

Navigating (im)mobility: female entrepreneurship and social media in Khartoum

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Introduction

On a tremendously hot Khartoum afternoon I am sitting in an *amjad* or mini-van with Wala, my Sudanese research assistant.¹ We are accompanying the *murasa* (delivery boy) of one of our research respondents who is delivering naturally concocted cosmetics – including a typical Sudanese body scrub called *dilka* – to a woman who placed her order online through WhatsApp. As we have to cross the El Mak Nimr Bridge, one of the few bridges that connect Khartoum with Bahri,² we get stuck for hours in one of the many traffic jams of Sudan’s capital. Finally arriving at Al Amarat and approaching our final destination, we call the client for further directions. In a city like Khartoum – with a lack of street signs, many half-constructed streets and chaotic urban planning – mobile phones have become a key asset for local navigation. However, because of another breakdown in the city’s overburdened communication infrastructure, or simply as a result of the client’s inattention to her ringtone, we remain immobilized for another half an hour in a city whose temperature reaches up to 50 degrees Celsius.³

This field note describes the extremely hot and chaotic Khartoum cityscape that several Sudanese women attempt to navigate from their home. The narrative, taking place in one of the biggest metropolises on the African continent,⁴ illustrates how the unpredictable nature of infrastructure in African cities has turned urban landscapes into networked spaces in which connection and disconnection, movement and immobility, flow and blockage, presence and absence have become the structuring factors of everyday city life (De Boeck 2015; Larkin 2013; Mains 2012; Simone 2010). Trovalla and Trovalla (2015: 333) indicate that ‘signals, pipes, wires and roads link individuals to larger wholes, and the character of these connections informs and transforms experiences of the social world’. From an anthropological approach, this article analyses how Sudanese women experience, adapt and transform mobile phone infrastructure for commercial purposes.

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¹Apart from the name of my research assistant, all respondent names were changed to pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

²While this article refers simply to the city of Khartoum, Sudan’s capital in fact consists of three cities: Khartoum, Bahri (or Khartoum North) and Omdurman. These cities are separated by the Blue and the White Nile rivers, and are thus connected by only a few bridges.

³Field notes, 16 November 2014.

⁴Khartoum’s population is estimated to range between 6 million and 7 million inhabitants (Abdalla 2008: 32).

Since mobile phones have become ubiquitous in African communication landscapes, their layered meanings, functions and dynamics in the most mundane aspects of everyday life have been widely debated (Archambault 2012; 2013; De Bruijn *et al.* 2009; McIntosh 2010; Pype 2017a; Zegeye and Muponde 2012). In these studies, little attention has been paid to the commercial uses of mobile phones, especially the smartphone, which offers access to the internet as well as online media platforms. As evidenced by De Boeck (2015) in the context of Kinshasa, and as illustrated in the above introductory fragment in the case of Khartoum, new communication technologies have not only intensified social flows and blockages in cities (for example through technological failure and delay); they have also created economic value through the introduction of alternative social infrastructures of connectivity. The digital era has increased, for instance, the number of commercial opportunities available to those traditionally restricted to the domestic realm of the household. In particular, the mobile phone network facilitates access to the worlds of trade and commerce via a number of digital spaces or platforms that allow the display and exchange of consumer goods, without the direct need for physical movement through space. This provides a striking entrepreneurial opportunity, particularly for Sudanese women whose physical mobility has been limited as a result of conventional gender and religious ideologies and the strong emphasis on women's domesticity (Abu Lughod 1998; Alvi 2013; Elyachar 2010).

In this article, I examine how mobile phone practices in Sudan facilitate new forms of home-based, female entrepreneurship by focusing on the particular case of Khartoum's *tajirat al-Facebook* – or *tajirat al-Face* (Facebook traders) in short.⁵ These women use a smartphone or *shakhatah*⁶ to trade goods such as cosmetics, garments, *toob*,⁷ fashion accessories and perfumes through digital mediation. So far, these 'e-tailers' remain rather overlooked in African entrepreneurship studies, probably in part because they are not as prominently present in the African cityscape as market women and other kinds of petty traders. Although growing in number, scope and popularity, especially since the introduction of the smartphone a few years ago, the role these women occupy is rather hidden within the urban economy because they work from home. Moreover, this quite recent phenomenon of female online traders does not correspond to the more general image of female African entrepreneurs as coming from less affluent households and working in the city due to pressing economic needs (Clark 1994; Cornwall 2007; Langevang and Gough 2012).

In comparison, Khartoum's *tajirat al-Face* are well-educated Sudanese women who live in the more affluent neighbourhoods of the city and enjoy a relatively stable and comfortable economic position due to the well-paid jobs of their husbands and other male relatives. These middle- and even upper-class women are the new female online entrepreneurs of Sudan who work from home, simultaneously running their businesses while widening their professional and social

⁵In the singular, *tajirat al-Face*.

⁶In Khartoum, my informants used this term for smartphone which refers to the sound the devices make when users scroll the screen.

⁷This is a typical Sudanese dress for women and comprises a long bolt of fabric that is wrapped around the body and head.

circles. Relying on the urban infrastructure of mobile phones, delivery boys, digital connectivity and online platforms, they navigate public life from the intimate sphere of the home or *harem*. In this way, these successful businesswomen continuously transcend conventional gender norms and classic divisions between public and private, visible and invisible, work and family – boundaries that have been crucial in current analyses of female entrepreneurship. By addressing the day-to-day socio-economic practices of Khartoum's *tajirat al-Face*, this article casts an innovative light upon broader discussions about the economic role of women in Africa. It is argued that the mobile phone, and the smartphone in particular, has opened up a range of opportunities for women to enhance their space for social and economic manoeuvring and to negotiate power within, and beyond, the domestic realm. New communications technologies have paved the way for a new kind of female entrepreneur whereby commercial goals of profit making are tactically combined with the broader practices of sociality and diversion from boredom so that personal ambitions of material as well as more social and immaterial transformations may be achieved.

This article is based on fieldwork I conducted in Khartoum in November and December 2014 and 2015. For four months I criss-crossed the capital city of Sudan by *amjad* together with my Arabic-speaking research assistant, Wala, in order to visit and revisit the *tajirat al Face* I traced through online searches and snowball sampling. I had regular contact with a very heterogeneous group of forty-five Muslim Sudanese women who post pictures to sell typically female personal care and beauty items on Facebook and WhatsApp. Through extensive interaction with the women, I was able to observe how they organized their private and professional lives, how their businesses were integrated into family life at home, and how these two spheres intermingled and interacted. I also talked with male vendors in order to contrast their online vending activities with those of their female counterparts and interviewed some of the family members of my respondents. To follow up the personal visits, I participated in my respondents' online activities by 'going digital', namely by becoming a member of their Facebook pages and by participating in other online vending platforms and WhatsApp conversations.

Based on a combination of online and place-based research methods, the following sections offer insights into an online economic activity that entrenches, intermingles and gains meaning through in situ social and economic experiences and practices. The article is structured according to the different spaces (namely the home, the internet and the city) from and through which Khartoum's *tajirat al-Face* operate and so widen their socio-economic circle. In order to frame these empirical sections, the article begins with a brief overview of the academic debates about female entrepreneurship in African cities in general and in the Sudanese context in particular.

Female entrepreneurship, gender and new ICTs in African cities

Over the years, female entrepreneurship has received significant attention in African studies. From a gender perspective, female entrepreneurship has been considered an important strategy not only to lift women and their families out of poverty, but also to contribute to women's empowerment, self-reliance and

autonomy. Due to its promising role in gender-equitable poverty reduction, female entrepreneurship has been widely promoted in development circles. As Bushel (2008) illustrated with the case of Nepal, female entrepreneurship has the potential to move poor communities beyond a so-called 'culture of dependency' to one of 'self-reliance'. By gaining an income independently, entrepreneurial women can increase their level of respectability and ability to exert influence within the household. However, this neoliberal gender and development narrative has also been criticized for the blind faith it places in entrepreneurship as a linear route out of poverty and for its blueprint approach as an effective empowering strategy (Cornwall 2007; Cornwall *et al.* 2007). One recurring criticism is that many gender and development studies tend to group all types of female entrepreneurship together, thereby missing differences between places, generations and sectors (Spring 2009).

Indeed, there are many different forms of female entrepreneurship. In urban studies, a rough distinction can be made between those women whose economic activities are highly visible in public street life and those women who perform a rather invisible or hidden function in the urban labour market, for example through the activity of outsourcing. In Africa, this second group of female entrepreneurs, who work as subcontractors for formal manufacturing companies, seems to be less common than in Asia and Latin America (Gough *et al.* 2003). While many African women sell foodstuffs or operate small retail shops from home, the majority of female African entrepreneurs are market women. In West Africa, for example, the 'Mama Benz' or female merchants of printed African textiles are known worldwide (Prag 2013). By monopolizing the African wax print market they have generated unprecedented success and fortune; this fact is reflected in their nickname, which refers to the Mercedes Benz cars they drive. Another prominent group of African female entrepreneurs (also studied in Thailand by Wilson (2004)) are the 'Avon Ladies', whose name derives from the international cosmetics company. These local, female distributors sell manufactured Avon cosmetics to their direct network of relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances (Dolan and Scott 2009). Both groups operate under international companies in public settings. The Mama Benz – initially operating as wholesalers for the Dutch wax company Vlisco, but more recently also for Chinese companies that imitate European fabrics (Sylvanus 2013; Toulabor 2012) – distribute imported textiles through fixed stores or market stalls, while Avon Ladies travel door to door with a catalogue and samples to sell cosmetics.

In contrast to other African countries, in the highly Islamized Sudanese society, market trade is a clearly defined male domain. Outside the few exceptions of lower class female itinerant vendors who are obliged by their socio-economic conditions to work in public, such as the omnipresent tea ladies from Darfur and South Kordofan, shops and *souk* stalls are controlled by men. As a result, women who visibly participate in the public trade industry in Sudan are highly contested. This can be best illustrated by the case of the *dalaliat*; these are female Sudanese traders who peddle imported goods door to door to middle- and upper-class women.⁸ By bringing fancy products from abroad to their

⁸The information on *dalaliat* (singular: *dalalia*) is based on interviews and informal conversations, as, to date, I have not been able to find academic studies on this subject.

relatives, neighbours, friends and other acquaintances at home, they compete with the local *souks*. However, unlike the Avon Ladies, *dalaliat* do not work as sales representatives for large international companies; instead they travel to Dubai themselves to procure a range of branded and internationally manufactured goods that are largely unavailable at the local *souk*. As a result of vending modalities that require physical movement through the public sphere, *dalaliat* generally suffer from ill repute in Sudanese society and are the subject of many rumours. These women are harshly criticized for the time they spend outside the house and for neglecting their homes and children.

In Sudan, there is much discussion about whether women should work outside the house or not, and under what conditions (Hale 2001). Especially since the introduction in 1983 of sharia or Islamic law, religion has become ever more important in shaping gender norms and defining the position of women in Sudanese society (Boddy 1989; Nageeb 2004; Willemse 2001).⁹ The Sudanese Islamic state has defined the family and the woman as the cornerstone of society (Tønnessen 2008). As the incumbent president El Bashir stated some years ago, the ideal Sudanese woman 'should take care of herself, her children, her home, her reputation, and her husband' (as quoted in Mosely Lesch 1998: 133). By defining where, when and under what conditions women can leave the house, this deeply entrenched patriarchal ideology structures women's social practices. However, as has been widely elaborated in the gender literature (see, for example, Fouron and Glick Schiller 2001; Glenn 1999; Mahler and Pessar 2001), the gender dimension is strongly interrelated with class, ethnicity, generation and other socially stratifying factors. The relative absence of women from Khartoum's streetscapes has, for instance, a strong class dimension as not all social strata can afford to stay hidden from public city life. Nageeb (2004) analyses the intersections between class and gender by introducing the concept of *harem*. In Sudanese Arabic, *Walyia* (*harem* in Arabic) literally means 'women', but the concept is frequently used to refer to the interior sections of homes and to social gatherings that are exclusively assigned to women. Nageeb (*ibid.*) argues that the strict confinement of women to the *harem* reveals certain aspects of social prestige, as generally only well-to-do families can afford to seclude women in the *harem*. In contrast, the socio-economic condition of market women, for instance, forces them to work in public because they are often the sole breadwinner of the family (Badawi *et al.* 2008). Nevertheless, with the introduction of new communications technologies, the strict boundaries between working inside and outside the home have been challenged.

In fact, telecommunications have opened up new spaces of commerciality in Africa. The mobile phone industry, for instance, has generated new business opportunities for a variety of technical specialists and small-scale entrepreneurs who open internet cafés and public phone booths to sell airtime. A number of largely informal market intermediaries – including retailers as well as agents and community-based organizations – have played an important role in delivering

⁹After independence in 1956, Arabic became the official language of Sudan and Islam the overall religion of the state (Sharkey 2008). However, especially after sharia was proclaimed the law of the land by Numayri (in 1983), religion has become an important factor framing the position of women in Sudanese society.

various mobile phone services including places to make phone calls, recharge phone batteries and buy airtime (Duncombe 2012). Grätz (2013) accurately describes how the introduction of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) have given rise to a wide range of new media entrepreneurs in African cities. However, apart from generating new business possibilities for a variety of male specialists, new communications technologies have also opened up new opportunities for emergent internet consumption and e-commerce. While there have been several studies on the way in which ICTs have facilitated e-commerce and e-retail in a Western context (Al-Qirim 2004; Brunn and Leinbach 2001; Wrigley *et al.* 2002), the rise of e-commerce remains a neglected area in African studies despite its growing importance, spread and dynamism.

In this article, I argue that where physical mobility is restricted by factors including class, family responsibilities and gender norms, mobile phones and internet access allow people to be economically active across space and time. New opportunities to maintain female entrepreneurship within the confines of the house have increased with access to new ICTs.¹⁰ With their dual applicability to display and disguise (Archambault 2013), phone practices simultaneously open doors for women's involvement in the highly public activity of petty trade and ensure the reputation of Muslim women who are supposed to spend their time in predominantly domestic realms.

***'Al-raghba li-l-shughul'* (a passion to work): shifting from working outside to working inside the house**

Sarah is a young Sudanese woman who studied science at one of Khartoum's prominent universities. After graduating, she worked as a teaching assistant while conducting pioneering laboratory research on the transmission of tropical diseases. She has always aspired to become a *mutkhasisa* [professional], but after she gave birth to her first child her academic career halted abruptly. Due to the long working hours and the large distances between work and home, Sarah could no longer combine the responsibilities of her job with her responsibilities as a mother and as a wife. In consultation with her husband, she decided to give up her professional career and stay at home with her newborn child. Sarah explains to me that initially it was *'takuni rabbat bayt, da kabus'* [a nightmare to become a housewife] and to spend the whole day *'ga'da fi-l-bayt zahjana'* [sitting at home and doing nothing]. Feeling stuck in her home, she started exploring the possibilities of opening an online business with her female Sudanese friends who reside in Saudi Arabia and Spain.¹¹

Sarah's case illustrates the context within which the activities of Khartoum's *tajirat al-Face* must be situated. In general, they are well-educated women who have enjoyed higher education opportunities at very prestigious universities in Sudan and beyond. In fact, a considerable number of these women studied at the renowned

¹⁰Vokes and Pye further analyse this interesting interaction between ITCs and spatiality with the concept of 'media chronotopes'. They argue that this concept inspires anthropologists to further scrutinize how 'media is embedded within structures, agency and the management of social lives, and; how media is allowed to alter these as well' (Vokes and Pye 2016: 3).

¹¹Interview, 24 December 2014.

Ahfad University for Women. After graduating, several of the women secured good jobs at the university, the United Nations or other international organizations and companies. Other women never succeeded in finding a job that fitted their professional profile. However, they all halted their professional ambitions or careers when they married, when they became pregnant or when they gave birth to their first child. In the case of Sarah, the working hours and the long distance from work to home were not compatible with her domestic tasks at home. However, several women – including the ones without children – also indicated that their husbands discouraged them from working outside the house. The husbands considered it their duty to financially maintain the family; they also feared that their wives' salaried jobs would result in less attention for the children and the home. In addition, their reputations as '*rajil mas'ul*' or responsible husbands would be threatened. Without a pressing financial need, being married to a working Sudanese woman would negatively affect a husband's social status (Mosely Lesch 1998).

Most women perceive the shift from *mutkhasisa* (professional) to *rabbat bayt* (housewife) in a negative way. Despite describing themselves as having '*al-raghba li-l-shughul*' (a passion to work), many women, including Sarah, soon find that their professional mobility becomes restricted to activities and responsibilities in the home. Sarah's statements above echo a widely shared sentiment of boredom and of 'being stuck' in the house, lacking in meaning and purpose.¹² The women expressed a strong desire to attribute meaning to their home activities in order to counter feelings of social isolation that accompany just being a *rabbat bayt*. They vividly described that they wanted to resume their job search or become professionally active again, but were worried about the consequences for their children and their reputation as a *mutadayina* ('straight Muslim'), *om azemah* ('responsible mother') and *sit bayt* ('good housewife'). While the women were in charge of the management of the household chores, almost all of them had the support of at least one *shaghala* (domestic worker) for cooking, cleaning and other tasks. However, the women were very reluctant about (and even suspicious of) outsourcing the care of their children.¹³

For these women, the *shakhatah* and applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp became important instruments for 'being smart in the city' (Pype 2017b) and extending social space beyond the four walls of the home. As in the case of the teenage girls studied by Nicolescu (2014) in Romania, the women central to this research use new communications technologies not only to

¹²In the Africanist literature, 'boredom' and 'being stuck' are the words used by in-limbo populations to depict their socio-economic situations; these include, for example, youngsters waiting for steady jobs and the economic stability needed to start their own families (Hansen 2005; Langevang and Gough 2009; Masquelier 2013) and refugees in camps and cities waiting for asylum and the legal status to work (Hyndman and Giles 2011; Jacobsen 2006). A focus on the mobility experiences of married women offers an important extension to these studies on African youth and how urban youngsters try to imbue life with meaningful practices that lessen the burden of 'boredom' (Masquelier 2013) or 'getting stuck' (Hansen 2005). While women navigate and traverse urban space in rather different ways compared to youth, both groups try to employ tactics and practices to transcend the socio-economic limitations and frustrations they face in daily life.

¹³This unease confirms van Nieuwkerk's (2008) observation that leaving children with nannies or in a kindergarten has been characterized as un-Islamic and associated with the neglect of children.

counter feelings of boredom and solitude but also to create social meaning by actively using the phone to establish and negotiate social relations. The *shakhatah* has become an important device to pass the time and to be socially engaged as well as to orient themselves towards the exterior. Through the *shakhatah*, the women get an idea of what keeps other women busy and how they organize their lives. These online activities inspired several of my respondents to imitate the *tajirat al-Face* they encountered on the internet and, like Sarah, to become traders themselves based on the eye-opening experience and apprenticeship of buying products online. As a result, they started to experiment by uploading pictures, taken with their *shakhatah* or directly downloaded from the online catalogues of eBay and Alibaba, and by featuring a variety of consumer goods including female fashion from Dubai, China and the UK; local cosmetics and perfumes; accessories; African hair products (mainly imported from the US); and kitchen equipment and bed linen from the Gulf States.¹⁴ Accompanied with their telephone numbers, these pictures are uploaded to the women's Facebook pages and WhatsApp profiles. In general, the pictures are very basic and additional information is restricted to the minimum. Only a few *tajirat al-Face* creatively fine-tune the images by adding personal messages and product information as a way to distinguish themselves from the rest of the *tajirat al-Face* who use this form of advertisement.

Moreover, most of the women indicated that their activities on Facebook started as a kind of play or 'virtuous fun', as Rollier (2010: 423) describes the playfulness of SMS texting among young Pakistanis. The women started exchanging pictures of consumer goods on their Facebook pages by way of experiment and in an attempt to enliven the daily routine of being a *rabbat bayt*. The logic of profit making was of secondary importance. Zaina, for example, stated:

The nature of my husband's work means that he is running around to many places, he is away the whole day, and my children are in school in the morning. So instead of calling my husband all the time and asking him what he is doing, I wanted *ashghil nafsi* [to occupy myself or to keep myself busy].¹⁵

Like Zaina, several women started their online activities after searching for a new way to pass the time, to defeat boredom as well as to distract themselves from the social isolation of being confined to the house. Although there were some women who suddenly experienced an economic need because of abrupt changes in the household budget or familial problems, for most of the women there was no direct economic motive to sell products; indeed, the men brought in enough income to maintain the family.¹⁶ Online trade was simply considered to be an

¹⁴It is outside the purpose of this article to track the routes these goods are following (see Appadurai 1986). However, what is important for the argument of this article is the zigzag pattern these goods follow. Women made an effort to purchase their merchandise in the United States or London because it guarantees that their products are of good quality. In the end, this is often just a sales strategy, because several of these products from Western countries are imported from China and so are similar to the products available at the local *souk*.

¹⁵Interview, 10 December 2014.

¹⁶During the second period of fieldwork, Sudan's economic recession was more perceptible than during the first fieldwork in 2014. In 2015, the *tajirat al-Face* I spoke with emphasized that they were not working to maintain the family, but simply to contribute where needed. In fact, several women stated that these economic contributions were directed to the extended family, and to their

appropriate way to combine their responsibilities as mothers and housewives with what several of the women described as an eagerness for '*khidmat al-mujtama*' or active involvement in society through community service. This is also why they feel very offended when they are associated with the *dalaliat*, their low-status predecessors. They explain that they are not poor women selling their merchandise on the streets, but instead use online technologies to convert their homes into commercial spaces where the social expectations of Sudanese wives and mothers can still be met.

Nonetheless, the private sphere remains a space in which the women have to continually negotiate and justify the relevance of their online activities, especially to husbands and in-laws. For example, Zaina, introduced above, had violent quarrels with her husband over the fact that she sells Chinese consumer goods through digital mediation; these arguments almost led to divorce. Her husband, living in a huge villa in one of Khartoum's most affluent neighbourhoods, continually opposes, discourages and undermines his wife's online activities. According to Zaina, he stated:

Even if you [Zaina] have a successful business and earn a hell of a lot of money I do not agree with what you are doing. Why are you working as *dalalia*? Have you ever asked me for something I did not buy for you?¹⁷

Zaina, in turn, justifies her activities by emphasizing the fact that she does not view her business as a profit-making activity; she simply considers it to be 'doing something I like'. However, her husband maintains a very narrow outlook on her online activities. He considers his wife to be working as a *dalalia* and, as such, that she continues to undermine his social prestige and pride.¹⁸

In other cases, relatives of the *tajirat al-Face* were worried about the negative association of having an income-earning woman in the family, the independence it might provide, and the negative impact it might have on the time the woman could dedicate to the home. From their perspective, the fact that women were working from home was not a decisive factor in the acceptability of their online activities.

Working online: the extension of the *harem* through digital connectivity

Since the *shakhatah* has become part and parcel of Khartoum's urban landscape, ever more people in the city have permanent access to a plurality of digital media – theorized as 'polymedia' by Madianou and Miller (2012) – as well as a wide range of technological applications and online platforms. Through this emerging accessibility of digital connectivity, Sudanese women in general, and the online vendors and buyers in particular, continually criss-cross the digital spaces of Facebook and WhatsApp. The power of Facebook to reach a high number of people in a very

mothers in particular. These women indicated that, while they could ask for money from their husbands for whatever they needed, they felt embarrassed about asking for money for their own families.

¹⁷Interview, 10 December 2014.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

short period of time makes this medium the preferred social networking site for business advertisements. Yet, most *tajirat al-Face* start to prospect business potential by first advertising among close friends and relatives. After enthusiastic reactions, they appeal to this ‘horizontal network’ (Hoodfar 1997: 229–30) of ‘strong ties’ (Granovetter 1973) to distribute their advertisements among the broader public. By extending their potential clientele beyond the private sphere of personal contacts, the *tajirat al-Face* rely on social infrastructures that are separate from those of the *dalaliat* (as well as the Avon Ladies described above) who use their direct web of social ties with family, neighbours and friends as the basis for face-to-face sales. However, irrespective of the Facebook possibilities, the women indicated that the success of online trade still largely depends on personal recommendations or *wasta*.¹⁹ The *tajirat al-Face* must spread their images within appropriate networks comprised of those women who have the money and an interest in buying these kinds of consumer goods.

At the same time, the cultivation of an online web of connections requires the endless practice of maintaining Facebook pages that are attractive and up to date. The *tajirat al-Face* must continually keep potential clients satisfied, gain credibility among members, broaden social networks, and look for positive comments on posts. The maintenance and fortification of an online network also demand relentless practices of virtual window dressing (if not with fancy pictures, at least with sweet words and funny emoticons) and advertising, as a large number of ‘likes’ gives no guarantee of economic success. Facebook ‘likes’ simply help to create the appropriate conditions for a successful online business; similar to other kinds of ‘phatic labour’ (Elyachar 2010), they can only potentially be transformed into vending opportunities.²⁰ This is just a first step in building a digital network of women who become virtually united by mutual consumption interests. Moreover, men are not allowed to participate in these all-female platforms. Some *tajirat al-Face* even indicated that they specifically switched from open Facebook pages to closed Facebook or WhatsApp groups to avoid the involvement and control of men. With the shift from Facebook followers to potential female clients, the *tajirat al-Face* also attempted to shift from the more public space of Facebook to the more intimate space offered by WhatsApp.

In general, WhatsApp is used for direct and personal conversations about products; the application mediates dialogue and agreement between buyer and seller about price, vending modality, and type of order. In addition, WhatsApp offers the possibility for both buyer and seller to enter into more private conversations in which daily experiences, private issues and emotions are exchanged. WhatsApp thus constitutes an important social space for female interaction. As these broader practices of sociability are exclusively taking place among women, the *tajirat al-Face* WhatsApp groups could be considered to be a new manifestation of the *harem*. *Tajirat al-Face* use WhatsApp to organize their economic activities

¹⁹In this regard, Mann (2014) has published an interesting book chapter on the way in which information technologies and *wasta* are also important assets when entering the formal Sudanese labour market.

²⁰Based on Malinowski’s concept of the ‘phatic community’, Elyachar (2010) describes how, in urban settings, ‘phatic labour’ or women’s practices of sociability – including visiting, moving, chatting and gossiping – are essential infrastructures shaping political economies.

in accordance with the gender segregation codes of the Islamist project, yet also to create spaces of female interaction and control beyond the boundaries of their homes' interior sections. In this sense, the home is transformed from a private abode to a business node for digital interaction, or from a place of physical proximity to a 'space of flows', to use Castells' (1996) term.

However, the women also faced fundamental challenges in navigating the public sphere from home. As with any other kind of 'flexible entrepreneurship', as Wilson (1999) calls it, the on-call nature of online trade creates a continuous intersection of work and family and thereby challenges the home sphere of the *tajirat al-Face*. Indeed, the women themselves schedule their working time and as such are supposed to have the flexibility to balance their online activities with their familial responsibilities at home. In practice, however, online entrepreneurship is time consuming, especially when the business starts to expand. In fact, some *tajirat al-Face* indicated that they are busy until four or five o'clock in the morning; while the quietness of the late-night hours was useful when answering the online messages received during the day, the women complained that the business never provides an opportunity to rest. This became especially evident during my home visits. Sitting together on colourfully draped beds,²¹ an endless stream of beeps, texts, images and phone calls punctuated our conversations. Yet despite the constant and instant communication, clients sent angry faces through WhatsApp because they felt that they were not responded to quickly enough. According to the *tajirat al-Face* clients have become increasingly demanding. The expectation of instant response at any time of the day thus triggers a perpetual move back and forth between private and public or work and family. Because the women are online almost all of the time, the boundaries between home and work have become blurred (Horst 2012). As the *tajirat al-Face* are permanently available for private family reasons as well as for public business reasons, conflict and tensions at the work–family interface have arisen.

The pressure on the *tajirat al-Face* work–life balance is also a result of their success. Despite their exploratory approach to conducting online activities, many traders seemed to expand in a relatively short period of time. Most of these women indicated that the rapid growth of their online activities took them by surprise as they had never expected to become so successful with a simple activity of distraction that was used to pass the time and give meaning to their lives as *rabbat bayt*. This unexpected success led to a turning point whereby their online practices were no longer perceived as 'fun', but instead shifted towards being a burden on their personal and family life. For instance, when I revisited Sarah, introduced above, during my fieldwork in 2015, she indicated that she had stopped working as a *tajirat al-Face* because she became too busy. She explained:

After some time it [the online work] became difficult for me because there was a load on me, you know, because the children are at school now, they have to study and I have to help them with their homework and exams and so on.²²

²¹Across Khartoum – even in the most affluent neighbourhoods of the city – living rooms and other meeting places are often equipped with beds instead of sofas. During the day, these beds are used to host visitors while at night they are used as sleeping places.

²²Follow-up interview, 8 November 2015.

In this case, Sarah used the English word 'load' in our Arabic conversation to describe the impact her online activities had on her daily tasks at home. Other women used the Arabic word *himl* to express the idea that their online activities added extra weight to their daily responsibilities.²³ The fact that their online activities are considered to be 'something extra', a side activity, is one of the reasons why several women pop up for a while only then to disappear again from the digital scene in order to fully dedicate their time to their home and their family. However, several women also indicated a desire to stop their business, or at least to scale down slightly, as it was no longer enjoyable; for many, however, there was no way back. The women, used to earning their own income, had become independent of their husbands for their personal care and consumption needs. They enjoyed the material and symbolic wealth they accumulated through the business and indicated that they would miss its sociable aspect as well. In this sense, the newly created socio-economic manoeuvring space also imposes new constraints within their lifeworlds. The *tajirat al-Face* are not always able to fully control the interplay between profit making and diversion, the underlying logic of their online activities.

Traversing city limits and country borders from home

Archambault (2012) makes use of the expression 'travelling while sitting down' to describe how young men in the city of Inhambane (Mozambique) make use of technology-mediated communication to travel mentally in a world that remains elusive for most of them. In this section, I will borrow Archambault's discursive metaphor in the analysis of how Khartoum's *tajirat al-Face* use digital mediation to transgress city and country limits. In general, Sudan does not yet have the technological infrastructure to uplift the online vending practices of the *tajirat al-Face* to the same level as international e-commerce companies with an extensive geographical reach.²⁴ In Khartoum, internet coverage is still very unreliable, transaction costs for websites are high, and there are few low-cost international shipping carriers. Moreover, due to American sanctions, it is hardly possible to transfer money out of or into Sudan because foreign cash transfers through international banks are forbidden and the procedures to transfer money by Western Union have become very strict. Within this context, the online activities of the *tajirat al-Face* remain a localized, low-profile phenomenon that is only partially materialized in the digital space; *tajirat al-Face* communicate with clients through digital devices while clients simultaneously rely on the physical infrastructure and face-to-face encounters with the *tajirat al-Face* or *murasala* in order to browse the merchandise as well as to build trust and to facilitate economic transactions. While some of the women combine the dual strategy of online marketing with vending from a physical location outside the home, most of the women welcome their clients at home. Women who sell fashion and accessories receive an especially high number of potential clients at home as these customers prefer

²³This term is also used when a woman is pregnant, in this case referring to the extra weight of carrying a baby.

²⁴Even in these cases, as Wrigley (2000: 309) argues, 'e-commerce remains bound by geography to a far greater extent than is often suggested'.

to personally assess the quality by inspection and touch before they buy online consumer goods. Other *tajirat al Face* offer delivery by calling on the services of *amjad* drivers. As a physical meeting still takes place in these situations, the money for the delivery and the *murasa* is always paid in cash; online interactions are limited to the pre-vending act. When dealing with Sudan's imperfect or lacking infrastructure, the women thus constantly search for ways to navigate the turbulence of what Larkin (2008) describes, in the context of Nigeria, as 'the politics and poetics of infrastructure'.

Despite these (infra)structural constraints, the *tajirat al-Face* are actively expanding their areas of operation and continue to search for opportunities to sell their products outside Khartoum.²⁵ Junah, the guiding force behind the *amjad* journey described at the beginning of this article, relayed how she had received an increasing number of Facebook messages and telephone calls from clients who are interested in buying her products but live outside Khartoum. Faced with certain logistical constraints, she decided to send her products through private bus companies that travel to different districts in Sudan. With her *shakhatah*, she takes pictures of the bus company invoices and sends them to her clients. In this way, not only can she inform clients about the bus schedule, she can also assure them of delivery. The clients pick up their packages at the local bus terminal and pay for their products by sending credit to her mobile phone. Unlike many other African countries, Sudan does not yet have a mobile money service. Hence, most women prefer to receive payment as credit on their mobile phones. For a 10 per cent fee, this credit can be converted into cash at local supermarkets. Several other women made use of the local bus companies, but asked clients to pay in advance through a regular bank transfer. In both cases, the *tajirat al-Face* depended on non-digital transport services and financial infrastructure in order to expand their vending territory across and beyond Khartoum. However, breakdowns in these infrastructures seriously complicated the trust relations between buyer and vendor. As Rao (2015: 39) succinctly describes for the case of Mumbai, 'systems that make urban flows possible are always a threat'. Indeed, when Samer's Facebook page was blocked for two weeks for an inexplicable reason, her business temporarily collapsed and eventually she lost several clients. Other significant cases where a failure of technology abruptly blocks motion and turns connection into disconnection can be exemplified by a lost or broken *shakhatah* and its severe consequences for the business.

The *tajirat al-Face* also employ other strategies to explore possibilities for virtual engagement and digital connection beyond their direct physical surroundings. Visits to market places abroad are planned in detail through internet research. Rihana, one of Khartoum's unmarried *tajirat al-Face*, has travelled several times to China to purchase clothes for her business, always accompanied by her brother or another male relative. She says that, on average, she spends three months conducting online research in order to prepare for her business trips. She Googles everything she needs to know, paying particular attention to advice posted on Arabic business forums. She generally consults these types of

²⁵Some traders explicitly decided to limit delivery to the city of Khartoum because it was too complicated and risky to do business with unfamiliar clients. These traders were afraid that these more distant clients would place orders but would not pay for products.

forums because the people who share their experiences there come from the same culture and are looking for the same type of Muslim clothing. Furthermore, they often have specific advice regarding clothing size, which apparently is a big challenge for Sudanese traders buying their products on the Chinese market.

What becomes clear from these descriptions is that developing businesses beyond the direct geographical surroundings goes hand in hand with an increasing dependence on the social as well as the physical infrastructure. This social infrastructure is comprised of various connections with people living abroad, commonly female friends or relatives, and the men who accompany them for physical travel. These movements in turn are governed by the urban infrastructure of roads, transport services, internet and mobile phone connections and money transfer systems. In this sense, as with gender norms, infrastructure is a key factor that shapes the *tajirat al-Face*'s activities as it channels (and blocks) the rhythm, flow and speed of their practices. As Rodgers and O'Neill (2012: 402) mentioned, urban infrastructure:

demarcates both literally and figuratively which points in urban contexts can and should be connected, and which should not, the kinds of people and goods that can and should circulate easily, and which should stay put, and who can and should be integrated within the city, and who should be left outside of it.

In this sense, and in line with Archambault's (2012) argument relating to young men in Mozambique, digital connectivity has significantly decreased the physical as well as the psychological distance between vendors and buyers. At the same time, it has shaped the immobility experiences of *tajirat al-Face* as it offers substitutes for physical movement and engagement in public city life. These rhythms of connecting and disconnecting and presence and absence have carved out a social space for women's interaction that transcends the private–public divide. Through online entrepreneurship, new meaning is ascribed to the concept of *harem*; online practices create a space that is exclusively navigated by women, yet allow fluid sociability beyond the boundaries of in-house activities and planned encounters with the familiar network of close friends and relatives. As a result, online trading has redefined and reconstructed women's experiences of time and space by offering a springboard to be more actively engaged in the hubbub of daily city life in Khartoum and beyond.

Conclusion

As a result of Sudan's Islamist project, as well as the introduction of the *shakhatah* in Khartoum's urban landscape, the physical mobility of Sudanese women might have decreased. At the very least, middle- and upper-class women no longer have to leave the house for shopping or doing business as a result of digital connectivity. However, despite the general discouragement of physical mobility, I argue that online activities have positively influenced the mobility experiences of the *tajirat al-Face* by opening up alternative spaces to develop their businesses and establish a web of connections with the outside world. *Tajirat al-Face*'s movements through digital space – or what Archambault (2012) called 'mental travels' – have opened up a range of opportunities for Muslim women to enhance their social and economic manoeuvring space. Online activities have enabled a shift from working

outside the house to working inside the house, as well as the ability to remain economically active without jeopardizing social expectations based on class, gender and religion. In addition, the *tajirat al-Face* extend their everyday social practices beyond the private sphere by changing from the use of Facebook to WhatsApp and by creating online *harem* spaces in which social interaction takes place exclusively between women. This is how women use technological as well as social infrastructures to expand their business beyond city and country limits and to benefit from global connection. In this sense, apart from challenging the dialectics between mobility and stasis, these *tajirat al-Face* are continuously transcending gender hierarchies by challenging boundary mechanisms between private and public, inside and outside, visible and invisible, and online and offline.

Without downplaying the economic significance of female online businesses, these back-and-forth movements or yo-yo flows between online and offline, between private and public, and between indoor and outdoor spaces have positively contributed to the *tajirat al-Face*'s agency and negotiating power within and beyond the home. These dynamics have created various opportunities for *tajirat al-Face* not only to distract themselves from some of the constraints they faced in their condition as *rabbat bayt*, but also to be more actively engaged in city life in general. The women indicated that '*ligayt nafsi fi-l-shughul*', or that they found themselves in the business and that due to the business they were able to live their own lives, or, in Sen's words, 'to live the lives they value' (Sen 1999). The business obliges and stimulates them to move, to be socially active, and to take initiatives of creativity, entrepreneurship and sociality.

In terms of gender and development, this transformative potential of online activities can in large part be ascribed to the mediating role of the complex social and physical infrastructures of the city of Khartoum. Women navigate and traverse urban space from their *harem* by falling back on the urban infrastructure of mobile phones, delivery boys, digital connectivity and social networks to enter Khartoum's worlds of trade and commerce. They combine work with family, business and fun in order to transcend the socio-economic limitations, frustrations and isolation they face as *rabbat bayt*. This is how Khartoum's *tajirat al-Face* have created personalized urban environments within which commerce can be combined with broader practices of sociality and where gender-based social positions are continuously negotiated and expanded.

In a digital age, it is precisely this interaction between the economic, the social and the technological infrastructure that deserves more attention in future research on the role of women in African economies. A focus on these interrelated aspects can provide a better understanding of how the boundaries between public and private, family and work, visible and invisible, and online and offline become increasingly permeable in contemporary online entrepreneurial activities. It echoes broader debates on gender, technology and commerciality, and, as such, contributes to the broader discussion revolving around the socio-economic dynamics of female entrepreneurship in African cities.

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Abstract

Through Facebook and other social media, a growing number of well-educated women in Khartoum are marketing and selling typically female personal care and beauty items online. These '*tajirat al-Facebook*' (or Facebook traders) are the new entrepreneurs of Sudan who work from home to run their businesses and widen their social circles. Relying on the urban infrastructure of mobile phones, delivery boys, digital connectivity and online platforms, they navigate public life from the intimate sphere of the home or *harem* to become successful businesswomen who continuously transcend conventional gender norms and classic divisions between public and private, online and offline, and work and family. By addressing the day-to-day socio-economic practices of these traders, this article casts innovative light upon the broader discussions surrounding the role of women in economic life in Africa. It is argued that the mobile phone, and the smartphone in particular, has opened up a range of opportunities for women to enhance their social and economic manoeuvring space and to negotiate power within, and beyond, the domestic realm. New communications technologies have paved the way for a new kind of entrepreneurship in which the commercial goals of profit making are intimately entwined with the broader practices of sociality and diversion from boredom.

Résumé

À travers Facebook et d'autres médias sociaux, un nombre croissant de femmes instruites de Khartoum commercialisent et vendent des produits de beauté et d'hygiène féminine sur Internet. Ces « *tajirat al-Facebook* » (commerçantes Facebook) sont les nouvelles femmes entrepreneures du Soudan qui, de chez

elles, dirigent leur entreprise et développent leur cercle social. S'appuyant sur l'infrastructure urbaine des téléphones portables, des livreurs et des plateformes de connectivité numérique et Internet, elles conduisent leur vie publique depuis l'univers intime de leur domicile ou *harem* pour réussir dans les affaires en transcendant en permanence les normes de genre conventionnelles et les divisions classiques entre public et privé, connecté et non connecté, et travail et famille. En traitant des pratiques socioéconomiques quotidiennes de ces commerçantes, cet article apporte un éclairage innovant sur les discussions plus larges concernant le rôle des femmes dans la vie économique en Afrique. Il soutient que le téléphone portable, et notamment le smartphone, a offert aux femmes un éventail d'opportunités pour améliorer leur marge de manœuvre sociale et économique et pour négocier le pouvoir au sein de la sphère domestique, mais également au-delà. Les nouvelles technologies de communication ont ouvert la voie à un nouveau type d'entrepreneuriat dans lequel les objectifs commerciaux lucratifs sont intimement liés aux pratiques plus larges de socialité et de diversion de l'ennui.