

Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: feminist solidarity and political activism in disguise?

Abstract

This paper is a longitudinal study that uses insights from postcolonial feminism to explore women's entrepreneurship as a political form of feminist organising for social change in Saudi Arabia. Postcolonial feminist approaches challenge Western feminism, which can obscure the diversity of women's lived experiences, agency and activism. Through Bayat's (2013) theory of 'quiet encroachment', I identify the ways in which contemporary Western conceptualisations of feminist solidarity and social movements have dismissed 'Other' women's 'silent', protracted and (dis)organised activism in parts of the Middle East. By exploring how Saudi women have utilised their entrepreneurial space as a legitimate platform for change, I aim to enrich understanding of women's activism through everyday solidarity practices, which allow them to quietly encroach onto the previously forbidden political space. The findings exemplify how their activism 'quietly' developed over time through a three-step process - from the entrepreneur aiming to empower women within their organisation, to developing feminist consciousness within their entrepreneurial network, to becoming a 'political activist' lobbying for policy changes for women. These solidarity practices exemplify the West's relationship with 'the Other', and reveal that feminist organising for social change must be explored within its own context in order to fully appreciate its global political potential.

Key words: *women's entrepreneurship, political activism, social change, postcolonial feminism, quiet encroachment, feminist solidarity, reflexivity*

Introduction

Understanding entrepreneurship as an economic activity has been criticised for its limited capacity in appreciating its impact on social change and community development (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004), particularly women's entrepreneurship (Calás, Smircich & Bourne, 2009). Feminist research building on these critical perspectives argues against the neo-classical paradigm of the individual, self-serving entrepreneur who engages in business only for personal economic gains (Hughes, Jennings, Brush, Carter & Welter, 2012), and has provided the ground for a gendered view on entrepreneurship as social change, away from the individualist and endemic

Western perspectives of the entrepreneur (Calás et al., 2009; Lewis, 2006; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012).

Reports in the entrepreneurship literature have noted the different historical experiences and government structures that negatively affect women and their enterprises (Scott, Dolna, Johnstone-louis, Sugden & Wu, 2012). Yet, women's entrepreneurship research has explicitly or implicitly conceptualised social change as empowerment of the entrepreneur (herself), and subsequently her family (Alkhaled, 2019) and local community, in areas that local government has neglected to support (Welter & Smallbone, 2008). However, the social change impact of women's entrepreneurship as a collective is rarely addressed and, therefore, the political potential for entrepreneurship as a practice of feminist organising and social change has gone largely unexplored (Barinaga, 2013). Furthermore, whilst some studies have addressed the impact of geographies and politics on women's entrepreneurship (Berg, 1997), there is a need to explore how women entrepreneurs collectively as a social movement - not as individuals - use their entrepreneurial platform for solidarity *with* women and political activism *for* women.

Contemporary social movements combating women's inequality have been explicitly visible in an unprecedented way over the last decade, particularly within the #MeToo (Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor & Tienari, 2019) and Arab Spring movements (Al-Ali, 2012). The surge of such global political activism, where the world has witnessed women and men's grass-roots activism in the form of organised protests in public spaces (Smolović Jones, Winchester & Clarke, 2020; Fotaki, & Daskalaki, 2020), calling out their leaders for their idleness and advocating policy reforms regarding

gender equality, has revitalised feminist debates in the study of organisations (Pullen, Lewis, & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019), with a particular (re)emergence of solidarity as a transnational “global sisterhood” (Ghadery, 2019, p. 253). Thus, feminist approaches to exploring women’s organising and social movements argue that a visible and organised collective feminist approach is necessary for such social change and effective political transformation (Sweetman, 2013).

Postcolonial feminism argues that the concept of social movement, particularly feminist movement, is inherently ‘Western’ (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019) and does not acknowledge alternative ‘quiet’ forms of individual resistance and capacity for political engagement and social change in non-Western contexts (Bayat, 2015). Indeed, social transformations may not be able to take place through democratic engagement in authoritarian or totalitarian contexts (Fernández, Marti & Farchi, 2017), where there is no legal platform for collective political activism or affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012). Nonetheless, these contexts have illustrated the strategy of ‘quiet encroachment’, characterised by individual resistance that is silent, protracted, fragmented but collectively pervasive in triggering social change (Bayat, 2013).

Framing entrepreneurship as social change through feminist perspectives (Calás, et al., 2009; Oser, Ellito & Leck, 2013) has theorised entrepreneurship as a platform for achieving empowerment, emancipation and social change for women from patriarchal structures in developed and developing country contexts (Jennings, Jennings and Sharifian, 2016; Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018). Drawing upon postcolonial feminist perspectives (Mohanty, 2003; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012) and the politics of social

nonmovement through quiet encroachment in the Middle East (Bayat, 2013), my study investigates 16 Saudi women entrepreneurs' ability to engage in feminist solidarity, political activism and social change between 2010 and 2020. Saudi Arabia is a Middle Eastern country ruled by a totalitarian regime under an absolute monarchy. Its ideology is based on tribal patriarchal values and strict Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, which accord women a secondary position in society (Doumato, 1992). Whilst (feminist) activism is prohibited in Saudi society, women are encouraged to partake in the economic development of the country through work and investment in the private sector (Sadi & Al-Ghazai, 2010; 2012). Therefore, entrepreneurship provides an interesting space for feminist organising and activism to be explored. To this end, in this study I ask, *how do women utilise entrepreneuring as a platform for feminist solidarity and political change in non-democratic contexts?*

Longitudinal study over a decade was essential in illuminating the everyday solidarity practices the female entrepreneurs enacted in over a period of time (Mills, 2002), and which eventually evolved into political engagement and social change. The adoption of Bayat's (2013) concept of 'social nonmovement' and its strategy of 'quiet encroachment' enabled a novel conceptualisation of women's entrepreneurship-as-political activism. That is, women's entrepreneurship provided a space for feminist solidarity and a legitimate platform to engage in political change. These findings exemplified how their activism developed through a three-step 'quiet encroachment' process overtime; from entrepreneur aiming to empower women within their organisations, to developing feminist consciousness online and within their entrepreneurial network, to becoming a 'political activist' lobbying for policy changes to support women alongside men in the King's Consultative Council.

This research is located within the field of critical entrepreneurship, which eschews the dominant gendered, white and Western norms embedded in much of the entrepreneurship literature, striving instead for more reflexive and nuanced considerations of entrepreneurship (Essers & Tedmanson, 2014). Combining insights drawn from postcolonial feminism provides a novel way of telling alternative stories of difference, culture, power and agency, which allow us to theorise experiences of solidarity and seeking justice in a more situated and cross-cultural perspective (Mohanty, 2003) away from the Western mainstream practices of feminist consciousness raising and solidarity (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019). Using the lens of ‘quiet encroachment’ (Bayat, 2013) also sheds light on the dominant social movement theories that have drawn upon Western experiences. It makes us question to what extent they can help us to understand the process of solidarity building or the collectivities of disjointed yet parallel practices of noncollective actors, both in Western and non-Western contexts. This is because many women and minority communities continue to be subjugated in the Western world, both explicitly and implicitly, and thus, they turn to entrepreneurship in response to their marginalisation at work and in society.

Feminist approaches to entrepreneurship as social change

Entrepreneurship has been recognised for its importance in the creation of economic wealth across developed, developing and transitional country-contexts (Welter & Smallbone, 2008). However, understanding entrepreneurship as an economic activity has been criticised for concealing entrepreneurship as part of society and fundamentally as a process for social change (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004), which is

impacted by the geopolitics of everyday entrepreneurship (Steyaert & Katz, 2004). Indeed, entrepreneurs who start up a business with an aim of achieving social impact (Bacq & Janssen, 2011) play a crucial role in addressing socio-cultural issues that governments and governmental organisations have failed to tackle (Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum & Shulman, 2009). Driven by the strong desire to bring about social change, such entrepreneurs seek to help overcome social problems and improve the welfare of others in need (Jarrodi, Byrne & Bureau, 2019).

Calás et al. (2009) argue that more theoretical frameworks are needed to explore the varieties of social change that entrepreneurship brings about. In their ground-breaking conceptual work, they propose feminist theorising as a means to reframe ‘entrepreneurship as an economic activity’ into ‘entrepreneurship as social change’ arguing that “all feminist theorizing is about social change...premiered on the assumption that gender is fundamental in the structuring of society, with women being historically disadvantaged, and it seeks to end this condition” (Calás et al., 2009, p. 554). Research building on these critical perspectives have used feminist perspectives to explore *entrepreneurship*, defined as “efforts to bring about new economic, social, institutional and cultural environments through the actions of an individual or group of individuals” (Rindova, Barry & Ketchen, 2009, p. 477), and support the argument for refuting the neo-classical paradigm of the individual, self-serving entrepreneur who sees business ownership only for personal economic gains (Hughes et al., 2012). In her much cited commentary, Ahl (2006) argues that when it comes to theory development, the individualistic focus has not only meant that “contextual and historical variables... such as legislation, culture, or politics are seldom discussed” (p. 605), but also that “feminist perspectives are rarely invoked

explicitly” (Hughes et al., 2012, p. 431). Thus, excluding discussions around gendered power structures hinders us from understanding women’s entrepreneurship as a contextual, situated and (co)constructed phenomena within their communities.

The critique of entrepreneurship as a purely economic activity, characterised by a Western, white, individual, ‘heroic’ male has been echoed within critical entrepreneurship studies (Ahl, 2006; Lewis, 2006). Postcolonial feminist perspectives have outlined how the epistemological assumptions researchers carry from the “West” and deploy on “the Rest” in conceptualising entrepreneuring and ‘the entrepreneur’ (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2014, p., 156) have misrepresented or even silenced the voice of ‘the Other’. That is, the Western bias steeped within the analyses of gender, women and entrepreneurship, has consequently constrained theoretical development. As such, it presumes dominant Western developed economies as a defining norm, which generates a potential ontological cul-de-sac, where entrepreneurship is researched perpetually in the same context (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010). Thus, understanding becomes limited and circular – eventually reaching a dead end (Ahl & Marlow, 2012).

Social change through women’s entrepreneuring has been illustrated as ‘freedom’, ‘autonomy’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘emancipation’ for the female-entrepreneur from the shackles of patriarchy, male-domination and poverty in developed and developing countries (Essers & Tedmanson, 2014; Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Datta & Gailey, 2012). However, research in developed countries has problematised these notions, as they argue that entrepreneurship is institutionally embedded, and therefore will reproduce gendered constraints rather than offer liberation from them (Jennings et al., 2016). Transnational feminist perspectives studying migrant women’s entrepreneurship

living in the West have also questioned these notions, and cite the dark sides of viewing entrepreneurship as the “Holy Grail” of elevation and emancipation for women (Verduijn & Essers, 2013, p. 100). Despite acknowledging these important insights, studies in contexts such as the Middle East have continued to highlight how women’s entrepreneurship can be used as a practice of defiance in patriarchal economies and societies, as women defy their contextual embeddedness and patriarchal boundaries to work through their entrepreneurial activities to empower themselves and others within their community (Al-Dajani, Akbar, Carter & Shaw, 2019). Yet, this empowerment remains confined within the patriarchal structures, with structural change and emancipation from gender constraints becoming an object of desire seldom reached (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018).

Whilst these recent studies have reflexively utilised feminist perspectives, they continue to focus on the *individual* female entrepreneur, embedded within her social setting, and her journey to empowerment (or struggle to reach it), and the possible positive impact on her community (e.g. providing employment in deprived communities (Scott, et al., 2012)). Deeper exploration is needed in order to unpack their feminist intentions to bring about tangible structural changes for themselves, as well as other women in particular within their communities. For example, Oser et al.’s (2013) research on ‘entrepreneurial feminists’ in Canada found that women entrepreneurs, who self-identified as feminists, viewed themselves as individuals who sought to translate their feminist values into feminist action and a desire for personal and/or social change in their community. On the other hand, Alkhaled and Berglund’s (2018) study illustrated how women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia, who did not explicitly identify as feminists, were instinctively and morally compelled to use their

empowered position as entrepreneurs to emancipate other women in their community from oppressive patriarchal structures through their enterprises.

Feminist theorising has provided the ground for a gendered view on entrepreneurship as social change (Calás et al., 2009). Yet, women's entrepreneurship research has explicitly or implicitly conceptualised social change as empowerment of the entrepreneur (herself) and subsequently her local community, in areas that local government has been unable to provide, whilst the social change impact of women's entrepreneurship as a collective, is rarely addressed. Thus, the political potential for entrepreneurship as a practice of solidarity and social change has been largely ignored and further research is needed to highlight its potential for political change (Barinaga, 2013). To my knowledge there is no research that explicitly investigates women's entrepreneurship as a feminist social movement for political and structural change through political activism in a neoliberal, democratic or totalitarian regime. Furthermore, whilst some studies have addressed the impact of geographies and politics on women's entrepreneurship (Berg, 1997), there is a need to explore how women entrepreneurs - collectively, not as individuals - use their entrepreneurial platform for solidarity *with* women and political activism *for* women.

Using a postcolonial feminist perspective, I expand on the notion that gender is an organising principle in the very practice of entrepreneurship and implicated in the production of entrepreneurial selves (Calás et al., 2009; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2014). In doing so, I attempt to understand the processes, practices and ideologies relevant to women entrepreneurs in the specific local contexts in which they occur in order to formulate autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded feminist

concerns and strategies (Mohanty, 2003) that can be enacted in order to engage in political change for women. The next section explores the literature on feminist solidarity and political activism through a postcolonial perspective. It then explores how entrepreneurship could be a platform for solidarity, political activism and social change for women through everyday solidarity practices situated within their particular context.

Feminist solidarity and political activism, a ‘global’ concept?

The contemporary feminist movement relies on “mobilising feminist consciousness that attends to the gap between individual subjectivity and a sense of solidarity through community” (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019, p. 26). Wickström et al. (2019) conceptualise solidarity as a form of feminist organising and resistance against socio-economic inequalities and patriarchal power, and the possibility of social transformations through “democratic engagement” (Segal, 2017, p. 228). They believe feminist solidarity is key for fostering *resistance towards capitalist and neoliberal regimes*, which reinforce systems of oppression and demarcation based on gender, class and ethnicity, and therefore, reduce collectivity and possibilities for joint action (Rottenberg, 2017).

hooks argues that feminist solidarity based on progressive politics must include *a space for rigorous critique and for dissent*, otherwise, “we are doomed to reproduce in progressive communities the very norms of domination we seek to oppose” (1994, p. 67). Hemmings draws upon a broader range of affects, such as “rage, frustration, desire for connection- as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation” (2012, p. 148). Vachhani and Pullen (2019) conceptualise feminist

organising as a form of feminist *infrapolitics*, defined as the space of “offstage practices” (Scott, 1990, p. 4) and typified by “a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name” (Scott, 1990, p.19). They emphasise that feminist solidarity is “explicitly visible” in an unprecedented way in contemporary social movements that are “directly combating women’s inequality” in the workplace and beyond (2019, p. 25). Therefore, a collective feminist approach to generating collective agency (Jones, Winchester & Clarke, 2020) is necessary for empowerment, commitment to social change (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Hyde, 2000) and effective political transformation (Sweetman, 2013).

However, as feminist scholars how can we reflexively and contextually (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012) draw upon the current conceptualisations of feminist solidarity and political activism when it is not *explicitly visible* in a contemporary social movement that is *directly* impacting women’s inequality (cf. Vachhani & Pullen, 2019)? That is, how can we explore feminist capacities for political engagement and resistance in contexts where social transformations *simply cannot* take place through *democratic engagement* (Segal, 2017), there is no space for rigorous critique and dissent or a legal platform for collective political activism or affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012)? Furthermore, how can women engage in political change when there are no feminist social movement organisations to unite them, nor a stage for them to exhibit *rage, frustration, and (an open) desire* for connection and feminist solidarity (hooks, 1994)? A postcolonial lens is required to reconceptualise feminist solidarity and activism in such contexts.

Feminist solidarity and political activism through quiet encroachment in non-democratic contexts: a postcolonial perspective

Postcolonial theories emphasise that concepts such as ‘the West’ dominate feminist work and conceptualisations of solidarity with little reflection on how this misrepresents ‘the Rest’ of the world. Indeed, Mohanty (1988) argues that transnational feminist scholarship must be attentive to viewing some women as ‘the Other’ and take into account the politics of location, i.e. the micropolitics of context and individual struggle and the macropolitics of global economic and political systems. Evidently, conceptualisations of feminist solidarity are rooted in particular Western democratic contexts where political activism and infrapolitical engagement is legal and permissible¹. Thus, theorising women’s social movements in non-democratic contexts using these concepts requires incorporating reflexivity in order to interrupt representations of non-Western countries as a unitary cultural place. This approach “is made necessary by western feminist lenses and their inability to address the specific historical, socio-economic, and geo-political realities faced by the postcolonial subjects” (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2014, p. 157). Failure to do so could lead to silencing ‘Other’ women’s voices and different forms of engagement in political change. Thus, feminist solidarity and political activism in non-democratic contexts must be guided under assumptions that are situated within their own geopolitical context.

Bayat (2013) argues that feminism in the Middle East remains at the forefront of examples that demonstrate a social (non)movement using ‘quiet encroachment’. Bayat’s (2013) concept of a ‘social nonmovement’ is based on collective actions of

¹ This is not to say it is always effective. What is meant here is that legally, it is permissible.

noncollective actors who “embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognisable leaderships and organizations” (Bayat 2013: 150). Therefore, a nonmovement is behind the scenes and utilises a strategy of resistance that he calls quiet encroachment. Bayat (2013) argues that “in early 2000 Iranian analysts looking uncritically at Muslim women’s activism through the prism of social movement theory-developed primarily in the United states- concluded that there was no such things as a women’s movement in Iran, because certain features of Iranian women’s activities did not resemble the principal “model”” (p. 5). Therefore, viewing the Middle Eastern context as ‘exceptionalist’- taking one of the elements of comparison as the norm and without questioning the original configuration. His illustration of Iranian women’s unique and collective strategies in opposing the patriarchal state’s oppressive policies towards women exemplifies quiet encroachment. That is, women who wanted to actively resist but were afraid of retaliation from the state or the shame of public disapproval displayed resistance through mundane activities that take place in everyday life, such as working or playing sports. Even though this may seem disorganised and only have a small percentage chance of resulting in any real change, this collective quiet encroachment enabled them to make a shift in gender dynamics and empowered themselves in other areas of the community.

Unlike infrapolitical efforts in social movements (Fernández, Marti & Farchi, 2017; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019), quiet encroachment as a nonmovement and alternative form of resistance has been argued to be possibly more effective. This is because its activities are not conscious political protests, but cumulatively expand, and therefore,

are an invisible movement, which may have a more lasting impact (see examples of quiet encroachment taking place in Egypt (Bayat, 2015), Ghana (Gillespie, 2017) and Bangladesh (Hackenbroch & Hossain, 2012)). However, quiet encroachment, as a type of grassroots activism, has both its costs as well as its advantages, as whilst these masses of largely atomised individuals engaging in parallel everyday encroachments have been argued to have virtually transformed the Middle East and by extension many developing countries, in terms of its (informal) economies and reconfiguring communities, it is largely unlawful and runs the constant risk of suppression (Bayat, 2013). As fluid and unstructured forms of activism, these largely atomistic strategies have the advantages of flexibility and versatility; but they fall short of developing the legal, technical, organisational, and even moral support needed to advance the mission for social justice through the institutional capacity of NGOs and other supportive organisations, and the consent of the authorities on the broader national level (Bayat, 2015).

Critical entrepreneurship studies have critiqued the notion of the male, individual and Western entrepreneur seeking personal economic gains and illustrated women's entrepreneurship as a vehicle of empowerment of the self and social change for those in their communities, when their governments have failed to adequately support them (Zahra et al., 2009). Therefore, could women's everyday entrepreneuring practices towards social change lead to a feminist social movement - a form of quiet encroachment - towards political change in non-democratic contexts? To this end, this research asks, *how do women utilise entrepreneuring as a platform for feminist solidarity and political change in non-democratic contexts?*

In order to tackle this question, I studied women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia, focusing on their endeavours to become successful businesswomen and engage in social change for women in their beloved country.

The Context

A brief history of feminist solidarity and political activism in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a Middle Eastern country, known historically as the hub of Islam. It is classed as a developing country, governed by an absolute monarchy, whose ideology is built on a tribal system and patriarchal structure, which, among many customs, “accords a secondary role to women” (Niaz 2003: 174). Men’s power over women in the home and in society is enforced through a legal framework based on strict Wahhabi interpretations of Islamic Sharia law (Doumato 1992). Despite these values being deeply entrenched in legal, societal and domestic spheres (Alkhaled, 2013), the first act of feminist activism and solidarity from Saudi women took place during the Gulf War on November 6th 1990, when 47 women took to the streets for a secretly organised and unprecedented driving protest in the country’s capital Riyadh. The women were arrested, their passports where confiscated and they were banned from travel along with their husbands for one year. Moreover, the women in government jobs were fired and were publically humiliated and denounced by name as immoral women out to destroy Saudi society (Doumato, 1999).

Whilst stability was restored, the women’s efforts were not forgotten. Inspired by the Arab Spring in neighbouring countries, an informal network of activists set up an online campaign called Women2Drive, and organised a protest day for June 17th 2011, where they drove in defiance of the law across major cities of Saudi Arabia –

this time in a ‘scattered protest’ (New York Times, 2011). They were also arrested and detained. However, despite worldwide praise for the ban being lifted on June 24th 2018 (Sky News, 2018), some women activists remain in prison and on trial for their activism (The Independent, 2019).

The Arab Spring in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia has had immense political and economic implications beyond the scope of this paper (see Seikaly and Mattar, 2014; Cook, 2016). However, it is essential to highlight the history of Saudi women’s *explicit* activism in order to open our eyes to other forms of lower risk social (non)movements (Bayat, 2013) in which they may be engaging. Drawing upon the notion of entrepreneurship as social change through feminist perspectives (Calás et al., 2009; Oser et al., 2013), I explore the current literature on women’s entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia, and unpack its potential for social and political change.

Women’s entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia

One of the key strategies in the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 is to encourage economic diversification and increase private sector investments, especially in SMEs. A segment of the Saudi Arabian population that warranted special attention regarding entrepreneurship and business development was women; who are highly educated and control much of the wealth in the country (Sadi & Al-Ghazali, 2010; 2012). Saudi women entrepreneurs are estimated to have SAR45 billion in *pure cash*. Women currently account for 39% of the total number of entrepreneurs in the Kingdom, up 35% in the last 10 years (Jeddah Chamber, 2019).

The Middle East remains one of the least studied regions for a range of activities given the persistent level of conflict and political unrest. Adding to this, the logistical difficulties of entering and conducting research in Saudi Arabia (Sadi & Al-Ghazali 2010, 2012) has led to few research studies exploring women's entrepreneurship. A systematic literature review of women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia since 2005 analysed a score of studies that were exploratory, descriptive, cross-sectional or gender-comparative (Abou-Moghli & Al-Abdallah, 2019). Like the findings of many studies from around the world, these studies concluded that Saudi women also seek work-family balance and to contribute to society, in addition to economic gains (Welsh, Memili, Kaciak & Al-Sadoon, 2014). Women's struggle with gender discrimination in obtaining funding, a lack of role models and society's association of entrepreneurship with masculine traits were particularly prevalent (Almobaireek and Monalova, 2012; Danish & Smith, 2012). The research is insightful in terms of the entrepreneurial motivations, opportunities and challenges the women faced (Basaffar, Niehm & Bosselman, 2018) but further theorising and contextualising is needed in order to understand how the women aim for a collective movement towards emancipation and breaking the oppressive patriarchal structures, rather than continuing to negotiate within them (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018).

Saudi Arabia is a fascinating context to research feminist organising and solidarity through Bayat's (1997) Middle Eastern conceptualisation of 'quiet encroachment'. A context where (women's) political activism is prohibited but women's entrepreneurship is *essential* for the economic survival of the country, it is imperative to investigate whether Saudi women entrepreneurs utilise their entrepreneurial capacity as a platform for feminist solidarity and political activism, which may lead to

legal changes towards gender equality.

Postcolonial feminist methodology and methods

Reflexivity, representation and “giving voice”

Postcolonial feminist scholars have critiqued the epistemological assumptions of Western feminist approaches in their attempts to speak about or speak for the “Third World” woman as an “undifferentiated object/subject of Western academia” (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p. 574). They offer the re-examination of Western feminist theories in terms of their epistemological assumptions produced based on the position of power and privilege in the West (Mohanty, 1988), ‘situatedness’ and ‘positionality’ in the field, and its influence on how narratives can be produced (cf. Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). I acknowledge my position of power and privilege, in my attempt to let the women “speak for themselves”, by adopting a reflexive stance in producing theory as well as in conducting fieldwork. I also emphasise that I do not claim to produce more “authentic” representations nor to correct “misrepresentations” of Saudi women (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p. 574-575).

Born as a “hybrid” or “halfie”, with mixed Arab (Syrian) and British parentage and cultural heritage (Abu-Lughod, 2006, p. 466), and growing up in Saudi Arabia for 11 years, attending the local all-female Arabic speaking Muslim school, but who is currently located institutionally within a UK Business School, provided me with a unique ‘insider-outsider’ position (Hamdan, 2009). I appreciate how these identities formed discursively through these “messy intersections”, and therefore had implications on my power and positionality in the field, in textual representations, in “giving voice”, and in theorising and “writing differently” (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p.

573-574). I exercised reflexivity throughout the research process, acknowledging my advantage of viewing the data from the vantage point of “rethinking the familiar” (Bolak, 1996, p. 111) but also appreciating the problems of the “double hermeneutic” (Abbas, 2010, p. 127), i.e. possibly misplacing a comprehensive awareness or understanding of specific cultural or religious issues. However, the insider-outsider debate is not a dichotomy between two positions, as the complexity of multiple subjectivities holds tensions as well as richness embedded in such researcher’s position, and therefore, reflexivity brings these tensions to the surface of the research approach (Hamdan, 2009). This is evidenced throughout each sub-section of the methodology.

The sample

The longitudinal study was initiated in 2010 as part of my PhD and continued until 2020. Initially, I contacted five women entrepreneurs through my personal networks in Jeddah, in the Western province. The next step was snowball sampling, which identified cases of interest from people who know people, which know what cases are information-rich (Patton, 1990). The snowballing approach was used to overcome the difficulties in accessing data in the Middle East (Jamali, 2009) and “the reluctance of individuals to share personal information” (Tlaiss, 2014, p. 298), especially women from conservative homes (Alkhaled, 2013). In 2010, I went to Saudi Arabia (chaperoned by my father otherwise I would have been denied entry as a woman alone), conducted face-to-face interviews with 13 women and observed their daily work in their businesses. Upon my return to the UK, the snowballing continued, and three more women were interviewed online.

My feminist researcher identity took many shapes during the interviews. I had briefly communicated my background and research aims either by telephone or email before my arrival, and therefore it was interesting to learn about the pre-assumptions they had made about my researcher identity before meeting me (Alkhaled, 2016). This was most evident at the end of each interview, when I asked why they had agreed to participate in my study. Each interviewee responded that they lived in a great country that was taking great strides in its development, and they wanted me to relay that to the West through my study. After this statement they stated one of these three comments: either, *“I trusted you because you are an Arab and Muslim woman. You are one of us and won’t portray us badly to the West in this study”*; or *“I trusted you because you are British and from a British institution and I know they require you to be methodologically rigorous, to obtain confidentiality and consent forms, and to be fair and unbiased in portraying your findings”*, and in one case an interviewee replied: *“because I am also half European and half Arab and I believe we make the best researchers as we understand both sides”* (Alkhaled, 2013; 2016).

Humbled by their positive responses and inspired by their continued interest in my study, our relationships continued after the completion of my PhD until 2020. During this study (2010-2020), Saudi women witnessed unprecedented economic and political changes to their position and rights in society since the first interviews in 2010. Given that I was now part of their network, frequent follow-up interviews every 6-12 months were made with each of the entrepreneurs, depending on when they were available to update me on their journey. These continued online, due to the financial and practical difficulties in accessing the field on a regular basis as a non-Saudi

female academic, who required a male chaperone to accompany her in order to obtain a visa².

Women's ages ranged between 28-77 when the data collection began in 2010³. The businesses were in healthcare, PR, fashion design, marketing, events planning, consulting, retail and IT services (see Table 1 for sample details). The interviews were conducted in both English and Arabic (depending on their personal preference) which I, as a bilingual researcher, was able to translate, and thus preserve the cultural integrity of the data, within the limitations of the situation (Temple, 2002). The audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

[Take in Table 1]

Feminist social movement research is one of the areas in which a strong tradition of qualitative research persists that utilises a feminist methodology into women's lived experiences (Taylor, 1998). Therefore, the in-depth semi-structured interviews involved asking them to recount their personal background (upbringing, education and previous employment experiences) as well as how they became entrepreneurs. This provided the basis for developing a unique and enriched understanding of the Saudi women's experiences contextually grounded in their entrepreneurial activities and their intention towards supporting other women. The follow-up interviews focused more on the recent changes and developments, their understanding of gender

² On September 27th 2019 Saudi Arabia introduced visitor visas, which did not require females from certain countries to be accompanied by a male chaperone. Thus, I booked a data collection trip for February 2020, and I was able to apply for a visa alone as a female for the first time. However, it was canceled due to the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown. Therefore, the latest Skype calls took place in February and March 2020.

³ The 77 year old, who is now 87, continues to observe and support her business but in a much more limited capacity.

equality, the Arab Spring and its link to their engagement in entrepreneurship and political change.

A qualitative longitudinal approach

In order to study women's entrepreneuring as social change, I conducted a qualitative longitudinal approach "to get to the heart of many processes of social change" (Ruspini, 1999, p. 219). Furthermore, it is insightful in order to fully understand the "developmental patterns" (Hoang & Atoncic, 2003, p. 180) in the women's entrepreneurial experiences, as it allows to observe how relationships evolve, how entrepreneurial networks and social ties are activated according to the entrepreneurs' needs over time (Lefebvre, Radu Lefebvre, & Simon, 2015; Shinnar, Hsu & Powell, 2014). Furthermore, McLeod and Yates (1997) argue that a longitudinal study is essential in investigating processes and being able to observe negotiations of gender and the changes within individuals over time. A primary issue for mainstream and feminist studies is whether a snapshot should be taken of that moment in time or whether it should be studied over time; as some feminist scholars focus on contemporary events while others argue for an analysis of the long term (Mills, 2002). I argue that in studying feminist social movements and political activism, it is essential for this to be conducted over a long period of time, especially if it is a social nonmovement characterised by *subtle* solidarity practices in the shape of quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2013), which are dynamic, developing and changing over time. This builds up a strong nuanced sense of the complex factors within which the women are situated, such as class, type of schooling and family background (McLeod & Yates, 1997), which along with gender shape their life-opportunities.

Data analysis – The Listening Guide

To shift from what Bayat (2013, p.5) calls the “exceptionalist tendency”, where even local scholars in the Middle East tend to uncritically deploy conventional methods and concepts to the social reality of their societies without recognising that these models draw upon the Western experience, I used a feminist qualitative approach for my analysis, which was guided by Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) “Listening Guide”. Originally designed by Brown and Gilligan (1992) for studying women and girls in feminist psychology and political theory, the Listening Guide is a “voice-centered relational method” that follows a thematic narrative approach. It preserves “the voice” in each narrative, so that each case is analysed holistically “in and on their own terms” (Mauthner, 1999, p. 147). Furthermore, the “guide to listening” should appreciate that relationships are “fluid and ever-changing”, thus, cannot be “fixed in a framework for interpretation” (Brown and Gilligan, 1992, p. 22).

The process involved four readings of each interview transcript which were: 1) reading for the plot, 2) reading for the voice ‘I’, 3) reading for relationships, and 4) placing the women’s accounts and experiences within a broader social, political, cultural and structural context (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998). Therefore, the Listening Guide was used to explore the women’s narrative accounts in terms of their relationships with the people around them and their relationships with the broader social, structural, cultural and political contexts within which they live. The readings were essential in analysing the women’s life stories, focusing on the implicit and explicit examples they used to describe the struggles they faced as both women and women entrepreneurs (Hamilton, 2011), how they negotiated them and then how they used them to connect to other women. Therefore, the guide’s readings helped steer

away from Western conceptualisations of feminist social movements seeking solidarity (Bayat, 2013) and focused their experiences of solidarity and political activism within their context.

I began the analysis process with a list of themes based on my first reading for the plot. Further themes were identified based on the theoretical understanding of feminist organising, solidarity and political change through social nonmovement. The second reading for the 'I' enabled analytical depth of each transcript, revealing unique aspects around the individual, her context and her intent to run her business to support other women's employment. The third stage of reading for relationships was where it became evident that the women were on a 'journey' to find a platform through entrepreneurship to connect to other women, with an aim to raise their feminist consciousness and empower them. The fourth stage involved compiling the women's accounts of how they had taken their entrepreneurial platform and turned it into a platform for feminist activism and social change.

Therefore, themes were created from the literature on the gendered-boundaries that Saudi women face, as well as the practices the women employed in overcoming them for themselves and with other women. Doing this resulted in nine *solidarity practices* across the 16 cases (as first order codes). These were then theorised into a three-step process from entrepreneur to political activist.

Women's entrepreneurship: a social nonmovement for solidarity and political activism through quiet encroachment

The adoption of Bayat's (2013) concept of 'social nonmovement' and its strategy of 'quiet encroachment' enabled a novel conceptualisation of 'women's entrepreneurship-as-political activism'. That is, women's entrepreneurship provided a space for feminist solidarity and a legitimate platform to engage in political activism in the non-democratic context of Saudi Arabia. In this section, I will outline the general insights from the 16 interviewees over the decade. The women's stories illustrate the gendered power struggles women face in their everyday public and private lives, and particularly the constraints they face while pursuing their work and running their businesses. These findings are exemplified using quotes from the sample over the decade, which will be dated to illustrate how their activism developed over time through solidarity practices of quiet encroachment. Their nine solidarity practices towards political activism across the narratives were demonstrated in a three-step process:

- (1) *Solidarity in isolation*: illustrating their journey from individual empowerment to empowering individual women employees within their organisation. The women engaged in three solidarity practices in this phase, i.e. providing a segregated or women-only office space for their employees, onsite daycare and safe transport to and from work.
- (2) *Solo-darity to solidarity*: illustrating how the women transitioned from individuals supporting their female employees within their organisation to utilising their entrepreneurial platform to raise feminist consciousness within their entrepreneurial networks. The women also engaged in three solidarity

practices in this phase, i.e. opportunities to travel, alternative fashion to traditional clothing, and mentorship at entrepreneurship events.

- (3) *Being an entrepreneur to becoming a political activist*: illustrating how they shifted from being an entrepreneur to a political activist to engage in political change. The women also engaged in three solidarity practices in this phase, i.e. confrontations with authorities refusing to support their business affairs, lobbying for women's employment laws, and becoming a member of the King's Consultative Council.

1. Solidarity in isolation: *From individual empowerment to empowering individuals through entrepreneurship*

The 16 women in this study discussed their background and families, particularly their male guardian, as a key element to both their subordination and privilege in society, and its impact on their decision to become entrepreneurs. That is, some of the women discussed having extremely supportive guardians whilst others discussed facing constraints from them during their employment, as they felt uneasy or jealous of their wives, daughters or sisters working alongside other men (even when in segregated offices or in hospitals where segregation rules are not as strict). This led them to quit their employment and turn to self-employment, as Rania, an accountant explains “*Eventually he called my boss and prohibited me from working... I am self-employed now and it is much calmer to work from home...* (March, 2010).

Rania eventually set up her own business and moved out of her home office. She states,

“I decided from the day I got this office space that it would be a women-only office. It means I can employ women whose guardians also do not like them interacting with men at work and gives them a chance to learn, evolve and be financially independent...to have a purpose in her life beyond the home” (March, 2013).

On August 2nd 2019 The Male Guardianship Law (*Mahram*) was removed, which meant women no longer needed their guardian’s permission to work. Rania states, *“Even if legally a woman does not need his permission, her boss will not want problems with an employee’s husband, so yes, a segregated business is still better for women who come from traditional families* (December, 2019).

Salma was an employee in a marketing firm and was told by her boss that she would not be promoted because *“you will soon get married and get preoccupied with your husband, house and children”*. She left her job and co-founded a successful PR business with her brother. She explains how she supports female employment through her business, *“I set up a nursery on the premises, all fees paid. This is only available to our female employees. I was losing great talent due to a pervasive patriarchal culture that means women’s only role is caregiver, so if they work it is their responsibility to fully subsidise and/or organise childcare”* (May, 2011).

Karma, who was employed in a local bank faced issues with regards to getting reliable transportation to work and back as she explains: *“It was becoming a logistical nightmare. One day my husband took me, one day my dad, other days I got a taxi but it was after standing in the sun for an hour. My family felt uncomfortable with this,*

the street is no place for a woman from a respectable family. So I had to quit work... After a while I set up a salon in the flat downstairs in this building” (March, 2010).

In follow-up interviews Karma explains of transport issues, *“I have three Saudi women employees. They struggled to get into work as much as I did. But now with Uber and Careem taxi apps the women find transportation much easier... Still doesn't resolve some of their guardian's discomfort with them being picked up and dropped off at their homes by different drivers everyday...”* (December, 2014).

Returning to the issue of transport in our subsequent interviews, Karma explains she has hired a driver and a mini-van for her employees, *“They don't need to pay for a driver, they don't need to face the danger of taxis with strangers, they don't need favours and lifts from their husbands that they have to grateful for, they are independent working women”* (September, 2015).

Asked if she still runs this service after the driving ban had been lifted on June 24th 2018, Karma says, *“I still have the driver. Even if they are permitted to drive, it does not mean they can afford a second car nor does it mean the men at home don't still control their wives' mobility. The conservative mentality is deep within our culture here but it will change and seeing women in cars will become more acceptable soon”* (September, 2019).

The first stage of the three-stage process of feminist solidarity through entrepreneurship reveals how this was based on the women's individual empowerment, which manifested into a desire to empower other individual women.

Indeed, *rage* and *frustration* with the current system followed by a *desire for connection* with other women (Hemmings, 2012; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) was evident. Yet, their solidarity practices through ‘quiet encroachment’ were down to the individual carrying out quiet and direct action, instead of collective demand-making (Bayat, 2013) for changes to these gendered policies and patriarchal traditions. Indeed, the solidarity practices in this phase of providing a female-only business, subsidised childcare and secure transportation to and from work, provided many women with an opportunity to work and what I call “solo-darity”, i.e. the scattered and isolated nature of the individual women’s businesses, which support individual women in their community, without any collective organising or ‘visible’ activism or call for political change. However, one cannot measure the impact of this employment opportunity in the private or the impact of her visibility as a workingwoman in the public (Walby, 2011). Therefore, these examples do indeed illustrate entrepreneurship as a form of quiet encroachment towards feminist solidarity and social change.

However, whilst some women’s solidarity practices remain in this phase, others’ transitioned from “solo-darity” to solidarity. That is, transitioned from (1) self-empowerment to empowering other women within the current structures to (2) using entrepreneurship as a platform for feminist consciousness raising.

2. Solo-darity to solidarity: *Entrepreneurship and feminist solidarity through consciousness raising*

Some women took to their entrepreneurial platform to address and inspire women *outside* of their own organisations and within their entrepreneurial network. Hanna, who runs a consultancy firm, is one of the many women in the sample who is

regularly asked to volunteer at the Khajida Bint Khuwailid Centre for businesswomen at the Chamber of Commerce to give educational lectures on “how to become an entrepreneur”. She explains *“They bring me in to give the “how to” lecture. As in, this is how you register your business, this is how you do your accounting and marketing etc. I say yes I will talk about these things, but once I am in the room I become a mentor, an advocate of women, an activist for women! I talk about how they should believe in themselves, work together, support and lean on each other, employ other women. I leave the “how to” part to guides and pamphlets they can pick up in the entrance of the building”* (March, 2010).

Deena, a fashion designer narrates a number of confrontations she had with her husband about limiting her from traveling alone outside of the Kingdom to get materials for her business. Eventually, she divorced him and was able to travel as she pleased under her brother’s guardianship. She states, *“My ex-husband instilled such fear in me. Saying how can you go alone? How can you cope? What if you get harassed, think of the shame this will bring on me and your family, you cannot take care of yourself.. I have been travelling four years now and I am fine!* (March, 2010).

Deena explains that her fashion business was very successful, and that she has been approached by magazines and newspapers for interviews and inclusion in their top 10 most successful female entrepreneurs in the region, *“When they ask me what advice would you give other Saudi women, I say travel! It is so important to see how others live outside of our bubble in the Kingdom. You do not have to go to the USA or Europe. Go to the UAE, Egypt, India, see that women work and maintain their*

modesty and dignity. See that women check into hotels and it is very safe and secure” (January, 2012).

She also raises her ‘feminist voice’ through her entrepreneurship blog to reach out to other women, entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs, who follow her, *“I also share articles about strong women’s success stories, biographies of strong women etc. It is not political, I just want women to believe in themselves and see me and think, if she can do it, I can do it”* (February, 2014).

Deena explains she specifically encourages her own employees to travel for the business as well, as she states, *“I want them to travel. I say trust yourself, you can cope with anything... but I guess if the guardian doesn’t sign the permission to travel she can’t go anyway* (November, 2018).

In August 2019 the Guardian’s permission to travel was lifted. Deena states: *“It did not make a big difference. The ones who were allowed to travel continue to travel and the ones who weren’t officially permitted to travel still do not travel. The law has changed but the woman cannot go and come as she pleases without her guardian’s permission. This tradition will take a generation to change”* (March, 2020).

Maram, also a fashion designer and boutique owner recalls quitting an unfulfilling job and traveling across India, where she says she was inspired by women who always wore colour, regardless of religion, wealth or class, explains *“I came back from travelling and set up my boutique... to sell my colourful abayas [cloaks] for Saudi women to wear... I am doing my own revolution, I call it the revolution of colour.*

That is, I design colourful abayas for women to wear in Saudi... Islam did not say women have to wear black, it says she has to be conservative! So why are we all wearing black? So men can't tell the difference between us? So we don't show any personality or any identity?" (March, 2010).

Her 'silent' activism against the *culture* of Saudi women wearing black took place through her colourful cloak (abaya) designs, which she sold in her own boutique. She turned to entrepreneurship so she could influence other women with her feminist social nonmovement (Bayat, 2013) named, "revolution of colour". Thus, entrepreneurship provided both Deena and Maram with a platform to exercise their feminist consciousness developed from their travels and to raise women's feminist consciousness, self-belief and visibility.

Follow-up interviews with Maram reveal that indeed wearing colourful abayas had become a 'nonmovement' of Saudi women rebelling against the tradition of wearing black, whilst maintaining the modesty of Islamic teachings, "*Did you see? Everyone is wearing colourful abayas now! We are no longer an invisible sea of women blending into the night*" (December, 2018).

Whilst discussions continue to question the impact of the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat, 2013) or the infrapolitics of the oppressed (Scott, 1990) it is interesting to note that over the years, and in a massive change to a deeply embedded tradition, it has become acceptable for Saudi women to wear colourful abayas (Gulf News, 2018). Furthermore, in 2018, Saudi women have been observed wearing their abayas inside out, as a protest against wearing abayas altogether (BBC, 2018).

Therefore, Maram, and other women who have been designing colourful abayas may not have actively engaged in a feminist movement or organised as a collective in this movement, but their individual actions contributed to increasing a feminist consciousness and subsequently a collective agency for social change (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Hyde, 2000), even if it was unreflective and unintentional.

It has been argued that “new political spaces are being used” for feminist collective action and consciousness-raising (Walby, 2011, p. 52) and that feminist organising relies on mobilising feminist consciousness and a sense of solidarity through community (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). The second phase of the women entrepreneurs’ journeys to feminist solidarity and political activism highlighted that the entrepreneurial space afforded them the opportunity to mobilise further solidarity practices, through quiet encroachment, to connect to other women outside their organisation and raise their feminist consciousness, still within the local structures. Indeed, the solidarity practices of mentoring women at entrepreneurship events to believe in themselves and support each other, encouraging their employees and other women to travel and see the world outside of the Kingdom and to wear colourful yet conservative clothing to be ‘visible’ and differentiated in society presented a flexible form of feminist solidarity and activism against the traditions, which traveled between the private/public spaces (cf. Walby, 2011; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019), albeit in disguise as an entrepreneur.

Some of the women however took their entrepreneurial/feminist activist platform beyond helping women within their organisation, or within their entrepreneurial network. The next phase illustrates how they contributed to policy changes for

women, with one woman joining the King's Consultative Shura Council, proposing laws and policies to the King and his cabinet.

3. Being an entrepreneur to becoming a political activist: *Entrepreneurship as a platform for feminist solidarity and engagement in political change*

The women entrepreneurs' journey from individual empowerment to empowering other women within their organisation, followed by feminist consciousness raising outside their organisation but within their entrepreneurial network, has illustrated the fluidity between the public and private spaces within which feminist organising and activism takes place in different contexts. These phases brought out social change within the current structures of society. Some women took this sense of empowerment for social change and began to take larger steps towards political engagement and ultimately political change to support other (working) women in society.

Amal, an entrepreneur who has owned a successful chain of retail outlets since the late 1990s, explains that she became increasingly frustrated with not being able to organise her own paperwork at the ministries, because women were not permitted to enter the government building. Like all female entrepreneurs, she was forced to employ a legal intermediary (or *wakeel*) who could be a relative or a stranger, but who in this case was unreliable. One day she decided she had reached her limit, "*I went to the government building and I saw the sign stating "no women allowed to enter...I went up to the door and I removed the sign and I said... 'you cannot stop women from coming in anymore to deal with their affairs'... I referred to the national debates encouraging women into the workplace, and which the King had been advocating at the time. After this the sign was removed from that building...until today you cannot*

find this. I am so proud of this thing” (March, 2010).

Amal’s entrance was a confrontational and illegal form of activism. She was at the mercy of the minister that day. However, she cleverly bolstered her argument and conflated her activism for supporting women entrepreneurs by highlighting the King’s support for women’s economic participation. Amal said this incident happened around 2002-2003. Interestingly, a Royal decree issued in 2003 required all government entities to open female sections across the ministries. In April 2004 the Ministry of Commerce lifted the requirement for women to appoint a legal intermediary (who has full power of attorney and complete access to the business’s assets) and opened up to women (AlTurki & Braswell, 2010). Whilst all 16 women in my study said it was a relief, many complained that the female sections did not have the authority of the male sections. Furthermore, some said they were “forced” to reinstate their *wakeel*, as ministry officials continued to request them. This demonstrates that female-supportive policies are not always implemented by the officials, thus, women must continue to negotiate their visibility.

Five of the 16 women that were interviewed discussed lobbying the government for policy change to support women’s work and entrepreneurship. Salma, whom we met in phase 1, explains how she has used her entrepreneurial platform wisely to lobby for policies to remove the need for women entrepreneurs to have a male manager (*mudeer*). She explains of her struggles in registering as the managing director of her own company and having to add her brother’s name instead, *“I am the Managing Director, I have been here since day one. I have been to the government and told them I am a board member of a company with 250 employees, I find it ludicrous that I*

cannot say I am the MD. My lawyers created the title “managing partner”, and “manager who is a member of the board”. But still, I cannot sign the paperwork as the MD and need my brother to do it...” (March, 2010).

She later explains *“My brother is great and it works but I keep lobbying for it to change. If not for me but for other women who have a small business and have one male employee and are forced to employ a male manager, and she pays him to run her business as he pleases” (January, 2011).*

Later in 2011, the Ministry of Commerce’s requirement for a male manager (*mudeer*) was overturned by the government (Lavelle & Al Sheik, 2013). Further interviews with the women over the years reveal that, similar to the reactions of the ministry officials who continued to request a legal intermediary (*wakeel*), they continued to ask for a male manager’s (*mudeer*) presence. However, simultaneously, the women revealed that the female sections were becoming more efficient and were given more power and authority to process their paperwork.

Over the years, Budour, an entrepreneur who owns a furniture store, highlights her continued efforts in supporting the development of sexual harassment laws and policies to protect women at work, she explains *“I am fighting for this but you have to tread carefully because suddenly one guy will pop up and say, right, if women are being harassed then let’s just stop women from working, and then we will be back to square one” (March, 2010).*

On October 20th 2019 the Ministry of Labour introduced a new policy on anti-

harassment in the workplace and public spaces (Khoja & Thomas, 2020). The women welcomed this law and said the next stage should be to focus on *“education in the community toward cultural change to normalise women’s visibility both at work and in society”* (Budour, February, 2020).

Ameera is a business consultant. She is also a committee member at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce. In 2008 she was assigned as a part-time *advisor* to the consultative council comprising 150 men. She explains *“It is frustrating, I am a prominent business woman with all this knowledge and all I get consulted on is “women’s issues”. Nothing about growing the economy, as if women do not have a role in that... I always push back on this point”* (March, 2010).

In 2013, The King issued a royal decree, granting women thirty seats in the council as *members* and stated that women should always hold at least a fifth of its 150 seats. In 2015, women were able to vote and stand as candidates in the 2015 municipal elections. Ameera, now one of the council members states, *“Of course, there are some power struggles and some discomfort from the men, but isn’t this everywhere in the world? Even America was not ready for a female to be in power... We will get there... (March, 2017).*

A sentiment across every woman’s narrative was a strong sense of national identity and the desire to make a difference. Ameera states, *“I had a chance to live in America for the rest of my life but I came back. This is my home and I will keep fighting here for these women who have nowhere else to go...I want to make a real difference in society and I will use this position to make it happen”* (December, 2019).

The third phase revealed entrepreneurship as a platform for feminist solidarity through engaging in political change. Being entrepreneurs and driven by a strong sense of national identity meant they had a legitimate platform to execute solidarity practices that were perhaps a little ‘louder’ than the previous quiet encroachment practices, through; standing up to the authorities when they were hindered in running their businesses, successfully lobbying the government for policy changes to support women entrepreneurs and women employees, and even representing women on the King’s consultative council. Yet, it was not in the form of mainstream Western activism either. What is important to note, is that the women were of a privileged class, and whilst feminists may argue that class and identity (Phipps, 2016; Hemmings, 2012) may limit the ability to represent ‘other’ women at different intersections (Essers & Tedmanson, 2014), Saudi’s culture and structures meant all the women were constrained by the same laws and regulations, which they wanted removing for themselves and others. There are however some nuanced differences in how the women were able to negotiate these boundaries based on the level of support they had from their guardian in the private, thus, the women wanted to use what they called their “privileged” position to support other women and bring about social and political change.

Discussion

This study contributes to the gender and entrepreneurship literature by viewing entrepreneurship beyond the economic development perspective and has emphasised its potential for political change (Barinaga, 2013). Whilst I am cautious of portraying entrepreneurship as the “Holy Grail” for women (Verduijn & Essers, 2013, p. 100), it

cannot be denied that in the case of these Saudi women, it provided a legitimate platform for feminist solidarity, political engagement and social change for women and Saudi society. It also advances the research agenda in the limited but growing body of work on Saudi women's entrepreneurship by highlighting deeper understandings behind the women's motivations for engaging in entrepreneurship beyond descriptive and comparative 'push' and 'pull' factors (Abou-Moghli & Al-Abdallah, 2019). In addition, it highlights the essential role that Saudi women entrepreneurs play in developing their country, beyond its needs for economic diversification and investment in the private sector.

The notion of empowerment through entrepreneurship was apparent across all narratives. Entrepreneurship was referred to as the means they had used to overcome obstacles and break free from gendered constraints to work in their own lives. This is not a unique finding as it has been put forward in Western, developed and developing country contexts (Jennings et al., 2016; Al-Dajani, et al., 2019), including Saudi Arabia (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018). What is specific to this context however, is the lack of 'ability to act together' (Scott, 1990), thus the feeling of self-empowerment through entrepreneurship within the current institutional structures led the women to set up their businesses with an ethos to support women's employment followed by a desire for political engagement towards social and structural change in their country.

Following a postcolonial feminist approach highlighted how concepts such as feminist solidarity, feminist organising and collective political activism are deeply entrenched within Western feminist research and contexts, which can blinker us to alternative forms of resistance and activism that women partake in around the world. That is,

problematizing and unpacking such Western concepts using transnational feminist insights in the context of the Middle East (Mohanty, 2003; Bayat, 2013) allowed me to reflexively investigate how feminist social movements and collective capacities for political engagement take place in a context where social transformations *simply cannot* take place through mainstream activism, rigorous critique and democratic engagement (Hemmings, 2012; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019; Wickström et al., 2019).

Given the socio-political structures in Saudi society, entrepreneurship as quiet encroachment and unorganised individual efforts, rather than intentional collective action (Fernández, Marti & Farchi, 2017; Bayat, 2013), became the ‘anonymous’ outlet for their rage, frustration and desire to connect to other women, and thus provided an ‘ambiguous’ platform for concealing their real intention for sustainable feminist politics of transformation (Hemmings, 2012; Sweetman, 2013) necessary for empowerment and commitment to social change (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Hyde, 2000). Therefore, this study contributes to the literature on feminist solidarity by illustrating that solidarity can be done ‘in isolation’, when there is no space for collective resistance to oppressive regimes through everyday solidarity practices, which quietly *encroached them* onto the forbidden territories. The study also extends Bayat’s (2013) concept of quiet encroachment of the ordinary by illustrating how the women utilised entrepreneurship in a *legal* way to gain actual political change, as opposed to Bayat’s (2015) claim that nonmovements through quiet encroachment are simply the everyday survival techniques of the weak, which fall short of developing legal, technical, organisational, and moral support and the consent of the authorities at the broader national level.

Delving deeper into the concept of social nonmovement and quiet encroachment in non-democratic and totalitarian contexts (Bayat, 2015) has opened the door for reviewing how 'Other' women organise and practice solidarity outside of the Western concept of feminist social movements (Bayat, 2013). This study exemplifies women's social nonmovement, based on the women's "collective actions", as "noncollective actors", but whom had "shared practices" in a disorganised and fragmented but similar way (Bayat, 2013, p.150), under the disguise of entrepreneurship, which in return triggered much social change for women. It was found that entrepreneurship has been used as a vehicle for social change by the Saudi women, where protesting is illegal, condemned and has been publicly shamed. Indeed, entrepreneurship provided the women with a legitimate and safe space to engage in feminist solidarity practices, which allowed them to quietly encroach upon the political space alongside men.

Methodologically, the longitudinal study was essential in demonstrating the long process of social change (Mcloes & Yates, 1997), political change and the developmental patterns (Hoang & Atoncic, 2003) of the women's solidarity practices along with the political changes that took place over the decade. Using the feminist analysis approach of the Listening Guide helped to shift the context from being "exceptionalist" to the Western norm (Bayat, 2013), and contextualised the women's narratives and voices within the social, structural, cultural and political contexts within which they live (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998). It also provided ample room for engaging in feminist reflexivity, and the impact my hybrid insider-outsider researcher role may have had on my personal relationship with the women, their narratives, and my interpretation and theorisation of them (Hamdan, 2009; Ozkazanc-pan, 2012). As feminist scholars continue to call for reflecting on the individualist and masculine

assumptions embedded within methodologies in the study of women's entrepreneurship (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Mirchandani, 1999; Knight, 2016; Hughes et al., 2012) the use of feminist approaches, such as the Listening Guide, has added insightful theoretical perspectives to the women's narratives. The guide has not been utilised in gender and entrepreneurship research previously, and thus it could be further used and developed in uncovering women's narratives of their entrepreneurial experiences, regardless of their country context.

In following a postcolonial feminist approach, my intention was not to 'essentialise difference', nor was it to revise Western feminism, as such a dichotomy between these words is no longer viable in a globalised world (Sinha, 2000). Instead, I aimed to interrogate the potential for a feminist social movement practiced in a non-traditional political activist manner (e.g. without street protesting, campaigning, picketing, or striking for equality) in a non-democratic context, and therefore, appreciating Saudi Arabia within its own socio-political context (Milevska, 2011) away from viewing them as 'the Other' which is opposed to the Western norm (Mohanty, 2003; Essers & Tedmanson, 2014). I believe that in this way, we, as feminist scholars, are better able to tell alternative stories of difference, culture, power and agency, which allows us to theorise experiences of solidarity and of seeking justice in a more situated and cross-cultural perspective.

Conclusions and future research agenda

Based on the readings of Western feminist movements and subsequent social and political change, the question remains: what perspective do we use as feminists to measure the success of the results of this nonmovement? Whilst women's mass

presence in the Arab Spring revolution in 2011 was essential to the toppling of some of the dictatorships, women ended up being excluded from the centres of power, and the policy changes towards gender equality were feeble and limited (Bayat, 2013), which led to questioning whether the ‘Arab “Feminist” Spring’ was truly impactful and worth it (Khamis, 2011, p. 692). Therefore, the Saudi women’s political engagement through ‘quiet encroachment’ should be developed further as a tool for sustainable change for women across various country contexts.

Unlike current conceptualisations of feminist solidarity, which essentialise women’s organising as a reflective and collective feminist approach towards change (Wickström et al., 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019) and effective political transformation (Sweetman, 2013), solidarity in the case of the Saudi women entrepreneurs was individualised, unorganised and a scattered nonmovement towards solidarity, but one which unreflectively and accumulatively became a collective feminist movement. This perspective could be further researched in Western contexts, where women and other subjugated communities also turn to entrepreneurship in response to their marginalisation at work and society, and thus, could also unreflectively fall within this process and pattern of unorganised individual actions but non-collective actors leading to collective change (Bayat, 2015).

A limitation of the study stems from the sampling in its methodology. That is, the nature of the snowball sampling, which identifies cases of interest from ‘people who know people’, meant that the women interviewees were all of a particular privileged class of wealth and (international) education. That is, whilst all Saudi women are essentially constrained by the same laws and patriarchal traditions, which the women

in my sample faced and wanted to remove for themselves and others, it is important to emphasise that their social class came with privileges that few others could access. However, whilst I am not declaring that this study is meant to be generalisable, nor that women are a homogenous group, it is essential to note that the women's activism was claimed to be for "all Saudi women", whilst their ability to be an entrepreneur, and thus an activist, was indeed embedded within the privilege of their own politics of experience (Phipps, 2016). This questions the power relations of the women as privileged feminists capitalising on experience (Ahmed, 2012), and therefore, I acknowledge that perhaps there are marginalised groups whose realities are invisibilised or not represented in this study.

Finally, it is important to note that I am not claiming a *cause and effect* argument of the women entrepreneurs' solidarity practices leading directly to the policy changes and Saudi women's emancipation. Rather, what I am arguing, is that the combination of the economic need for women's investment in the private sector and participation in the workforce (Sadi & Ghazali, 2010), and the external political pressures on improving women's rights within the country *as well as* the women's everyday solidarity practices through quiet encroachment have led to these advancements in women's rights towards equality in Saudi Arabia. Still in place, however, are rules that require male consent for a woman to leave prison, exit a domestic abuse shelter, seek certain types of medical care, or marry. They also cannot pass on citizenship to their children and cannot provide consent for their children to marry (The Guardian, 2019). The Saudi women are patriotic, proud and hopeful that the country is taking slow but sustainable steps towards achieving legal equal rights between men and women. However, for change to truly take place towards equality, a cultural shift in

the gendered-norms and expectations is required– but I strongly contend this needs to take place globally, not just in Saudi Arabia.

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Table 1 - Sample of Saudi Women Entrepreneurs

Personal Characteristics			Business Characteristics	
Name	Age (in 2010)	Marital Status	Business Type	Founded
Zahra	77	Widowed	Child Care	1985
Amal	55	Married	Retail (Accessories)	1990
Deena	32	Divorced (x2)	Fashion Designer	2000
Hanna	49	Married	Consultancy (Management)	2001
Salma	32	Married	Multinational PR	2004
Ameera	50	Divorced (x4)	Consultancy (CSR)	2005
Fatima	30	Divorced (2013)	Health Care	2006
Joud	27	Single	Publishing	2006
Maram	32	Single	Retail (Clothing)	2007
Layla	30	Single	Events Planning	2008
Rama	32	Divorced	Marketing	2008
Riham	30	Married	Consultancy (IT)	2008
Budour	29	Married	Retail (Furniture)	2009
Karma	28	Married	Salon	2009
Rania	35	Married	Accountancy Firm	2009