

# Reformulating the empowerment process through women entrepreneurship in a collective context.

NG, P.Y., WOOD, B.P. and BASTIAN, B.L.

2022

© Poh Yen Ng, Bronwyn P. Wood and Bettina Lynda Bastian. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence.

# Reformulating the empowerment process through women entrepreneurship in a collective context

Poh Yen Ng

*Christ Church Business School, Canterbury Christ Church University,  
Canterbury, UK*

Bronwyn P. Wood

*Department of Innovation, Technology and Entrepreneurship,  
College of Business and Economics, United Arab Emirates University (UAEU),  
Al Ain, United Arab Emirates and*

*Muslim Marketing Matters, Hamilton, New Zealand, and*

Bettina Lynda Bastian

*Royal University for Women, Riffa, Bahrain*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to develop an empirically informed framework to analyze women empowerment and entrepreneurship, contextualized within a collective society.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors conducted 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs located in the United Arab Emirates to understand their entrepreneurial experiences and how they were empowered.

**Findings** – Findings suggest that the three aspects of power characterized as “positive” from within Rowlands’ distinctions (“power to”, “power with” and “power within”) dominate, as opposed to those emphasized in the literature (“power to” and “power over”). Findings include empowerment of the “me” (individual) also synergistically contributes to empowerment of the “we” (society), when considering empowerment within a collective society.

**Originality/value** – A psychology model was used as a basis to develop a Collective Empowerment Process Framework. This framework provides a fresh look at empowerment, allowing for explanations of how women in specific contexts experience empowerment and social change.

**Keywords** Women entrepreneurs, Gender, Empowerment, Collective context

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a pivotal element for development, with powerful economic as well as societal impact (Harris *et al.*, 2009; Schumpeter, 1983). In the Arab Gulf region, governments actively promote women entrepreneurship, with countries pursuing ambitious strategies to become gender-equal societies (UAE Government, 2014; Ennis, 2019). Their efforts are aligned with international development organizations, such as the World Economic Forum (2019) and the United Nations (2018), which see entrepreneurship as a catalyst to women



empowerment and as a pivotal antecedent to gender equality and human development (Bastian *et al.*, 2019). In fact, Arab Gulf countries have been quite successful recently in increasing the convergence of female to male entrepreneurship ratios. The latest data from the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2020)* reveal that the number of female to male entrepreneurs is nearly equal in countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.

Despite positive entrepreneurship ratios, it is, however, not clear whether entrepreneurship has the intended empowerment effects (Gill and Ganesh, 2007; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Ojediran and Anderson, 2020) both in the Gulf and elsewhere. Men still dominate as high-profile, normative, entrepreneurial role models (Marlow *et al.*, 2009; Marlow and Swail, 2014) while women are “*first assumed to be deficient, then ‘proved’ to be deficient and finally held accountable for their own deficiencies*” (Ahl and Marlow, 2012, p. 550; Perez, 2019). This gendered perspective of entrepreneurship underestimates the diversity of female venturing and the empowering potential in differing gendered contexts (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Ahl *et al.*, 2016). Research agrees that empowerment is an ongoing process (Kabeer, 2005; Lombardini and McCollum, 2018) not merely reducible to a change in the individual but encompassing social change as well (Calás *et al.*, 2009; Kabeer, 2005). Still, the effects of entrepreneurial activities on relevant communities or groups remain unclear (Garikipati, 2013; Ganle *et al.*, 2015), and more research is required to examine empowerment considering its local complexities.

The paper makes the following theoretical contributions. First, it adds to the understanding of whether entrepreneurial experiences of women entrepreneurs have had empowering effects, by exploring and analyzing the process and elements involved in their entrepreneurial activities. Second, the empirical findings rejuvenate the empowerment process model by Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) in a collective context. In line with the original model, empowerment is conceptualized as a cyclical process that is experienced by individuals within their context and in connection with their communities. Through this process, women entrepreneurs undertake actions which both build individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional contexts (Alsop *et al.*, 2004). This approach allows the overcoming of ethnocentric and gendered analysis biases and illustrates the relations between entrepreneurship, gender and empowerment within a collectivist environment, such as that shared throughout Middle East. Third, the paper follows the call to contextualize women’s entrepreneurship (Brush *et al.*, 2009; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021; Welter, 2011) and provides insights on how the entrepreneurship process constructs gender, and positions women in a Muslim society that is keen to pursue gender balance in workforce participation.

By providing insight into a context which, while providing a very high standard of living to its nationals on a global scale, is still often regarded as “Global South”, in at least cultural and religious terms, we provide a counterpoint to these gendered and orientalist assumptions (Wood *et al.*, 2021), by highlighting the women’s own voices (as leading women’s entrepreneurship scholars repeatedly call for) describing and considering their entrepreneurship experiences and its relationship to empowerment. Our study engages 15 successful Emirati women entrepreneurs, living in Al Ain city – a place widely regarded as the Emirati “heartland” where the Emirati population outnumbered the expat population. Al Ain, then, is a great setting for studying Emirati national entrepreneurs, who face similar cultural norms and institutional opportunities across the UAE.

The paper is organized as follows. First, the literature review critically analyzes the concept of women empowerment processes and entrepreneurship. This is followed by the research context and the methodology section. The results inform the paper’s model of empowerment, which is discussed in detail. The paper concludes by providing our study’s contribution and recognizing our limitations.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 *Empowerment and women entrepreneurship*

Entrepreneurial actions of individuals and groups have the potential to bring about lasting change within economic, social and institutional realms that go beyond the establishment of technology-based high growth firms and profit maximization (Welter *et al.*, 2018). Scholars increasingly emphasize a broader understanding of the role of entrepreneurship, one that includes emancipatory dimensions of individuals and groups (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017). In this sense, entrepreneurial actions often involve overcoming environmental constraints and breaking free from the authority and dominance of others to pursue individual and collective development. As such, starting a venture enables people to engage with the necessary resources and social networks to achieve entrepreneurship projects that entail social change and liberation from prevalent power systems (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). This is also echoed in the term “entrepreneurship” (Ahl and Marlow, 2012), which emphasizes diverse entrepreneurial practices and outcomes that aim at achieving personal and collective freedom and autonomy from unequal social orders and authority structures (Haugh and Talwar, 2016). Moreover, entrepreneurship is a tool for “social turn” (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018), which supports the creation of more equal and inclusive societies (Haugh and Talwar, 2016), as well as being an important driver behind poverty alleviation and human development (Sutter *et al.*, 2019). The concept of entrepreneurship has an inherently empowering dimension associated with the promotion of human welfare through development of capabilities that people can use to practically achieve the doing and being they wish to (Sen, 2001; Nussbaum, 2011). Empowerment aims at changing power relations and overcoming power asymmetries (Pettit and McGee, 2019) in favour of those who previously exercised little power over their own lives (Sen, 2001).

Various disciplines have contributed to defining the empowerment concept, and despite diverse analytical emphasis, different literatures agree on some defining aspects: Individuals who become empowered, must have been disempowered relative to others (e.g. men) (Batliwala, 1994; Mosedale, 2005). Empowerment is an ongoing process that applies directly to individuals who are deficient in power because of social exclusion and marginalization, as well as discrimination and social inequalities (Al Dajani and Marlow, 2013). It involves both a process and an outcome (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010). As a process, empowerment enhances an individual’s capabilities to make personal choices and transform these into desired outcomes (Mosedale, 2005). Personal life choices must be strategic for the individual, notably, they must be choices that are critical for the empowered to live the life they want (Kabeer, 2005). Empowerment leads to social changes (notably, changes in power structures within a society or family) (Sen, 1990; Calás *et al.*, 2009). Empowerment cannot be bestowed, but it requires a process in which the individual’s agency is pivotal (Mosedale, 2005; Narayan, 2005). Agency is the ability of women to self-define their interests and choices and to be able and entitled to act upon them (Sen, 1990; Kabeer, 2005; Metcalfe, 2011). Batliwala (1994) identifies control over resources (e.g. physical, financial, human, etc.) and control over ideology (e.g. beliefs, values and attitudes) as central means to gain agency and ultimately power. Empowerment processes, therefore, should aim at lifting women’s confidence and self-assertiveness, or conscientization (Metcalfe, 2011). The process of conscientization is also a process of social change (Calás *et al.*, 2009; Metcalfe, 2011), where women increase their ability to have opinions and to express ideas that are not aligned with prevalent mainstream attitudes, become role models in communities and society, and to be able to mobilize and organize individually and collectively for social change (Kabeer, 2005; Calás *et al.*, 2009; Metcalfe, 2011; Duflo, 2012). Thus, empowerment is understood not only as economic strength but also as a process of social change, which is both an individual and a contextual practice.

Scholars are sceptical of the potential of female entrepreneurial engagement to generate a structural change in pre-existing, discriminating environments (Jennings *et al.*, 2016) for

individual women, and for others in society (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). In fact, research regarding the empowering effects of entrepreneurship is mixed; a recent literature review by Ojediran and Anderson (2020) concludes that empowerment through entrepreneurship remains a challenging issue because of entrenched power relations that subjugate women in predominantly patriarchal environments. Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) discover that women entrepreneurs in both Sweden and Saudi Arabia attained a certain level of independence within pre-existing sociocultural structures, but they were not able to emancipate themselves from predominant constraints in society. Gray and Finley (2005), looking at Morocco, found that empowerment outcomes were related to the social class of entrepreneurs, where women from modest backgrounds benefitted much more in terms of personal mobility, control of their own financial resources and increases in decision power within the family, compared to women from middle and upper classes. Mehtap and Al-Saidi (2019) in Syria and Al Dajani and Marlow (2013) with Palestinians in Jordan discovered that women were able to derive certain financial as well as personal liberties and benefits from their business activities. Yet, female entrepreneurial activities and outcomes were inadequate in challenging the culturally embedded patriarchy and the related subordinating power structures (Zayadin *et al.*, 2020).

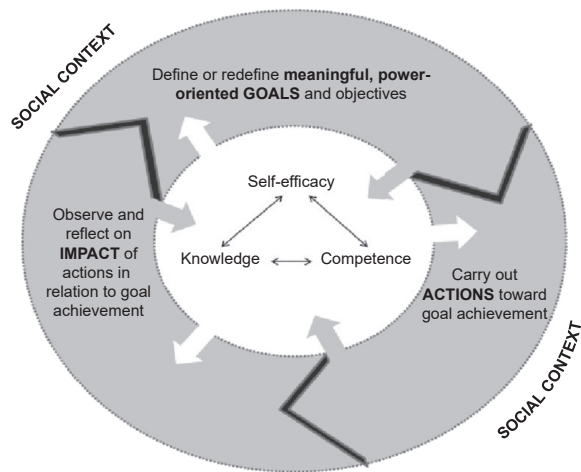
The assumption, however, that entrepreneurship does empower women in subjugating environments is not unilaterally shared by scholars. Increasingly scholars attend to intersectional influences such as gender, patriarchy, migration and displacement on women entrepreneurs (Welter *et al.*, 2019) and the important role of formal and informal institutional context (Brush *et al.*, 2009; Bastian and Zali, 2016). Critical entrepreneurship scholars conclude that women entrepreneurship often perpetuates prevailing gendered and oppressive systems whilst failing to achieve female empowerment and to overcome societal and institutional sexism (Barragan *et al.*, 2018; Verduijn and Essers, 2013). Scholars criticizing current research often address the Western context (Al Dajani and Marlow, 2013) and note that further research in emerging contexts will enhance our understanding of empowerment and entrepreneurship.

## 2.2 Empowerment process

To examine whether entrepreneurship has the expected empowerment effects, it is important to understand the empowerment process. We opted for the empowerment model by Cattaneo and Chapman (2010), because it understands empowerment as an iterative process in which “a person who lacks power sets a personally meaningful goal oriented toward increasing power, takes action toward that goal, and observes and reflects on the impact of this action, drawing on his or her evolving self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence related to the goal” (p. 647).

The model is particularly suitable for our research which explores and analyzes the subtle links between entrepreneurship, individual female empowerment and cultural context, as it emphasizes the interplay of individual and contextual impact factors on empowerment outcomes within an action-based process. The model comprises six components: meaningful and power-oriented goals, self-efficacy, knowledge, competence, action and impact. Social context influences all six process components and the links among them. Figure 1 shows that the process is not linear but a cycle where a person can travel through the different components of the cycle repeatedly with regard to different goals and objectives, allowing for reflection and reevaluation of progress and outcomes. The model highlights the importance of social context, which influences the process and broadens the scope of empowerment beyond personal internal experiences (as expressed through perceptions of abilities, entitlement, self-efficacy, etc.).

In the first step of the process, individuals realize what they lack and then set goals to increase their power. However, such goals must be personally meaningful for the individual



Source(s): Cattaneo and Chapman (2010)

Figure 1.  
Empowerment  
process model

and, as well, they must be power-oriented. The personal nature of goals differs across individuals and relates to individuals' values and belief system, which is highly sensitive to sociocultural influences that also affect an individual's sense of self.

Power oriented goals intend to increase the individual's influence in social relations at any level of human interaction (dyadic relations as well as interactions with a social system). Despite the centrality of power for individual empowerment, the notion of power in literature has been criticized as sketchy, where concepts of power are often assumed rather than properly defined (Gaventa, 2006; Pratto, 2016). This is due to a lack of understanding regarding the distribution of power in societies and related invisible power stratifications based on gender, race and other categories. Prevalent power understandings are associated with "power over" someone or something (Gaventa, 2006; Kabeer, 2005). Hollander and Offermann (1990) define "power over" as an implicitly or explicitly dominating power force. Female empowerment, in this understanding, refers to enabling women to participate within existent economic and political structures (Rowlands, 1997) by bestowing access to both decision-making and positions of power. Yet, as Rowlands (1997) states, if power can be bestowed, it can as well equally be withdrawn. Prevalent notions of power are therefore heavily criticized in empowerment literature as deliberately discounting structural inequalities within societies (Sato, 2016), related to race, gender, class and others (Rowlands, 1997; VeneKlasen *et al.*, 2002; Riger, 1993). Moreover, they rely on a perspective that sees power driven by individual self-interests and economic cost-benefit thinking (Wood *et al.*, 2021), where gains in power on behalf of some individuals lead to loss in power on behalf of other individuals (Read, 2012). In this context, the promotion of women's empowerment predominantly through means of financial autonomy is denounced as "neoliberalization of feminism" (Prugl, 2015), which imposes the role of the rational "economic man" (Wilson, 1996) upon women – a role that emphasizes agency, mastery and control over others (Riger, 1993). This notion of power promotes a distributive view of power, where individuals compete for scarce individual and collective resources premised on me/us against the other/them (Wood *et al.*, 2021). This exclusive view of power is expressed as "power over" others and "power to" act entirely on one's choices and decisions; coercive forms of power trigger responses of compliance, resistance or manipulation (Rowlands, 1995). Yet, this understanding of empowerment is not shared across cultures. Within collectivist contexts,

notions of power are grounded in underlying cultural collective values such as collaboration, sharing and mutuality (Kreisberg, 1992; Wood *et al.*, 2021). More recent approaches to empowerment hold an inclusive understanding of power that can be shared by many and expanded to diverse actors and communities (Gaventa, 2006; Rowlands, 2016). Literature concerned with development, especially women and development and women in development (Jaquette, 1990; Tinker, 1990), as well as research on community power (Gaventa, 1982; Gaventa, 2006), see the possibility of expansion of power, which can take different forms in different contexts (Rappaport, 1987), as an antecedent of successful empowerment (Page and Czuba, 1999). Therefore, notions of power should equally include more expansive notions of power, as offered by Rowlands (1997), who distinguishes the conventional form from generative expressions of power that connect awareness of individual power interests and goals to the needs and interests of others and the group. Rowlands (1997) defines “power to” as well as “power with” in this category. “Power to” is a form of productive power, a form of creative force for new possibilities and actions (Rowlands, 1997); “power to” enables individuals to be self-determined through power-sharing (Hollander and Offermann, 1990). “Power with” refers to pursuing power in collaboration with others, with and for a group (Rowlands, 1997). Rowlands (1997) also identifies “power from within” as an important root concept of empowerment: here, individuals undo negative social constructions regarding their role and abilities to see themselves as capable and entitled to act and influence decisions. Power from within bases on self-acceptance and self-respect, which extend to respect and acceptance of others as equals. Generative forms of power are not dominated by self-interest, and they involve empowerment of others and the group through individual transformations (Pratto, 2016). A fifth form of power represents “power from”, which has been considered as the capacity of an individual to resist the dominance of others (Hollander and Offermann, 1990; Riger, 1993). Power from does not mean transition of power or require decision-making power and access to scarce resources (Riger, 1993). Instead, it represents the “unrestrained ability (of the individual) to maintain dignity and integrity” (Salzer, 1997, p. 3) and individuals that seek “power from” recognize having inalienable rights that they will not allow to be infringed upon. Power from does not specifically involve access or control over resources or participation in decision-making (see Table 1).

Understanding various conceptualizations of power is pivotal in understanding empowerment outcomes based on individual empowerment goals (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010).

After defining power goals, the next step in Cattaneo and Chapman’s process is action, which is driven by individual subjective goals and the value attached to these goals. Action that generates empowerment cannot be imposed from outside but requires the agency of the individual, who pursues changes based on the perception of her/his own situation. The third process is impact, which involves an individual’s assessment of the consequences his/her previous actions have brought. Consequences are environmental responses regarding actions and an individual’s perception of personal impact. The reflection on impacts would eventually lead to the refinement of goals. Three elements which provide strength/support to

Expressions of power	Meaning
Power over	Dominance over others (Riger, 1993); Controlling power (Rowlands, 1997)
Power to	“Freedom to act” (Riger, 1993); “Productive power” (Rowlands, 1997)
Power with	Tackling problems with a group (Riger, 1993)
Power from	The ability of the individual to resist others (Riger, 1993)
Power from within	Self-respect/spiritual strength (Rowlands, 1997)

**Table 1.**  
Expressions of power

the empowerment process are (1) Self-efficacy, a pivotal link between motivation and performance which is influenced by the social context through opportunities, obstacles and resources presented to the individual; (2) Knowledge, an understanding on behalf of the individual about their own social context, which includes becoming aware of inequalities (Stromquist, 1995), power dynamics and hierarchies as well as insights regarding routes to change the status quo, required resources to attain goals and ways to obtain such resources (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010; Ng, 2008) and (3) Competence, an individual's ability to identify the required skills to reach their goals, awareness of skill deficits and being prepared to learn new skills.

### 3. Methodology

Aligned with the research questions to investigate whether entrepreneurial experiences of women entrepreneurs have had the empowering effects and how the process empowered them, a qualitative methodology based on multiple case studies was adopted (Yin, 2014). This approach is chosen to offer an in-depth explanation, with comprehensive and rich insights on how the real-life environment impacted women empowerment (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013). Multiple cases capture the link between, and uniqueness within, each woman and her venture, thus enabling the development of an understanding of their contextualized empowerment experiences.

#### 3.1 Research context

The UAE has a complex sociocultural environment. At the macro level, with an Islamic culture at its core, this fundamental and ideal framework is reflected in the basic format of the law and other institutions. Loyalty, and the associated concept of reputation, was traditionally familial, more widely community/collective and now, much more recently, also national in scope (Ennis, 2018). An Emirati woman's core responsibility is to care for her children/family and (Islamic) education, this requirement refers to emotional care, rather than acting as a call to the performance of "housework". In recent years, this responsibility is significantly reduced for an individual mother through easy access to support staff (maids, nannies and drivers) and outsourced education. Emirati women are in possession of completely discretionary funds (82% according to Briegel and Zivkovic, 2008) – any money they inherit or make they keep, and commonly receive a further allowance from their husbands (or fathers) for personal spending. Women do not ordinarily contribute to the running costs of the family (Erogul and McCrohan, 2008) – this is the sole responsibility of the husband/father. Most Emirati women, then, are neither short of money nor do they need to work or start their own business out of necessity.

The National Strategy for the Empowerment of Emirati Women in the UAE has a strong focus on the education and empowerment of Emirati women. This initiative was launched by H.H. Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, Chairwoman of the General Women's Union to set plans that will provide a decent living for women and make them creative in all sustainable and developmental fields. The strategy highlights the responsibilities of all sectors including government agencies, the private sector and social organizations to develop initiatives that would empower Emirati women. This country also became the first in the world (in 2019) to empower women in parliamentary work by ensuring 50% of the representation in the Federal National Council are women, with the aim to advance Emirati women's contribution to nation-building. In addition, there are at least 70% of Emirati women enrolled in university and over two-thirds of students who graduate from public universities in the UAE are women, according to the data provided by UAE Gender Balance Council. Notably, there are nine female cabinet ministers in the UAE government, the permanent representative to the UN is a



woman, and women lead several prominent projects – such as the Mars Mission. Additionally, women’s business organizations are in evidence right across the country (Business Women Councils in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah; Women, Women@Work, Mumpreneurs ME, 30% Club GCC, NAMA, CEO Club UAE, International Business Women’s Group, etc.). However, women make up only 28% of the total Emirati workforce and many amongst these unemployed have a strong desire to pursue an entrepreneurial venture (PWC, 2018). Emirati women emphasize non-economic motivations for entrepreneurship, such as “*achievement, independence, personal development, improved social status and contribution to community welfare*” (Tlairs, 2015, p. 566; Boulanouar and Wood, 2018; Boulanouar, 2015). The form that women empowerment might take in this context, where local women are Arab and Muslim, from a “developing” economy, but wealthy and privileged, living in a culture where public life is socioculturally male-gendered, may mean that entrepreneurial success can reflect their inherent feeling of empowerment.

### 3.2 Research approach

Fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with women entrepreneurs located in Al Ain, the oldest city in the country. Al Ain has the highest proportion of Emirati nationals in comparison with expat-dominated cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The oldest university in the country is also in Al Ain and most of its graduates are female. Most papers on aspects of life and culture in the UAE consider residents (e.g. Bodolica and Spraggon, 2015), whereas this study considers Emiratis themselves, and the empowerment process of Emirati women entrepreneurs, specifically. This group can be very difficult to access as they are small in number and cultural and religious conditions need to be considered for interviews to be able to take place (Boulanouar *et al.*, 2017; Sandikci and Ger, 2007). Therefore, the present design responds to the wider calls within the academic literature to speak to the women themselves, to understand their (entrepreneurial) experience (Read and Bartowski, 2000; Alserhan *et al.*, 2015; Wood, 2022).

Three criteria were used for inclusion in the study. Firstly, the Emirati woman must have an established business which has existed for more than 42 months (here the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) classification of an owner/manager of an “established business” is used). This requirement allows the entrepreneur to provide sufficient evidence and experience of her empowerment journey. Second, she must employ at least two full-time workers to show her ability in job creation. Third, she must fully own and manage the business by herself. With the support of Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ADCCI), the research team selected qualified women entrepreneurs from a dataset of 1,585 registered and located in Al Ain. Few women entrepreneurs fulfilled the criteria, as the majority only took part in the business on a part-time or co-owned basis. Many of them are involved in home industry under the Mudi’ah programme (for women involved in creative industries) where they do not offer full-time employment or have official business premises. Due to information confidentiality, an ADCCI small business specialist contacted the potential informants to seek their agreement to participate. Interviews were conducted in their business premises or the ADCCI office. Table 2 outlines the profile of the women entrepreneurs. To triangulate the data, interviews were also conducted with key officers in ADCCI and Abu Dhabi Businesswoman Council to validate the support and services offered to women entrepreneurs.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Based on the interviewees’ preference, the interviews were conducted in Arabic. One of the authors was present but the interviewer was an Arabic-English bilingual female research assistant (a postgraduate student). All the interviewees welcomed research focusing on

**Table 2.**  
Profile of women  
entrepreneurs in  
this study

Name	Age	Education level	Industry	Year founded	# Of staff
Ghada	40	B. Education	Beauty products	2015	2
Fawzya	59	High school	Fashion	2006	2
Aysha	22	B. in Tourism and Public Relations	Handicraft	2016	3
Noura	34	High school	Tailor	2014	4
Fatima	44	High school	Handcraft products	2015	4
Amal	30	Master of Business Administration	Event organizer	2016	4
Naema	37	Master of Business Administration	Emirati restaurant	2013	5
Shamsa	27	Master of Software Engineering	Software	2013	6
Mariam	35	B. Media	Fashion	2014	7
Meera	24	B. Electrical Engineering	Flower shop	2016	8
Muna	35	B. Arts	Abaya andesign	2013	13
Aisha	38	High school	Interior design	2014	16
Salama	45	Bachelor of Architecture Engineering	Architecture	1994	17
Pure	38	B. Business	Fashion	2013	25
Shaikha	28	B. Business administration	Grill restaurant	2013	40

them. They were pleased that researchers from different backgrounds were interested and shared their thoughts openly. This reduced social desirability bias, as they were not drawn to give “better” answers to conform to the societal expectations (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). An interview protocol was used to ensure consistency. The interview questions were translated from English to Arabic and pilot tested with two graduate students who each owned a business. All interviews took between 60 and 120 min and were audio-recorded. Personal observations of the entrepreneurs on how they deal with customers and employees, and their business operations, were included in the interview notes for triangulation purposes.

Structured data analysis was applied to ensure rigour. First, all audio-recorded transcripts and interview notes were transcribed, translated and cross-checked by two Arabic-English bilingual research assistants, then reviewed by the research team, coding the data individually by creating categories from emergent themes related to the empowerment, notes and coded documents were compared to identify possible patterns. Cross-case analysis confirmed that the emerging categories were reliable and valid, allowing the formation of first-order codes, which emerged from the rich data. The iterative process of exploring themes and cases ceased when no new categories could be discerned. Next, Nvivo 12 was used to organize the first-order codes with relevant quotes from the interviews. Based on these codes, themes were identified to generate second-order codes (theoretical categories). Finally, aggregate theoretical dimensions were developed, as illustrated in the Data Structure table (Table 3). This was followed by a robust and lengthy series of meetings to discuss the responses from the interviewees. The robustness of these discussions leveraged the various personal, national and academic backgrounds of the research team as none of the authors are Emirati nationals or native Arabic speakers. From a reflexive perspective, this bricolage of experiences, personalities and expertise was found to be a great strength when it came to developing the model/concepts applied to the data collection and its analysis (Patton, 2002). The authors of this paper represent a plethora of cultural mix elements, which gives them complex identities that they bring to this work and use reflexively as a matter of course. They have all lived amongst Arab populations for lengthy periods, all three have lived and worked in the Gulf, are either Muslim, from majority Muslim countries, or have been married to Arab Muslims for many years. The authors are of Asia Pacific and European origin but view the subject matter from different angles while also understanding the interactions in context (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

**Table 3.**  
Data structure

Creating provisional categories and first order	Theoretical categories (second order)	Aggregate theoretical dimension
Statements about personally meaningful goals and objectives in business; expression of power	Power to Power from Power with	Empowerment goals and related notion of power
Statements about action, process, activities in developing the business; impacts and achievements perceived through the business; future ambitions	Competence Self-efficacy Persistent hard work Emirati culture and confidence	Social concern and community well-being
Statements about sources, support and strengths received in the business	Family Government agencies/ institutions Prior work experiences	Cultural norms of support from family and community

#### 4. Findings

Table 3 shows the development from raw data to the emerging themes (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Using the illustrative fragments of narrative in the form of power quotes, emerging themes from the analysis are elaborated in the following.

##### 4.1 Empowerment goals and related notion of power

The interviewees have thought of their limitations and positions in the society. They set personally meaningful goals through their entrepreneurial ventures. Based on their goals, there are different sets of power relations expressed, though not exclusively (Pettit and McGee, 2019).

*Power to:* Many respondents expressed how they are motivated by their freedom to act in venturing. For example, Mariam, who has a comfortable married life, said,

I wanted to have valuable time, I don't like to be idle - without any tasks. If my children are all grown up, I don't want to sit around and do nothing. Also, I want to give something back to society and give something to the people.

Mariam demonstrates a woman's productive power by challenging the stereotypes of women in this context, with a strong intention to give back to the society through her business. Besides considering personal gain, Mariam also hopes to bring benefits to her society. This shows the influence of collective context and how it interacts with the entrepreneurial endeavour. Similarly, a young lady like Meera stated,

My main motivation was I really wanted to open a business where I can make money and then invest that money and open another business and another!

Meera's entrepreneurial venture provides an opportunity for her to generate more capital for future activities. Both Mariam and Meera exhibited a strong desire to make full use of their abilities and talents. They hope their ventures can bring both economic independence and productive power that would further empower their role in the society while they exercised their freedom to act. The finding reveals how the notion of "power to" is extended to society in this collective context.

*Power from within:* Some interviewees expressed their aim to increase "power from within" to gain self-respect, creating a more equal and inclusive society (Haugh and Talwar, 2016). Salama was one of the first female architects in the city and was offered a job in the municipality, but she decided to open her own firm:

I wanted to improve myself and work in architecture engineering . . . It was a challenge for me because I was the first female architectural engineer at that time. I succeeded after around a year, and I demonstrated that women can do anything.

Salama wanted to change the perception of females as architects in her society to show women can also be successful in a profession usually dominated by males. Similarly, the analysis found others in the group such as Pure:

I like fashion design and I wanted to preserve our traditional Emirati fashion through my designs.

Pure's shop also features Emirati theme in the layout with exclusive area for her lady customers to have tea and socialize. Naeema designed her restaurant with Emirati sitting style to showcase the culture:

There haven't been proper restaurants where people can go out to try an Emirati meal. Most Westerners accept that Middle Eastern cuisine is restricted to the likes of tabboula, fattoush and kannafah. I always wanted to own an Emirati restaurant that served different dishes to those offered elsewhere.

Both Pure and Naeema wanted to change the perception of Emirati tradition either through fashion or food, to show their national pride. They consider it extremely important to help the Emirati culture to sustain through generations, amidst the influences of other cultures in the country. The "power from within" deals with one's sense of identity and self-knowledge. The interviewees found fulfilment in changing the cultural and societal expectations with their choice of occupation and venture. This empowerment goal also intertwined with the collective mindset where tradition and culture are valued and considered when the women strive to gain self-respect.

*Power with:* The ventures were also initiated to focus on tackling problems in the society. Some interviewees were empowered by solving the problems of different social groups (Calás *et al.*, 2009). Shaikha, who owns a restaurant, is using her business to support local farmers:

I wanted to promote the local farmers by ensuring that all the ingredients and supplies that my business needs are sourced from local farmers and suppliers, and I had a goal of expanding my business to other Emirates in the UAE.

The UAE is heavily reliant on fresh produce imported from India and Europe. Local farmers are often neglected in the supply chain due to the small numbers of Emiratis involved in farming. The awareness of the struggles faced by her own people encouraged Shaikha to source food ingredients and supplies directly from them. On the other hand, Shamsa noticed that the younger generation was no longer interested in their classes:

My brothers and sisters are very energetic children. But when they are in class, they always feel bored, which limits their understanding of the concepts. Hence, I came up with the idea of implementing games to help the children learn better – especially in the Arabic language.

Shamsa's willingness and ability to contribute to cognitive development started from her family and then spread to her society when she set up a software development company. It is interesting to note that Shamsa's employees are mostly young graduates who have similar background like her. These findings support the notion that entrepreneurship has the inherent empowering dimension to support people to achieve what they wish to (Calás *et al.*, 2009; Sen, 2001). These women think not just about themselves but about the issues they see within their society while pursuing their own ventures, which is common in this collective context. The discussion above demonstrates how the women relate their venture motivation to empowerment. It is important to note that these power expressions are not exclusive, as we found some women voiced more than one power relation to their venturing experiences. For example, Aysha, who runs a handicraft business, expressed a great sense of "power to" and "power from within":

---

I made my own profit and became a manager of the work I love to do. I work hard and highlight my presence in a particular field, and I said to myself “you are delivering your own message to people that every woman can do it, every lady can be independent.”

Her power to act relates to how the society perceives the role of women. Her abilities to make strategic choices for herself, while also influencing the societal perception of women, are her sources of empowerment in the venturing process.

#### *4.2 Social concern and well-being*

Based on their personal meaningful goals, actions in achieving the power dynamics they were looking for are further explored. In this collective context, where collaboration, sharing and mutuality have pivotal roles (Kreisberg, 1992), there is a clear connection in their empowerment process to the influence of their culture and society. For instance, Aisha, whose first business order was to decorate just one room in her relative’s house, started the business with one staff member. Now she employs 16 people, most of whom are female. The ability to create more jobs allows her to improve the social well-being of others, thus supporting the empowerment of others. Shaikha, who received great support from family and relatives in growing her business, mentioned:

I employ 40 workers now compared to the initial 15. There are plans underway to open a new restaurant branch in Al Ain . . . The long-term plan is to have a chain of restaurants across all the Emirates in the UAE and even establish ourselves across the GCC region. We want to support young people to continue with creative ideas that serve the country.

This shows a keenness to extend their impact throughout the society by providing more jobs and reaching more customer segments. Besides gaining profits through business, their individual drive leads to collective benefits through job creation and serving customers with good products, aligning with Islamic benevolence values (Tlaiss, 2015). The venturing process empowers the women entrepreneurs to pursue the well-being of others in their business, which again reflects the value-base of a collective society.

When asked about the impacts of their business venture, five respondents shared how they feel about themselves today. For instance, Noura, a high-school graduate, went from being unemployed to having her own business employing four other tailors within five years, and feels very proud of her achievements. She considers herself as having more power to act in making her own decisions. She has proven herself, despite early objections from her father:

After all these years, I have a better sense of exploitation, see the importance of work, self-development, and have a constant passion for success. I am able to turn all my mistakes into incentives for excellence and continuity.

Noura’s acknowledgement of mistakes which eventually led to business success demonstrates a sense of responsibility in the decision-making process. Similarly, Mariam, who wanted to show her productive power, noted:

Entrepreneurship is very interesting and important for anyone . . . I gained a lot of experience from my business, even when it wasn’t successful. I learned the value of money and I also taught my children the value of one dirham [unit of currency].

Mariam highlights the value gained from business is beyond the financial aspects but is on lessons she could share and influence her children with. In the same way, Pure feels proud doing her business for the country because she has successfully showcased Emirati fashion to a wider context via social media and television channels. Frequent references to family, relatives, society and country in their venturing success are something unique in this collective context. These women strive to gain acceptance and acknowledgement from people around them, which is not commonly found in masculine venturing, where personal

achievements are being emphasized. Apart from achieving financial independence through the ventures, their voices are also being heard in the society and industry through showcasing the success of their ventures.

Some of them have also refined their goals to broaden their business objectives. For instance, Shaikha, who initially aimed primarily to support local farmers, now wants to develop her business into the best restaurant in the country:

I believe as one dives deep into the business, there are things that she comes to learn and realize that may play a big role in motivation. In my experience, as much as I believe my primary goals have not changed, they have broadened, and I can say an additional motivation is the urge to be the best restaurant around.

Shaikha plans to improve the status of her restaurant after achieving success in supporting local farmers exemplifying her ambitions. Pure also shared:

In the beginning, it was my love for fashion. But now, as my brand is becoming more famous, it has become my duty to show the Emirati culture and fashion to the outside world. I am proud of doing this for my country, UAE.

Both Shaikha and Pure expanded their horizons after accomplishing something. The interviewees discovered new meaning in their ventures when they evaluate the impacts, and this suggests empowerment is an evolving process. There is a strong intention to bring improvement to the society, and also for community welfare, which is often considered in Muslim women contexts (Tlaiss, 2015), where the women found their personal growth and empowerment through helping others to grow (Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021).

#### *4.3 Cultural norms of support from family and community*

In evaluating how women were during the process, our research found that a high level of support came through family and community. Many of them managed to gather sufficient funding prior to starting their business. Pure commented confidently during the interview:

I didn't face any problems because I was lucky enough to have enough capital so that I could afford all the expenses by myself.

Besides Pure, seven respondents have access to financing support from Khalifa Enterprise Development Fund (KEDF) or the local government Mubdia'h project for women involved in creative industries. Apart from finances, some are also well equipped with the resources they need to set up such as sewing machines and manpower through family, as in the case of Noura:

I have a space in the house equipped with several sewing machines and all the tailoring needs and I have the possibilities and the capital and the manpower (my sisters) who have learned with me the art of sewing.

Though the workspace is not big, there is warmth and harmony among the ladies working together. Like Noura, several women also received start-up advice from family members. Their access to resources is commonly based on family and institutions. This shows the prevalent role of the family and institutions in empowering women through their ventures.

Interviewees also gained support from their prior entrepreneurial or work experiences. Meera, who opened a flower shop with funding from the government, had already demonstrated her business success through a home-based business selling biscuits. Some have also been involved in start-up competitions or selling directly, besides undertaking a home-based business. Shamsa worked as an intern in a software firm in Dubai before starting her software development business and she also mentioned:

I was part of the entrepreneurship club at university. I even tried starting my own crafting shop, as I am good at making things.

---

These prior experiences elevated Shamsa's confidence in developing her own venture. Some women used their knowledge of sociocultural norms to their advantage. For example, Shamsa mentioned her father's help to connect with external stakeholders:

Yes, my father helped us greatly in the networking part. He connected us to potential investors and big people in the software gaming industry which pushed us up a lot.

The software industry is male-dominated; thus, it is more convenient to have a male figure to support business negotiations on behalf of a young woman like Shamsa. The use of a male partner may either be a "proxy of belonging" (Stead, 2017) or simply a convenient and culturally acceptable business device, cleverly leveraged by these women to ease their path – particularly where it is expedient and efficient to do so. The norm of women preferring to deal with the same gender is also observed when Aisha shared her target market:

As a local woman I understand what my female clients want. I work with women directly on the ground and know how to realize their ideas.

She can relate to women who only want to engage with a female designer, as this is consistent with the culture. Home decoration is the autonomous area of women, and they are free to creatively express themselves as they see fit. The support from community is apparent and fulfils the call for responsibilities of all sectors to empower Emirati women in the country (Ennis, 2019).

On the other hand, some acknowledged their skill gaps, especially in preparing a sound business plan. They had not considered the cost and revenue aspects carefully and they expressed regret at not having a proper plan as that had caused them some losses in the early stages. An event planner, Amal, failed to develop a proper plan in terms of budget, marketing, human resources management and strategy. Her experience summons up common deficits:

We didn't make any plan for our project, so we didn't know how to organize the budget or how to create good marketing for our company. In addition, we didn't know how to deal with our competitors to keep up and sustain our project. Also, we didn't have any permanent employees, instead we brought in part time ones, this I consider a big mistake.

To overcome their limitations, most of the respondents attended some training courses related to entrepreneurship offered by ADCCI and KEDF. This also expanded the women's business networks by advertising in the Chamber's business directory and joining exhibitions and events from time to time. It is also noted that some women proactively seeking help and expertise, such as Naema, who paid to learn how to do accounts for her business and Salama, picking up leadership and management courses as she expands her architectural firm. The findings suggest that the women in this collective context receive good support from family and community that strengthens their abilities in the empowerment process.

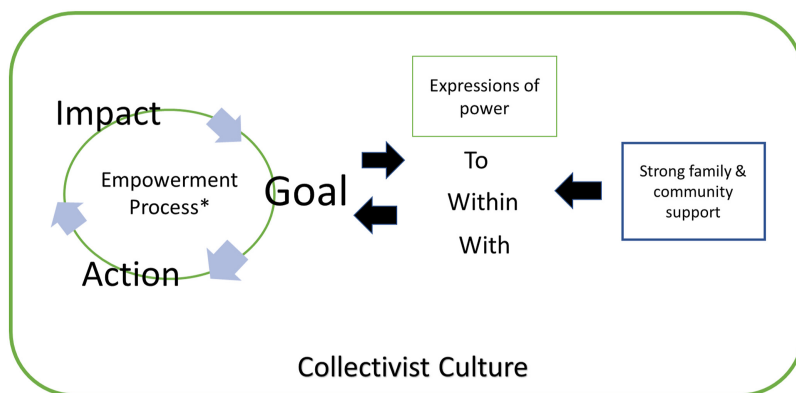
The three themes identified in the findings illustrate the important elements for women venturing in a collective society and how they support empowerment. From identifying the empowerment goals and notion of power, the women entrepreneurs frequently refer to the motivations and impacts in the society. During the venturing process, they are driven by social concern and community well-being, where their entrepreneurial ventures empower them to empower others. Finally, the cultural norms of support from family and community are the strong pillars that allow empowerment to take place.

## 5. Discussion

By exploring and analyzing the processes and elements involved in entrepreneurship, this paper examines whether the women entrepreneurs experienced empowering effects. Our findings provide new insights into the empowerment process in a collective context, as

demonstrated in Figure 2, where the model reflects the benefits of its format for application to a varied and complex culture, such as that of the UAE, through its iterative nature and the flexibility of possible weightings on the key focus areas (empowerment process, expression of power, collectivist culture, strong support from family and community support). The notion of empowerment, derived from the findings, interrogates the emphasis and sources of power, reflecting the balance in this context. It is common in many non-Western societies that the source of power is the family/tribe/nation and attribution of gain is also considered collectively – achievements are wider than the self. In the present context, the understanding and distribution of power are clear, with three of Rowlands’s (1995) types of power emphasized, and two going completely unarticulated. VeneKlasen *et al.* (2002) note that “power to” and “power with” are referred to as agency – the ability to act and change the world – by scholars writing about development and social change (p. 45). They further note that “power to”, “power with” and “power within” – the three major categories identified in our sample – offer ways that create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships and provide individuals with basic principles for constructing empowering strategies. Perhaps “power over” and “power from” are less emphasized in our respondents as in Islamic teaching the normative model for success in this life and beyond is not a male one (Boulanouar, 2006) but a genderless Muslim one – the central measure of success is how good a Muslim you are, rather than how good a male or female Muslim. This basic difference in point of comparison/measure allows an opportunity for a different formula for empowerment to arise – one which does not sacralize the state of manhood. The findings break away from the underlying assumptions in entrepreneurship literature regarding a male and individualist norm of empowerment which bases predominantly on coercive power (“power over” and “power to”) (Rowlands, 1995) towards an enactment of power where goals, actions and impacts are reflected in a collectivist “pattern” of power.

This catalogue of the lived experiences of Emirati women in their established ventures highlights empowerment in this context and shows how the nuanced experience of local women in the UAE could be completely misread (or left entirely unread) by a failure to reweight elements. Hence, what the paper attempts to do with the Collective Empowerment Process Framework (Figure 2), articulated here as a left-to-right process, is to effectively measure the society it is being applied to. As such, the empowerment process is at the centre of the impact, action and goal cycle – this reflects the iterative nature of the empowerment process. Surrounding the entire process is collective culture, interacting and reflecting with each element of the process. Actions and impacts interact with goals and are reflected in



**Figure 2.**  
The collective empowerment process framework

Source(s): \*Adapted from Catteneo and Chapman Model (2010)



culture, which privileges which expressions of power are dominant. In our case, power to, with and within are leveraged to develop Collective Empowerment, and this is reinforced and supported by strong family and community support.

The findings demonstrate how empowerment can look inside a collective society, that empowerment of the “me” (individual) also works for the empowerment of the “we” (the society). This reflects socialization of a relational self from childhood, meaning that people seek change through consultation (shura) and receive both permission and power from the group. An iterative process of growth allows incremental changes in both individual sociocultural experience and collective sociocultural structure – a collective empowerment. In this way, the three forms of power which dominate our context are not exclusive. Although the measures are individualized, our cases all had a collective reference to empowerment, and so the feelings of power, and empowerment, vary by person.

Family, tribe and nation provide the cumulative reputation for Emiratis and are a definitive power source, and, in contrast to many people and entrepreneurs in all nations, Emirati Muslim women are remarkably confident and self-assured. They also demonstrated the virtue of persistent hard work that helps to realize self-achievement (Sen, 2001). They have set up businesses, have aimed to help others through their business and have also tackled problems in the business. There is a strong sense of social concern and community well-being when evaluating their achievements (Calás *et al.*, 2009; Sen, 1990). This reveals that the women consider their success through the lens of collective well-being (Sidani, 2018; Taiss and McAdam, 2021). A further group extend the “power from within” aspect of empowerment by pursuing national pride through their entrepreneurial contributions, where they expanded their empowerment horizon (Haug and Talwar, 2016; Pettit and McGee, 2019).

Support mechanisms revealed in the findings suggest that the women in the present study do not identify barriers as gender-related but attribute issues to other sources. This does not discount gender barriers existing but it does suggest they are not identified in this way by the respondents. Perhaps the clear gender separation, prevalent in the context, assists this perception of a relevant yardstick which, in this case, would not be male. Therefore, the standard normative measure of male experience in this context may be deemed irrelevant to their processes or pathway to success. They show no timidity or fear in doing the business, they simply up-skill when they think they need to. On the other hand, the understanding of sociocultural norms backed them either through finding a niche in the market or seeking support. There is a wide range of assistance and resources provided by the institutions through family, funding agencies or universities, as well as women’s business organizations throughout the country. Additionally, entrepreneurship is explicitly supported in Islamic teaching/governance – being emphasized as community building through job creation and supporting community by providing goods and services that the community can benefit from (Sadeq, 1991) – and so both culturally and religiously pursuit of business is supported, and corporate social responsibility and societal concerns are considered within Islam’s moral economy (Katsioloudes and Brodtkorb, 2007; Mellahi and Rettab, 2019). The findings highlight the point that researchers must be careful not to impose their own cultural norms onto their analyses and thereby run the risk of misreading their data (Boulanouar *et al.*, 2017; Gallant and Ponder, 2008), but rather “critically contextualize” (Gümüşay, 2015, p. 206). The women entrepreneurs in this context received good support in pursuing their ventures and gaining a sense of empowerment.

## 6. Conclusion

In addition to providing a framework to reformulate an understanding of empowerment for a collective context, the study makes several contributions to the literature and highlights policy implications.

First, this contextual study of Emirati women entrepreneurship in the UAE presents the opportunity to “spotlight conditions” within it (Henry *et al.*, 2015, p. 233), adding to the understanding of entrepreneurial experiences and their possible empowerment effects. Women entrepreneurship in the Gulf contributes to both the economy and the reputation of the nation (Ennis, 2019). Power relations matter to social change and consequently the power people seek to achieve (Suarez, 2018). The study expands on the *a priori* assumption in prevailing empowerment discourses that engagement in entrepreneurial and productive activities by women are, *per se*, positive and essential for their empowerment. Little attention has been paid to power relations inherent in the entrepreneurial discourse and understanding (Da Costa and Silva, 2012; Ogbor, 2000), which reflect in expected power goals and ultimately “decide” whether empowerment is considered a success or a failure. What is typically perceived as empowering is filtered through the hegemonic view regarding entrepreneurship that Da Costa and Silva (2012) describe as an “entrepreneurial model that is capitalist, Western, white, male heterosexual, of European or North-American origin” (p. 589). Hence, this study extends the current literature by offering a fresh look at empowerment in a non-American/Western and collective context. Policymakers are therefore encouraged to consider the contextual environment when deciding on policies to support and empower women entrepreneurs. Instead of following examples in the Western countries, solutions should be redesigned to fit the specific context (Zayadin *et al.*, 2020; Wood *et al.*, 2021).

Second, entrepreneurship literature predominantly focuses on the power elements of “power to” and “power over”; however, our findings revealed the sources of power to be “power to” (performative power), “power with” (group/community/collective power) and “power from within” (self-efficacy). The present paper highlights the rich complexity of empowerment and recognizes it as a process, with steps forward (and sometimes, back) in a synergistic, multidimensional and iterative growth and development process as framed in the model. This process uses different power goals at different stages; the power goals that women entrepreneurs set have been shown to be collective goals, with individual goals within – thereby illustrating that there are other ways to look at sources of power and, therefore, both sources and outcomes of/for empowerment. As such, policymakers need to view empowerment in its iterative nature and its relationship to structural, societal and sociocultural change – incremental steps in different parts of the framework iteratively come together to result in significant and fundamental changes in the lived reality of the society at a macro level, as the respondent entrepreneurs have illustrated.

Third, the present study reveals the need for entrepreneurship research to expand existing perspectives about the role of venturing for individual empowerment. As researchers like Batliwala (1994), Kabeer (2005), Malhotra and Schuler (2005) and others show, women empowerment also requires systemic transformations of patriarchal structures and male-dominated institutions. Here lies a chance for entrepreneurship research to overcome the historical masculinization of their own discipline, which reflects in an emphasis on male constructions of entrepreneurs and venturing and which informs prevalent understandings of the right entrepreneurial behaviour and definitions of entrepreneurial success (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Female agency via entrepreneurial actions, notably through opportunity recognition and exploitation (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), is clearly not sufficient for women to be empowered, especially when the vehicles to achieve empowerment goals, notably entrepreneurship itself and underlying assumptions and beliefs behind entrepreneurship, are highly gendered (Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Following Batliwala (1994), women entrepreneurship should go further than economic empowerment and provide an approach to challenge (neoliberal) economic powers; it represents an emancipatory tool to challenge the system of (patriarchal) power. For entrepreneurship scholars, it is crucial to understand the actual influence that women have over external actions critical for their

welfare, and this requires that future research acknowledge the arrangements in the field which compel women to make certain choices, and not others.

The study acknowledges that women entrepreneurship in any form (home-based or outside the home) reduces pressure on the state that is both social and economic. It is common for women to feel competing pressures to contribute to the GDP of their nation, while also facing greater sociocultural expectations regarding “hearth and home”. Recognizing that these pressures come from both male and female sources is important, as is the acknowledgement of the macro-socio-economic pressures women operate within when examining their lived experience as entrepreneurs and considering policy development related to their participation (Ennis, 2019). The kind of examination and understanding provided in the present study allows a more nuanced view of the coexistence of competing realities and narratives within the gendered context, and how they are possible.

The study ultimately draws attention to policymaking, especially with regard to international development efforts. Here, empowerment frameworks need to be sensitive to the interconnectedness of culture with different notions of power and self (Wood *et al.*, 2021) that development programmes aiming at women empowerment can be applied across different settings. Such an approach would allow for broader definitions of female power; equally, empowerment outcomes would benefit from context-specific measures that are aligned with cultural contexts and women’s own norms and expectations. Policies and programmes aimed at women empowerment need to be reflective of opportunities and challenges in specific contexts, touching on normative values and different representations of women identities. Women empowerment is multidimensional and interlaced with global variations of governance, institutions, and socio-economic stages of development, which require policymakers and programme designers to also engage openly, albeit critically, with individual as well as sociocultural and epistemological foundations of how empowerment is conceived and interpreted. There cannot be a single and universally valid consensus regarding women empowerment.

The study poses some limitations and suggests possible avenues for future research. As it is a qualitative study using a cross-sectional design, the findings presented may lack wide generalizability. However, our aim, as is common to qualitative research studies, is to investigate a context and provide a considered commentary on what is found based on data collected from primary sources. We look at research on women entrepreneurship in this collectivist society. The authors conducted interviews with a limited number of women under very specific parameters (in line with GEM’s delineations), all of whom had established businesses. The majority of these businesses were in the so-called feminized industries (such as food, clothing and care). This raises a potential research area which could look at whether occupying so-called masculinized industries or fields of business would represent a more substantial model of empowerment, or if it would for women in this study – given the gender-separated nature of society in the context. Further, the relationship between empowerment and business categories would contribute important insights to this literature. There is, however, much to be learned from businesses which were not successful. As well, the study looked specifically at Emirati Nationals – support, opportunities and other conditions may well be quite different for expats in the country. Several suggestions can be made for future research on the collective – how far does the trust/inclusion boundary extend and how strong it is at each point – family, tribe, nation, citizen, resident, etc.? How does empowerment extend across the society – or it is just shifting the traditional labour burdens from one group to another (Afiuni *et al.*, 2013)? Although there was little direct reference to religion from our respondents, there is room to investigate religious influence much more extensively. For example, gender separation/norms in the context are very influential and foundationally understood in religious terms. The significant influence of this separation on spaces, choices and perceived potentialities could be a rich area for future research. Continued study of the shape of the UAE’s development, the

process of empowerment as it develops, and the navigation of the way through competing tensions of state and market, traditional and progressive, global and local, as [Emmis \(2019\)](#) puts it, is both an obligation and a rich research area for future focus.

## References

- Afiouni, F., Karam, C.M. and El-Hajj, H. (2013), "The HR value proposition model in the Arab Middle East: identifying the contours of an Arab Middle Eastern HR model", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 24 No. 10, pp. 1895-1932.
- Ahl, H., Berglund, K., Pettersson, K. and Tillmar, M. (2016), "From feminism to FemIncism: on the uneasy relationship between feminism, entrepreneurship and the Nordic welfare state", *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 369-392.
- Ahl, H. and Marlow, S. (2012), "Exploring the dynamics of gender, feminism and entrepreneurship: advancing debate to escape a dead end?", *Organization*, Vol. 19 No. 5, pp. 543-562.
- Ahl, H. and Marlow, S. (2021), "Exploring the false promise of entrepreneurship through a postfeminist critique of the enterprise policy discourse in Sweden and the UK", *Human Relations*, Vol. 74 No. 1, pp. 41-68.
- Al-Dajani, H. and Marlow, S. (2013), "Empowerment and entrepreneurship: a theoretical framework", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, Vol. 19 No. 5, pp. 503-524.
- Alkhaled, S. and Berglund, K. (2018), "'And now I'm free': women's empowerment and emancipation through entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia and Sweden", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 30 Nos 7-8, pp. 877-900.
- Alserhan, B.A., Halkias, D., Boulanouar, A.W., Dayan, M. and Alserhan, O.A. (2015), "Expressing herself through brands: the Arab woman's perspective", *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 36-53.
- Alsop, R., Heinsohn, N. and Somma, A. (2004), *Measuring Empowerment: An Analytic Framework. Power, Rights, and Poverty: Concepts and Connections*, World Bank/DFID, Washington, DC, London, p. 120.
- Barragan, S., Eroglu, M.S. and Essers, C. (2018), "'Strategic (dis) obedience': female entrepreneurs reflecting on and acting upon patriarchal practices", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 575-592.
- Bastian, B. and Zali, M.R. (2016), "The impact of institutional quality on social networks and performance of entrepreneurs", *Small Enterprise Research*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 151-171.
- Bastian, B.L., Metcalfe, B.D. and Zali, M.R. (2019), "Gender inequality: entrepreneurship development in the MENA region", *Sustainability*, Vol. 11 No. 22, p. 6472.
- Batliwala, S. (1994), "The meaning of women's empowerment: new concepts from action", in Sen, G., Germaine, A. and Chen, L.C. (Eds), *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights*, Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, Harvard.
- Bodolica, V. and Spraggon, M. (2015), "Life on heels and making deals", *Management Decision*, Vol. 53 No. 5, pp. 984-1004.
- Boulanouar, B. (2006), "The notion of modesty in Muslim women's clothing: an Islamic point of view", *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 8 No. 2, p. 134.
- Boulanouar, A.W. (2015), "Islamic marketing and branding: thinking outside the box", *International Journal of Islamic Marketing and Branding*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 123-130.
- Boulanouar, A.W., Aitken, R., Boulanouar, Z. and Todd, S.J. (2017), "Imperatives for research designs with Muslim women", *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 2-17.
- Boulanouar, Z. and Wood, B.P. (2018), "Towards a theory on the place of goods and services in Islamic marketing", *International Journal of Islamic Marketing and Branding*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 175-182.
- Briegel, T. and Zivkovic, J. (2008), "Financial empowerment of women in the United Arab Emirates", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 87-99.

- Brush, C.G., De Bruin, A. and Welter, F. (2009), "A gender-aware framework for women's entrepreneurship", *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 8-24.
- Calás, M.B., Smircich, L. and Bourne, K.A. (2009), "Extending the boundaries: reframing 'entrepreneurship as social change' through feminist perspectives", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 552-569.
- Cattaneo, L.B. and Chapman, A.R. (2010), "The process of empowerment: a model for use in research and practice", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 65 No. 7, pp. 646-659.
- Da Costa, A.D.S.M. and Silva, S.L.A. (2012), "Hegemonic discourses on entrepreneurship as an ideological mechanism for the reproduction of capital", *Organization*, Vol. 19 No. 5, pp. 587-614.
- Duflo, E. (2012), "Women empowerment and economic development", *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 50 No. 4, pp. 1051-1079.
- Ennis, C.A. (2018), "Reading entrepreneurial power in small Gulf states: Qatar and the UAE", *International Journal*, Vol. 73 No. 4, pp. 573-595.
- Ennis, C.A. (2019), "The gendered complexities of promoting female entrepreneurship in the Gulf", *New Political Economy*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 365-384.
- Erogul, M.S. and McCrohan, D. (2008), "Preliminary investigation of Emirati women entrepreneurs in the UAE", *African Journal of Business Management*, Vol. 2 No. 10, pp. 177-185.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006), "Five misunderstandings about case-study research", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 219-245.
- Gaddefors, J. and Anderson, A.R. (2017), "Entrepreneurship and context: when entrepreneurship is greater than entrepreneurs", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 267-278.
- Gallant, M. and Pounder, J.S. (2008), "The employment of female nationals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)", *Education, Business and Society Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 26-33.
- Ganle, J.K., Afriyie, K. and Segbefia, A.Y. (2015), "Microcredit: empowerment and disempowerment of rural women in Ghana", *World Development*, Vol. 66, pp. 335-345.
- Garikipati, S. (2013), "Microcredit and women's empowerment: have we been looking at the wrong indicators?", *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 41 No. Suppl. 1, pp. S53-S75.
- Gaventa, J. (1982), *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago.
- Gaventa, J. (2006), "Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis", *Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Bulletin*, Vol. 37 No. 6, pp. 23-33.
- Gill, R. and Ganesh, S. (2007), "Empowerment, constraint, and the entrepreneurial self: a study of white women entrepreneurs", *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, Vol. 35 No. 3, pp. 268-293.
- Gioia, D., Patvardhan, S., Hamilton, A. and Corley, K. (2013), "Organizational identity formation and change", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 7 No. 1.
- Glesne, C. (2006), *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*, Pearson, Boston.
- Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) (2020), "Global entrepreneurship monitor 2019/2020 global report", available at: <https://www.gemconsortium.org/file/open?fileId=50443> (accessed 30 June 2020).
- Gray, K.R. and Finley-Hervey, J. (2005), "Women and entrepreneurship in Morocco: debunking stereotypes and discerning strategies", *The International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 203-217.
- Gümüşay, A.A. (2015), "Entrepreneurship from an Islamic perspective", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 130 No. 1, pp. 199-208.
- Harris, J.D., Sapienza, H.J. and Bowie, N.E. (2009), "Ethics and entrepreneurship", *Journal of Business Venturing*, Vol. 24 No. 5, pp. 407-418.

- Haugh, H.M. and Talwar, A. (2016), "Linking social entrepreneurship and social change: the mediating role of empowerment", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 133 No. 4, pp. 643-658.
- Henry, C., Foss, L., Fayolle, A., Walker, E. and Duffy, S. (2015), "Entrepreneurial leadership and gender: exploring theory and practice in global contexts", *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 53 No. 3, pp. 581-586.
- Hollander, E.P. and Offermann, L.R. (1990), "Power and leadership in organizations: relationships in transition", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 45 No. 2, p. 179.
- Jaquette, J. (1990), "Gender and justice in economic development", in Irene, T. (Ed.), *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*, Oxford University Press, London, pp. 54-69.
- Jennings, J.E., Jennings, P.D. and Sharifian, M. (2016), "Living the dream? Assessing the 'entrepreneurship as emancipation' perspective in a developed region", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 81-110.
- Kabeer, N. (2005), "Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third millennium development goals", *Gender and Development*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 13-24.
- Katsioloudes, M.I. and Brodtkorb, T. (2007), "Corporate social responsibility: an exploratory study in the United Arab Emirates", *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, Vol. 72 No. 4, p. 9.
- Kreisberg, S. (1992), *Transforming Power: Domination, Empowerment, and Education*, SUNY, New York.
- Lombardini, S. and McCollum, K. (2018), "Using internal evaluations to measure organisational impact: a meta-analysis of Oxfam's women's empowerment projects", *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 145-170.
- Malhotra, A. and Schuler, S.R. (2005), "Women's empowerment as a variable in international development. Measuring empowerment", *Cross-disciplinary Perspectives*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 71-88.
- Marlow, S., Henry, C. and Carter, S. (2009), "Exploring the impact of gender upon women's business ownership: introduction", *International Small Business Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 139-148.
- Marlow, S. and Swail, J. (2014), "Gender, risk and finance: why can't a woman be more like a man?", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 26 Nos 1-2, pp. 80-96.
- Maxwell, J.A. (2005), *Qualitative Research Design, An Expanded Sourcebook*, Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Mehtap, S. and Al-Saidi, A.G. (2019), *Informal Refugee Entrepreneurship: Narratives of Economic Empowerment in Informal Ethnic Entrepreneurship*, Springer, Cham, pp. 225-242.
- Mellahi, K. and Rettab, B. (2019), "CSR in the Middle East: from philanthropy to modern CSR", in *Practising CSR in the Middle East*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 39-51.
- Metcalf, B.D. (2011), "Women, empowerment and development in Arab Gulf states: a critical appraisal of governance, culture and national human resource development (HRD) frameworks", *Human Resource Development International*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 131-148.
- Mosedale, S. (2005), "Assessing women's empowerment: towards a conceptual framework", *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 243-257.
- Narayan, D. (Ed.) (2005), *Measuring Empowerment. Cross Disciplinary Perspectives*, The World Bank, Washington, District of Columbia.
- Ng, P.Y. (2008), "Learning organization dimensions on knowledge sharing: a study of faculty members in the private universities in Malaysia", *Paper Presented at the International Conference on Business and Information*, Seoul, 7-9 July.
- Nussbaum, M.C. (2011), *Creating Capabilities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Ogbor, J.O. (2000), "Mythicizing and reification in entrepreneurial discourse ideology critique of entrepreneurial studies", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 5, pp. 605-635.
- Ojediran, F.O. and Anderson, A. (2020), "Women's entrepreneurship in the global south: empowering and emancipating?", *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 10 No. 4, p. 87.

- 
- Page, N. and Czuba, C.E. (1999), "Empowerment: what is it", *Journal of Extension*, Vol. 37, pp. 1-5.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002), *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Perez, C.C. (2019), *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Random House, New York.
- Pettit, J. and McGee (2019), "Introduction: power, empowerment and social change. Rethinking power in critical times", in McGee, R. and Pettit, J. (Eds), *Power, Empowerment and Social Change*, Routledge.
- Pratto, F. (2016), "On power and empowerment", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 1-20.
- Prugl, E. (2015), "Neoliberalising feminism", *New Political Economy*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 614-631.
- PWC (2018), "Women in work index. Insights from Middle East and North Africa", available at: <https://www.pwc.com/ml/en/publications/documents/women-in-work-index.pdf> (accessed 30 June 2020).
- Rappaport, J. (1987), "Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: toward a theory for community psychology", *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 15, pp. 121-148.
- Read, J.H. (2012), "Is power zero-sum or variable-sum? Old arguments and new beginnings", *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 5-31.
- Read, J.N.G. and Bartkowski, J.P. (2000), "To veil or not to veil? A case study of identity negotiation among Muslim women in Austin, Texas", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 395-417.
- Riger, S. (1993), "What's wrong with empowerment", *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 279-292.
- Rowlands, J. (1995), "Empowerment examined", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 5 No. 2.
- Rowlands, J. (1997), *Questioning Empowerment*, Oxfam, Oxford.
- Rowlands, J. (2016), "Power in practice: bringing understandings and analysis of power into development action in Oxfam", *Institute of Development Studies (ISD) Bulletin*, Vol. 47 No. 5, pp. 119-130.
- Sadeq, A.H.M. (1991), *Economic Development in Islam, Australia*, Pelanduk Publications.
- Salzer, M.S. (1997), "Consumer empowerment in mental health organizations: concept, benefits, and impediments", *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, Vol. 24 No. 5, pp. 425-434.
- Sandıkçı, Ö. and Ger, G. (2007), "Constructing and representing the Islamic consumer in Turkey", *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 11 Nos 2-3, pp. 189-210.
- Sato, C. (2016), "Two frontiers of development? A transnational feminist analysis of public-private partnerships for women's empowerment", *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 10, pp. 150-167.
- Schumpeter, J.A. (1983), "The theory of economic development", in Elliott, J.E. (Ed.), *With a New Introduction*, Routledge.
- Sen, A. (1990), *More than 100 Million Women Are Missing*, Review of Book, New York.
- Sen, A. (2001), *Development as Freedom*, Oxford Paperbacks, Oxford.
- Shane, S. and Venkataraman, S. (2000), "The promise of entrepreneurship as a field of research", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25, pp. 217-226.
- Sidani, Y.M. (2018), *Muslim Women at Work. Religious Discourses in Arab Society*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stead, V. (2017), "Belonging and women entrepreneurs: women's navigation of gendered assumptions in entrepreneurial practice", *International Small Business Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 61-77.
- Stromquist, N.P. (1995), "The theoretical and practical bases for empowerment", in Medel-Anonuevo, C. (Ed.), *Women, Education and Empowerment: Pathways towards Autonomy*, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg.

- Suarez, C. (2018), *The Power Manual: How to Master Complex Power Dynamics*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, British Columbia.
- Sutter, C., Bruton, G.D. and Chen, J. (2019), "Entrepreneurship as a solution to extreme poverty: a review and future research directions", *Journal of Business Venturing*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 197-214.
- Tinker, I. (Ed.) (1990), *Persistent Inequalities*, University Press, New York.
- Tlaiss, H.A. (2015), "How Islamic business ethics impact women entrepreneurs: insights from four Arab Middle Eastern countries", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 129 No. 4, pp. 859-877.
- Tlaiss, H.A. and McAdam, M. (2021), "Islam, Arab women's entrepreneurship and the construal of success", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 821-844.
- UAE Government (2014), "Vision 2021", available at: <https://www.vision2021.ae/en/publications>.
- United Nations (2018), "UN women. Annual report 2017/18", available at: <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/annual%20report/attachments/sections/library/un-women-annual-report-2017-2018-en.pdf?vs=2849> (accessed 30 June 2020).
- VeneKlasen, L., Miller, V., Budlender, D. and Clark, C. (2002), *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, World Neighbours, Oklahoma City.
- Verduijn, K. and Essers, C. (2013), "Questioning dominant entrepreneurship assumptions: the case of female ethnic minority entrepreneurs", *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, Vol. 25 Nos 7-8, pp. 612-630.
- Welter, F. (2011), "Contextualizing entrepreneurship – conceptual challenges and ways forward", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 165-184.
- Welter, F., Baker, T. and Wirsching, K. (2019), "Three waves and counting: the rising tide of contextualisation in entrepreneurship research", *Small Business Economics*, Vol. 52 No. 2.
- Welter, F., Xheneti, M. and Smallbone, D. (2018), "Entrepreneurial resourcefulness in unstable institutional contexts: the example of European Union borderlands", *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 23-53.
- Wilson, P.A. (1996), "Empowerment: community economic development from the inside out", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 33 Nos 4-5, pp. 617-630.
- Wood, B.P. (2022), "Beyond decolonising – some thoughts on the future of marketing/ marketing research in the Gulf/ME/NA region", *Arab Economic and Business Journal*, Vol. 14 No. 1.
- Wood, B.P., Ng, P.Y. and Bastian, B.L. (2021), "Hegemonic conceptualizations of empowerment in entrepreneurship and their suitability for collective contexts", *Administrative Sciences*, Vol. 11 No. 1, p. 28.
- World Economic Forum (2019), "Global gender gap report 2018: middle East and North Africa", available at: <https://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/middle-east-and-north-africa/>.
- Yin, R.K. (2014), *Case Study Research: Design and Method*, 5th ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Zayadin, R., Zucchella, A., Ameen, N. and Duckworth, C. (2020), "Entrepreneurs contextualisation of culture a national setting", *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, Vol. 26 No. 8, pp. 1661-1683.

**Corresponding author**

Bronwyn P. Wood can be contacted at: [bwood@uaeu.ac.ae](mailto:bwood@uaeu.ac.ae)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)