

Female entrepreneurship in MENA and the GCC countries: from SDGs to policy-making considerations

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1. Introduction: placing female entrepreneurship in context

The attainment of gender equality and empowering women and girls constitutes one of the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A very strong normative component is inherent in this imperative that tacitly and expressly weaves between the SDGs. The twin imperative of gender equality and women's empowerment defines a broad field of policy debate and research. Simultaneously, it highlights the interconnectedness of the SDGs and the multi-scalar factors that determine the efficient pursuit of sustainable growth and development across the globe (Visvizi and Daniela, 2019). In other words, there can be no sustainable growth without gender equality and fundamental human rights. Moreover, the talk of female entrepreneurship is empty if gender equality is not safeguarded by domestic regulatory frameworks and internalized by society at large. Similarly, there can be no empowerment if basic healthcare and maternal care are not granted, or if social norms relentlessly place the burden of maintaining the household solely on women. In summary, the discussion on female entrepreneurship, as research highlights (Nikou *et al.*, 2019; Anlesinya *et al.*, 2019; Bastian *et al.*, 2018), requires that several constitutive questions are considered, and a number of conditioning factors are taken into account. Women's entrepreneurship is not a niche dimension of the research and policy-making landscape; rather, it is an integral part of the broader set of questions such as whether a new social contract fit for the needs and challenges of the twenty-first century is feasible; how to design it and which economic growth model to apply to make it work (Visvizi *et al.*, 2019a).

The objective of this special issue was to query this issue from the perspective of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and, specifically, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The MENA and GCC countries are particularly interesting in the context of gender equality and female empowerment for several reasons. First, developments pertaining to gender equality and female empowerment only gradually carve out their position in the academic literature (Itani *et al.*, 2011; Dechant and Al Lamky, 2005; Bastian and Zali, 2016). Second, stereotypes tend to obscure objective insights into developments in the region, and so bias frequently clouds the popular debate on those topics, including their country and regional variances. Third, the scope of socio-economic transition that unfolds in MENA and the GCC countries is so profound that the very pace of that evolution and its implications for society are at times difficult to grasp. Accordingly, the objective of this special issue was to shed some light on these complex and interconnected issues.

2. Female entrepreneurship: the structure and agency question

This special issue focussed on women's entrepreneurship in MENA and the GCC countries. Going beyond the obvious argument that woman and girls cannot be excluded from any sphere of a functioning society, the guest editors' objective was to query the processes and the practice of the day-to-day efforts aimed at empowering women in the GCC countries. Accordingly, the papers included in this special issue focus on the perennial question of structure and agency and offer intriguing material that allow us to return to and re-examine the classics (Giddens, 1979; Wendt, 1987; Archer, 1995). The papers selected for publication in this special issue elaborate on the diverse determinants behind women's



entrepreneurship, including the structural and agential ones. They also add empirical insights into gendered perspectives of entrepreneurship (Yousafzi *et al.*, 2018).

Drawing on primary and secondary data, and by carefully examining women's attitudes and perceptions, the contributing authors offer curious insights into the purposeful agency of women in the GCC countries. The picture that the readers thus gain defies the stereotypes that tend to cloud the popular understanding of how things are done in the region. The papers included in this special issue place emphasis on the business context and business practices in the region, highlighting that they too gradually adapt to the imperative of a greater degree of women's engagement and gender equality. It is in this context that the question of entrepreneurship is also introduced into the debate. The latter is seen a fundamental lever in the process of empowering women. The challenge is how to equip women with the mind-set and skills necessary to exercise the spirit of entrepreneurship with which they are naturally endowed (Henry *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b).

The guest editors have chosen five papers for inclusion in this special issue; other valuable contributions, owing to space constraints, will be published in a forthcoming general issue. It was fascinating to observe how the authors and reviewers engaged in a very constructive dialogue that sought to enhance the quality of the research and its social impact. We are grateful to both the authors and reviewers for their commitment and hard work in helping to finalise the selected papers.

3. The content of the special issue

The discussion in this special issue opens with an overview on the MENA region, i.e. the broader regional context, in which the GCC countries are embedded. Clearly, the GCC countries, comprising Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman, represent a distinct group, not least because of the implications of exploiting and managing one of the biggest confirmed reserves of carbohydrates in the world. To contextualize developments pertinent to female entrepreneurship in the GCC countries, a glimpse into the trends shaping the entire region is useful. Clearly, the GCC region has its specificity, nevertheless contrasting and comparing allow us to uncover certain hidden factors and developments.

Several questions come to the fore in the discussion on women's entrepreneurship in the MENA and GCC regions. These include the following:

- Which factors shape women's decision to embark on entrepreneurship?
- To what extent does the specific cultural context of the MENA and GCC countries play a role in facilitating individual decisions to embrace entrepreneurship?
- What is the role of religion, i.e. mostly Islam, in shaping individual attitudes to entrepreneurship?
- To what extent do factors such as red tape and transaction costs hinder women's drive to embrace entrepreneurship?
- Which policies and specific tools promote women's engagement with entrepreneurship?

The papers included in this special issue address these questions. Moreover, the authors make several suggestions and recommendations as to how the findings of their research could be used in the policy-making process.

Indeed, findings presented in this special issue by Khan (2019) suggest that several factors drive women's decision to engage in entrepreneurship. These include the role of the government, the influence of role models, entrepreneurial training and demographics.

Interestingly, the analysis the authors conducted suggests that women consider the government and entrepreneurship training as the dominant factors that lead them to embrace entrepreneurship. These factors are significantly more important than role models and demographics. With specific regard to the latter, the regression results suggest that age and work experience were not important determinants of women embracing entrepreneurship. The overall finding of the study was that governments need to play a bigger and more reflective role in encouraging women to embrace entrepreneurship. The government needs to develop more effective policies, including addressing the problem of “red tape”, creating incentives to establish start-ups and allowing existing businesses to expand. Furthermore, the government should design new and effective training programmes to emphasise the importance of entrepreneurship for women and the economy. Considering the degree of misunderstanding that obscures popular discussion in the West on developments and larger trends in MENA countries, the value added of this paper is that it offers a straightforward non-biased insight into the nascent dynamics of women’s involvement in the labour market across the region.

In the subsequent paper, Alexandre *et al.* (2019) explore the evolution of female entrepreneurship in Bahrain. Bahrain, as the authors argue, is a country in transition. As a result, a new context emerges for women to adapt and adopt the skills and attitudes necessary to effectively engage with entrepreneurship. Alexandre *et al.*’s findings suggest that Bahrain, owing to its enabling regulatory framework, is a country of opportunity for female “entrepreneurs-to-be”. As the authors indicate, role models, especially male role models, such as father, husband, family friend, play a profound role in women’s decision to embark on entrepreneurship. Based on interview fragments strategically cited throughout, the paper offers fascinating insights into contemporary undercurrents shaping developments in Bahrain.

In their paper titled “Determinants of Innovation Decisions in Emirati Female Owned Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)”, by Jabeen *et al.*, the authors examine factors that drive innovation decisions in businesses run by women. The study concludes that female SME owners prioritise government policies, R&D, innovation strategy and skills development as the main criteria influencing their innovation decision. Family support, access to external finance, social networks and allocation of funds are the main sub-criteria affecting women entrepreneurs’ decisions to be innovative. Furthermore, respondents who were in the nascent business stage considered family motivation as the greatest influence on them initiating new ideas through financial and moral support. The nascent business owners ranked skills development the highest because they were in the initial stages of their business journeys, and thus obtaining these skills would help them to be innovative and succeed in their ventures.

In Ali *et al.*’s (2019) paper “Symmetric and asymmetric modelling of entrepreneurial ecosystem in developing entrepreneurial intentions among female university students in Saudi Arabia”, the authors examine the factors that influence female students’ intention to engage with entrepreneurship. The paper elaborates on configurational combinations of entrepreneurial ecosystem factors that cause high or low entrepreneurial intentions among female university students in Saudi Arabia. The results of symmetrical analysis show that access to finance, access to physical infrastructure and cultural factors are not significantly associated with entrepreneurial intentions. In contrast, government policies and regulations, government programmes and support, social factors and entrepreneurship education and training are associated with the development of entrepreneurial intentions among female Saudi university students. The results of asymmetrical analysis allow the authors to build 15 configurational models that explain the high levels of certain factors to predict

entrepreneurial intentions among female university students in Saudi Arabia. Here, social support is pinpointed as a necessary condition in the majority of models to predict high levels of entrepreneurial intentions among female Saudi university students. The study proposes that it not necessary to have high levels of all entrepreneurial ecosystem factors to predict high entrepreneurial intentions, rather in some conditions, low levels of certain factors are necessary.

In their paper, Sabri *et al.* (2019) investigate psycho-attitudinal features in female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia. "Psycho-attitudinal features: A study of female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia" offers practical insights into gender-specific attitudes, including reported variance over the entrepreneurial process. It shows that attitude is an equally predominant feature for both genders through all business stages, with female entrepreneurs reporting a slightly higher growth-oriented attitude relative to their male counterparts. Overall, significant differences were noted between gender and business stages for five of the six attitudinal growth subscales. From a policy perspective, noting the country's plan for economic reform and desire for greater participation by women, there are important questions that arise concerning the impact of incentive devices and policy measures.

4. What drives entrepreneurship in the GCC? – Policies and social norms, not religion

Women's entrepreneurship is by no means a new topic. It was introduced in the late nineteenth century and has been simmering under the surface of other debates pertinent to the process of the modernization of western societies ever since. Statistics reveal that gender inequalities across the globe – including those in developed, emerging and developing markets – have yet to be effectively addressed. Diverse forms of gender-based discrimination and exclusion proliferate, including those in professional and social settings. The SDGs' twin imperative of gender equality and female empowerment is equally relevant in both the developed and the developing world.

As the world economy changes and traditional sources of competitive advantage dwindle, empowering women becomes critical for an economy's survival. Gender inequalities and gender-based exclusion – expressed by the gender-related pay-gap, glass ceiling, glass cliff, unequal access to education and employment opportunities – need to be addressed. Steered by laudable initiatives of the United Nations and the International Labour Organization, considerable progress has been attained in research on diverse forms of gender inequality worldwide. In addition, important policy-making strategies have been implemented in recent years, including those driven by best practice studies conducted by the OECD. Yet, much more needs to be done.

Research suggests that by empowering women, several macroeconomic benefits can be achieved, including greater diversification in the economy and the export base; improved bank stability, greater financial sector resilience and more sustainable growth (Kazandjian *et al.*, 2016). That said, while questions of empowering women and encouraging women's entrepreneurship are in vogue in western academia – thus creating an image of the West, once again, as the harbinger of change – the same questions as well as the related narrative within the Arab world are largely absent from academic debate. Considering that the Arab world develops fast and is bound to catch up with the rest of the developed world (Visvizi *et al.*, 2019b), and that the popular level of knowledge and understanding about the GCC economies and societies is negligible and marred by stereotypes, it is necessary that questions of empowering women and women's

entrepreneurship are inserted in the very context of the GCC countries. The objective of this special issue was to do just that.

The findings of research presented in this special issue defy stereotypes about the GCC region and allow the reader to gain substantial knowledge and understanding about the GCC countries. The papers confirm the initial assumption that a profound change is taking place in the region and that substantial variances exist among GCC countries. The authors presenting their work in this special issue highlight that cultural factors play a role in shaping women's attitudes towards entrepreneurship in the GCC region. However, as they also document, it is the government – through the enabling of the regulatory frameworks that it establishes – that is viewed as the most important trigger behind women's decision to embark on entrepreneurship.

From a different perspective, in the discussion on the MENA and the GCC region, the question of the influence of religion, i.e. mostly Islam, on entrepreneurial behaviour remains tacit. As Khan (2019) argue, it is the social norms specific to each country, rather than the religion that act as enabling or hindering factors. The findings presented in this special issue suggest that the general support of the family and the motivation to act they provide are considered crucial for embracing entrepreneurship. In a similar vein, the case of Bahrain suggests that male role models coupled with their actual practical support in the form of mentorship, for instance, is an equally important factor in the process.

The papers included in this special issue showcase strategies used across the GCC region to empower women by facilitating their engagement in entrepreneurship. This process is part of a greater process of profound socio-economic change that is taking place in the GCC countries. We refer to it as a quiet revolution in which researchers remain vigilant to developments in the region. As the guest editors of this special issue, we hope that the contributions we have selected will encourage further debate, involving academics and policymakers, on topics pertinent to determinants of female entrepreneurship and the role of the latter in the process of developing sustainable and inclusive societies. We are grateful to the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* (IJGE), Professor Colette Henry, for the opportunity to work on this special issue and for her mentorship throughout the process.

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