

THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF IDENTITY CAPITALISM:

A Case Study of Pakistan's Khwajasira Community Based Organisations

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Identity has remained an important determinant in political and change-oriented organising in the neoliberal world order, especially in Pakistan. We now have multiple community-based organisations in Pakistan governed, run, and managed by khwajasira people. Through project-based grants, in-kind donations, and international donor support, many of these organisations have created employment opportunities for khwajasira people in a country where khwajasira people are actively denied employment. Where this has created a positive change in the development-sector market, there have simultaneously been consistent reports and accusations of financial mismanagement and corruption often leading to project closures. As the khwajasira, and the quasi-queer, communities are in fact marginalised and for vulnerable communities, these claims have remained hushed whispers and bureaucratic gossip – rarely have such claims made it to mainstream media reporting, or legal arbitration. Whilst navigating this critical space juxtaposed between marginalisation of a community and abuse of power by community insiders with access to organisational resources, it is pertinent to ask the question: are community-based organisations (CBOs) delivering? Or are they merely creating a new breed of identity capitalists where one's marginalised identity is being used to create proximity and access to financial resources solely for personal enrichment?

To understand the genesis of identity capitalism around khwajasira identities in Pakistan, we need to historically understand the advent of the NGO model for the khwajasira in Pakistan. The Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (GFATM) through its Project DIVA⁹ initiated a first-of-its-kind approach across South Asia to help transgender communities fight HIV by instituting community-based systems. The grant was later renamed to the Multi-Country South Asia Grant, or the MSA Grant¹⁰, and has been delivered in a multi-tiered process characteristic of the Global Fund. In this model, a 'big' development sector agency becomes the Principal Recipient (PR) of the funds from the Global Fund. Money is then transferred to the Sub-Recipient (SR) who then transfers it to the Sub Sub-Recipient (SSR) to conduct the HIV prevention activities on the ground. All khwajasira CBOs implementing this grant in Pakistan are SSRs, whereas the PR has jumped hands from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Bangkok, to Save the Children in Nepal, and then back to the UNDP but in Islamabad.

⁹Ministry of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination, 2014. Global AIDS Response Progress Report 2014, Islamabad: Government of Pakistan.

¹⁰United Nations Development Program, 2015. Fast Facts: Multi-Country South Asia Global Fund HIV Programme. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/-fast-facts-multi-country-south-asia-global-fund-hiv-programme> [Accessed 12 November 2023].

This historically inconsistent grant laid the foundation of khwajisira CBOs in Pakistan, and in essence all of them were either born, or raised, on this specific Global Fund grant as CBOs to fight HIV. This required the presence of a CBO, and a team of khwajisira employees who would then manage a range of HIV preventive services.

This model has created a new class of economy within the embattled khwajisira community, where a prospect of employment now exists at one of these CBOs. The khwajisira system is an indigenous system with a guru-chela hierarchy, where artificial families are born. The Guru can be seen as a parent, and the chela as a child – creating a kinship structure. Simultaneously, if two khwajisira individuals don't get along, it is understood that their respective chelas will also refrain from maintaining a relationship with each other. However, within the new CBO economy model, a new relationship now emerges – that of the employer and the employee. Historically, within the khwajisira community, this relationship had never existed. Hierarchy was determined based on kinship, age, and transition status. Illustratively, an older khwajisira who has medically transitioned (and hence has objective seniority in the khwajisira system) being employed by a younger khwajisira person who hasn't transitioned will create a power imbalance within the indigenous khwajisira hierarchy and organisational norms. It also creates conflicts of interest and muddles up decision-making power when it comes to intra-community accountability. Furthermore, this model creates a new power structure; that of the khwajisira 'CEO' who is running a CBO and is hence 'granting' employment to other khwajisiras as HIV community health workers and counselors. The emergence of this 'new' power, within a traditionally hierarchical community that is teetering on the edges of extreme poverty and income through begging, dance, and sex-work has thus created a new playground of exploitation and power struggles within the khwajisira community.

Theoretically speaking, the Global Fund provided a robust model as it seeks to 'strengthen community systems' to take ownership of and hence combat HIV. In reality though, Pakistan is one of the very few countries that has seen a consistent increase in new HIV infections among khwajisira people, and at least three cities in Pakistan have a community-wide epidemic of HIV which have shown no signs of reversing¹¹. This, despite the fact that khwajisira CBOs have been actively working to combat HIV in the three cities. This posits that although khwajisira CBOs in Pakistan have created new avenues for employment, they have dramatically failed at curbing HIV all the while generating new conflicts within the khwajisira community.

Ironically, the same Global Fund has failed to institute a national level arbitration council or grievance redressal mechanism that has resulted in a surge of accusations against people heading these projects. Topically, it seems that these accusations serve the purpose of reducing donor confidence in a CBO so that another CBO can land the same grant money and run the project instead, hence gaining 'control' of the employees and through that, also attaining power. However, in the absence of a formal, or even semi-formal, grievance redressal mechanism, these accusations remain unaddressed and hence remain volatile ammunition in this fight for khwajisira fiefdom over CBOs. The desire for accessing this new power through 'running a project' and employing other khwajisiras has resulted in community-insiders now invoking transphobia and misogynist accusations against other people working in the field. For instance, in late 2022, a Karachi based khwajisira CBO's HIV grant was suspended after false and transphobic accusations were made against an activist employed within, allegedly by a competing CEO of another CBO¹². The project was reinstated in a few months and the charges dismissed, only to be shut down again in July 2023 by the Office of Audits and Investigations of the UNDP in New York, without providing any reason¹³. Earlier in 2014, a transgender activist and her partner working on the same HIV grant in Karachi was accused by a minor of sexual assault which later became a national scandal during the #MeToo era of 2019¹⁴. Later in 2019, the parent NGO to run the Global Fund grant from Lahore, which birthed a majority of these khwajisira CBOs, shut itself down due to repeated accusations of corruption and subsequent loss of donor confidence. This demonstrates that accusations and complaints in the absence of transparent redressal have become a vital weapon in this war between CBOs as they compete over paltry resources from the Global Fund HIV grant.

¹¹National AIDS Control Program, 2017. Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance in Pakistan 2016-17, Islamabad: National AIDS Control Program.

¹²Arab News, 2022. UN agency abruptly closes HIV prevention program putting thousands at risk in Karachi. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2138896/pakistan> [Accessed 12 November 2023].

¹³Azam, O., 2023. UNDP suspends transgender HIV programme with GIA. [Online] Available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1094610-undp-suspends-transgender-hiv-programme-with-gia> [Accessed 12 November 2023]

¹⁴The Express Tribune, 2019. Kami Sid removed as Aurat March organiser following rape allegations. [Online]

Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1980086/4-kami-sid-removed-aurat-march-organisers-panel-following-rape-allegations> [Accessed 12 November 2023].

The problem with accusations is that if they are unaddressed, they don't go anywhere. There are legitimate issues of corruption, financial mismanagement, safeguarding, and exploitation within these CBOs as khwajasiras struggle to create organisational systems that address their financial needs while also balancing the tricky juxtaposition of community norms with organisational principles. Furthermore, through the emergence of this novel CBO economy, the marginalised identity of being a khwajasira suddenly becomes a valuable identity asset associated with marginalisation that allows one access to resources that elevate a person within the marginalised community: hence granting them power over other khwajisira persons. This has been framed as 'identity capitalism' by Nancy Leong in her book titled 'Identity Capitalists: The Powerful Insiders Who Exploit Diversity to Maintain Inequality'¹⁵. This commentary's inside-out exposition of the CBO economy model also serves the same purpose: to highlight an emergent problem within the design of this economic model that ends up empowering only an individual and their kinship while failing to improve the material conditions of the larger community that it seeks to serve.

In conclusion, neoliberalism through its emphasis on the non-profit sector – funded primarily by big foreign donor agencies – has displaced a lot of the responsibilities of the State on to marginalised people, who have then reproduced the same systems of inequality within their own communities. Recognising this reality is central if we want to progress, because this then tells us what steps to take next. For Pakistani khwajasiras, it means that an Arbitration and Grievances Redressal Council is necessary. Otherwise, we will continue to see exploitation both from within, and from outside, the community and no actual change towards improving the material conditions of people.

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¹⁵Leong, N., 2021. Identity Capitalists. 1st ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

