market has become one of the key strategies to distinguish yourself from the rest of the vendors. Hidayat for example is one of Sudan’s most famous *toob* designers, who negotiated to have her own designs printed on standard fabrics of a famous Italian textile brand. She sells *tiyab* for at least 350\$ per piece, her Facebook page is consulted internationally, and she was invited to participate in an international exhibition in Paris (Interview Hidayat, 25 November 2014). The source of Hidayat’s success lies partially with her wayward character and her innovative idea of recreating foreign fashion in a local context. She has managed to create a fruitful fusion between marketing her very typical and rather traditional Sudanese dress by indexing a famous Italian textile brand. As Abranches (2013: 524) also indicates in the case of migrant traders from Guinea-Bissau, she has strategically negotiated “global” and “local” elements in creative and dynamic ways. This fusion has been an important key to her success. In the same manner, a collective of eighteen Sudanese *toob* designers aims to lift the practice of designing *toob* from a local level to an international level by using a particular discourse of aesthetics and cultural heritage. By extending the design techniques they use for *tiyab* to also create scarves and *abaya* (an Islamic dress for women) they have plans to enter the markets in Dubai, Qatar and the United States (Group interview Manal, Widjan and Rasha, 12 December 2015).

I have also interviewed online vendors of traditional perfumes and cosmetics who managed to extend their clientele outside of the geographical borders of Khartoum by making use of travelling migrants and international shipping services to sell their products to clients in the diaspora. Like the case of online entrepreneurs selling locally, the role of global networks and the back and forth movements of migrants is of

fundamental importance to sustaining their online business. Without connections to transnational networks their online enterprises would not have the capacity to expand globally. As such, Sudanese women living in the diaspora have become a significant part of the clientele of the online entrepreneurs under study.

7. Conclusion

New ICTs have become part of the entrepreneurial landscape in urban Africa, and have shaped the first contours of a new kind of female enterprise culture that benefits from the rise of digital technology for gaining a global reach. In Khartoum, the digital media revolution has contributed to the rise of a number of female online entrepreneurs who have capitalized on digital connections with the Sudanese diaspora to let their businesses grow at local as well as global scales. For online entrepreneurs, digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp help make their entrepreneurial aspirations a reality, providing them with a place to market their businesses, daily contact with potential clients and facilitating the supply of products and delivery services. In addition, this approach builds on the multiple linkages with transitional migrants who are both clients and traders at the same time, holding a broker position in obtaining access to international consumer markets as well as creating demand for more locally oriented consumer goods. This article has shown that digital connections with the diaspora have become paramount in supporting global outreach for female online entrepreneurs in Khartoum’s. These connections have become important attributes in making online businesses successful: both locally (by bringing in global consumer goods) and globally (by distributing local consumer goods to an international public).

Although we should be careful of “uncritical cyberoptimism” (Ali, 2019), it became clear, at least at a micro level, that some important changes have taken place in the lives of these female entrepreneurs. Several women have extended their “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai, 2004) by the money they bring into the household and to their extended family, by their digital proficiency and by their connections with the rest of the world. In particular, the businesses of the women who managed to navigate the disruptions of “going global” (such as fluctuations in currency and import taxes, shifting geopolitical orders and changing shipment procedures and transnational networks), were growing rapidly and becoming successful in different ways. Building on a complex set of relationships and interactions across the globe, these online entrepreneurs have become important actors in a world economy of which much of the country is still excluded due to economic restrictions and sanctions.

To further analyze what these kinds of achievements mean in terms of development, more comparative empirical studies on the potential of this form of African entrepreneurship are required. As Africans become ever more digitally connected (De Bruijn, 2019) and online work is encouraged in the context of a global pandemic and other crises, there is a growing urgency to better understand the complex and unexpected ways in which these digital economic practices have put Africa on the map of global e-commerce. It is expected that both large-scale giants such as Jumia or Amanbo and the low-profile variants described in this article have the potential to gain global success. More in-depth knowledge on the unique ways in which the digital revolution has shaped, restructured and facilitated African entrepreneurship in general and female African entrepreneurship in particular will throw new light on the diverse ways in which online entrepreneurship can foster local productivity and the well-being of female entrepreneurs. These studies would add a qualitative dimension to the current studies on African entrepreneurship and ICT4D discussions and provide empirical insights into what kinds of opportunities as well as challenges and new inequalities global digital connections generate in enhancing processes of bottom-up development and social change.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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