

Entrepreneurship as Everyday Politics: Feminist, Decolonial, and Rights-Based Perspectives on Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a theoretically grounded and empirically informed analysis of women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia as a site of everyday politics, feminist contestation, and rights-based negotiation. Drawing exclusively on interdisciplinary scholarship spanning entrepreneurship studies, feminist theory, Middle Eastern studies, human rights law, and decolonial thought, the study interrogates how women's entrepreneurial practices operate simultaneously within and against neoliberal, religious, and nationalist frameworks. Building on literature concerning women's empowerment through entrepreneurship (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018; Danish & Smith, 2012; Basaffar et al., 2018), social entrepreneurship (Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Calás et al., 2009; Datta & Gailey, 2012), and everyday politics in the Middle East (Bayat, 2013; Bayat, 2015), this research reframes entrepreneurial activity not merely as economic participation but as embodied and relational political practice.

The analysis situates Saudi women's entrepreneurial engagement within broader global governance regimes such as CEDAW, neoliberal human rights discourse (Whyte, 2019; Tzouvala, 2020), and decolonial feminist critique (Vergès, 2021). It also considers the dynamics of religious reinterpretation (Wadud, 1999; Yamani & Allen, 2006), nationalist gendering (Yuval-Davis, 1997; 2003), and backlash politics (Tsujigami, 2009). Methodologically, the article adopts a critical interpretive synthesis and feminist co/autoethnographic lens (Coia & Taylor, 2007; 2013) to bridge macro-structural analysis and lived experience.

The findings argue that Saudi women's entrepreneurship constitutes a form of "entrepreneurial citizenship" in which economic agency becomes a vehicle for incremental rights-claiming (Zivi, 2012; Zaeske, 2002) and embodied dissent (Fotaki & Daskalaki, 2020), even when articulated in non-confrontational or culturally embedded forms. Yet this empowerment remains ambivalent: entrepreneurship may reproduce neoliberal individualism and depoliticize structural inequalities (Whyte, 2019). The article concludes that women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia should be understood as a complex assemblage of emancipation, accommodation, and transformation—simultaneously enabling personal autonomy and reconfiguring the boundaries of nation, religion, and global capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, women's entrepreneurship has been celebrated globally as a pathway to economic development, poverty alleviation, and gender equality. Within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, this narrative has acquired particular resonance. As women increasingly establish businesses, lead social enterprises, and participate in public economic life, their activities are frequently interpreted as indicators of modernization, reform, and empowerment. Yet to reduce women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia to an economic phenomenon is to overlook its profound political, cultural, and epistemic dimensions.

Entrepreneurship, as conceptualized in mainstream management literature, has often been framed as an individualistic act of opportunity recognition and value creation. However, feminist scholars have long challenged this narrow framing, arguing that entrepreneurship is embedded in gendered structures of power, identity, and nation-building (Berg, 1997; Calás et al., 2009). In the Saudi context, women's economic participation intersects with deeply entrenched legal, religious, and social norms governing gender segregation, guardianship, and public morality (Doumato, 1992; Doumato, 1999; Commins, 2006). The emergence of women entrepreneurs therefore cannot be understood outside the matrix of monarchy, Islam, nationalism, and global capitalism.

Research has documented both the challenges and opportunities facing Saudi businesswomen. Studies highlight regulatory barriers, cultural constraints, and limited access to capital (Alturki & Braswell, 2010; Danish & Smith, 2012; Basaffar et al., 2018), while also noting high levels of entrepreneurial intention among university students (Almobaireek & Manolova, 2012). Comparative research has further suggested that entrepreneurship may provide a pathway to emancipation, particularly when women reinterpret traditional roles in empowering ways (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018). Yet existing studies often treat empowerment as a measurable outcome rather than a contested political process.

Simultaneously, broader theoretical debates interrogate the relationship between women's economic participation and social change. Social entrepreneurship literature, for instance, conceptualizes entrepreneurial action as a mechanism for addressing social problems (Bacq & Janssen, 2011), but feminist critiques argue that such framings risk obscuring structural inequalities and re-inscribing neoliberal rationalities (Calás et al., 2009). Similarly, global human rights discourses—especially those surrounding the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

against Women (CEDAW, 1993)—position women's economic empowerment as a marker of progress, yet critics highlight the complicity of human rights frameworks with market liberalization (Whyte, 2019; Tzouvala, 2020).

In the Middle East, scholars such as Bayat (1997; 2013; 2015) have emphasized the transformative potential of "everyday politics"—the subtle, incremental practices through which ordinary people negotiate and reshape power structures. Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia may be understood as such a form of everyday politics, enacted not through overt protest but through market participation, embodied presence, and social innovation. Instances such as the "inside-out abaya" protest reported by BBC (2018) illustrate how bodily practices intersect with economic agency to challenge normative gender codes.

The literature thus presents a rich but fragmented terrain. On one hand, entrepreneurship is framed as empowerment; on the other, as neoliberal co-optation. Human rights are celebrated as tools of liberation yet critiqued as market-oriented governance. Religious reinterpretation is seen as either progressive or conservative. Nationalist projects rely on gendered symbolism while simultaneously opening spaces for women's public participation (Yuval-Davis, 1997; 2003).

This article addresses the following central research question: How can women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia be theorized as a form of everyday political practice situated at the intersection of feminist, decolonial, and rights-based discourses?

To answer this question, the study synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship to develop a conceptual framework that moves beyond binary understandings of empowerment versus oppression. Instead, it conceptualizes women's entrepreneurship as an ambivalent assemblage—simultaneously emancipatory and constrained, transformative and embedded within neoliberal rationalities. The article contributes to three scholarly conversations. First, it extends feminist entrepreneurship theory by situating Saudi women's economic activity within broader political and epistemic structures. Second, it integrates everyday politics and rights-claiming literatures to reconceptualize entrepreneurship as a practice of democratic citizenship (Zivi, 2012). Third, it offers a decolonial feminist critique of global empowerment narratives, highlighting the need to foreground local agency while interrogating the civilizational assumptions embedded in international law (Tzouvala, 2020; Vergès, 2021).

By foregrounding complexity, contradiction, and situated agency, this research seeks to illuminate how Saudi women

entrepreneurs navigate, negotiate, and subtly reconfigure the boundaries of nation, religion, and market

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in critical literature synthesis and feminist epistemology. Rather than conducting primary empirical fieldwork, the research systematically analyzes the theoretical and empirical insights provided in the specified references. The approach resembles what might be termed a critical integrative review, but it is informed explicitly by feminist co/autoethnographic sensibilities (Coia & Taylor, 2007; 2013), reflexive field positioning (Bolak, 1996), and interpretive organizational analysis (Bell et al., 2019).

The decision to employ a literature-based methodology is not merely pragmatic but theoretical. The scholarship under review spans multiple disciplines—entrepreneurship studies, Middle Eastern politics, feminist theory, international law, and human rights. Each field operates with distinct assumptions about agency, structure, and social change. A critical synthesis enables the articulation of connections and tensions across these epistemic domains.

Feminist epistemology emphasizes that knowledge production is situated and relational (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Crawley et al., 2008). Consequently, this research treats the literature itself as a field of discursive struggle. For example, entrepreneurship research often adopts managerialist language, whereas feminist and decolonial scholars interrogate power, embodiment, and coloniality. By juxtaposing these literatures, the study identifies underlying assumptions and normative commitments.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, entrepreneurship-specific studies concerning Saudi women were examined to identify recurring themes: structural barriers, cultural negotiation, and aspirations (Alturki & Braswell, 2010; Danish & Smith, 2012; Basaffar et al., 2018; Almobaireek & Manolova, 2012). Second, broader feminist and social entrepreneurship theories were reviewed to contextualize empowerment narratives (Calás et al., 2009; Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Datta & Gailey, 2012). Third, political and sociological scholarship on everyday politics, nationalism, and religion in the Middle East was integrated (Bayat, 2013; Doumato, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 2003; Wadud, 1999). Finally, critical human rights and decolonial analyses were incorporated to examine global governance dimensions (Whyte, 2019; Tzouvala, 2020; Vergès, 2021).

Throughout the synthesis, particular attention was paid to counter-arguments and ambivalences. For instance, while entrepreneurship may enhance autonomy, it may also shift responsibility for structural reform onto individuals. Similarly, rights-claiming may empower women yet entrench neoliberal governance.

The methodological limitations are acknowledged. The

absence of new empirical interviews means that lived experiences are mediated through existing scholarship. However, the integrative depth and theoretical elaboration provide a comprehensive analytical framework that can guide future empirical research.

RESULTS

The integrative analysis reveals five interrelated thematic findings: (1) entrepreneurship as negotiated emancipation; (2) everyday politics and incremental transformation; (3) entrepreneurial citizenship and rights-claiming; (4) neoliberal ambivalence and market moralities; and (5) decolonial and religious reinterpretations as epistemic interventions.

Entrepreneurship as negotiated emancipation emerges prominently in comparative research. Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) demonstrate that women in Saudi Arabia and Sweden articulate entrepreneurship as a pathway to freedom, yet the meaning of “freedom” is contextually mediated. In Saudi Arabia, emancipation is often negotiated within familial and religious frameworks rather than against them. This aligns with Doumato’s (1999) observation that Islamic margins may be flexible, allowing reinterpretation rather than outright rejection of tradition.

Entrepreneurial activity frequently occurs within gender-segregated sectors such as fashion, beauty, and education (Alturki & Braswell, 2010). However, these sectors can serve as platforms for economic independence and public visibility. Basaffar et al. (2018) note that women entrepreneurs often leverage social networks and digital platforms to circumvent mobility restrictions. Such strategies exemplify what Bayat (2013) terms “quiet encroachment”—incremental practices that expand rights without formal protest.

Everyday politics is evident in the embodied dimension of entrepreneurship. The BBC (2018) report on the “inside-out abaya” protest highlights how sartorial choices intersect with political expression. Fotaki and Daskalaki (2020) argue that politicizing the body can disrupt dominant narratives. In the Saudi context, women entrepreneurs’ public presence—negotiating contracts, managing employees, appearing in media—constitutes a reconfiguration of gendered space.

Entrepreneurial citizenship reflects the transformation of

economic participation into a form of democratic practice. Zivi (2012) conceptualizes rights claims as acts of citizenship, while Zaeske (2002) demonstrates how petitions historically enabled women to assert political voice. Although Saudi Arabia's political system differs from liberal democracies, women's entrepreneurial activities may function as indirect claims to recognition, mobility, and institutional reform. The expansion of female participation resonates with global human rights frameworks, including CEDAW (1993) and the work of the Commission on the Status of Women (1946).

However, neoliberal ambivalence complicates the empowerment narrative. Whyte (2019) argues that human rights discourse has been intertwined with market liberalization. Tzouvala (2020) traces how international law constructs capitalism as civilizational progress. In this light, promoting women's entrepreneurship may align with state-led modernization and global economic integration while deflecting attention from political reform. Individual success stories can obscure structural inequalities.

Finally, decolonial and religious reinterpretations offer alternative epistemic frames. Vergès (2021) calls for a decolonial feminism attentive to global hierarchies. Wadud (1999) and Yamani and Allen (2006) demonstrate that Islamic texts can be reread from feminist perspectives, challenging patriarchal interpretations. Tsujigami (2009) notes backlash dynamics, indicating that empowerment processes provoke contestation. Women entrepreneurs may therefore navigate competing discourses: global feminism, Islamic jurisprudence, nationalist identity, and neoliberal development.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia cannot be reduced to a linear narrative of liberation. Instead, it constitutes a multidimensional field of negotiation. Drawing on Yuval-Davis (1997; 2003), gender is central to nation-building projects. As Saudi Arabia pursues economic diversification, women's entrepreneurial participation becomes symbolically linked to national progress. Yet this incorporation into national narratives may simultaneously constrain radical critique.

The concept of everyday politics (Bayat, 2013) provides a useful lens. Rather than dramatic confrontation, transformation occurs through cumulative practices. Entrepreneurship enables women to expand social networks, control income, and model alternative gender roles for younger generations (Almobaireek & Manolova, 2012). These shifts may gradually recalibrate societal expectations.

At the same time, feminist scholars caution against romanticizing agency. Calás et al. (2009) argue that framing entrepreneurship as social change can obscure power asymmetries. Datta and Gailey (2012) show that cooperatives can empower women yet remain vulnerable to market pressures. In Saudi Arabia, state policies promoting women's economic participation may enhance autonomy while maintaining political centralization.

Human rights frameworks offer both resources and limitations. Sikkink (2017) provides evidence that rights advocacy can produce measurable change. Sepper (2008) emphasizes the obligation to modify discriminatory cultural patterns. Yet Sokhi-Bulley (2024) critiques rights discourse for its limitations, suggesting relational ethics beyond formal rights. Thus, entrepreneurial empowerment must be situated within broader struggles for substantive equality.

Limitations of this study include its reliance on secondary sources and its focus on urban, educated populations reflected in the literature. Rural women, migrant workers, and lower-income entrepreneurs require further investigation. Future research should incorporate ethnographic fieldwork, comparative regional analysis, and longitudinal designs to assess long-term transformation.

CONCLUSION

Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia represents a complex intersection of economic agency, feminist negotiation, and everyday political practice. It is neither purely emancipatory nor merely co-opted by neoliberal modernization. Instead, it embodies an ambivalent process through which women expand autonomy while navigating religious, national, and global structures.

By integrating feminist theory, decolonial critique, human rights scholarship, and Middle Eastern political sociology, this

article has reconceptualized entrepreneurship as a form of entrepreneurial citizenship. Saudi women entrepreneurs are not only market actors; they are participants in an ongoing redefinition of gender, nation, and modernity.

Understanding this process requires attentiveness to subtle practices, embodied politics, and epistemic plurality. As incremental changes accumulate, the boundaries of possibility shift. Entrepreneurship becomes a site where freedom is not declared but enacted—quietly, persistently, and relationally.

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