

Strategy And Entrepreneurship In Arab Countries

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Female entrepreneurship in the United Arab Emirates: Legislative encouragements and cultural constraints

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SYNOPSIS

Onlookers from outside the Middle East tend to view the region as an essentially hostile environment for women in non-traditional roles. While this perspective may be valid in certain contexts, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sets new standards of support for women in business ventures as it attempts to engage all its citizens in the economic and social development of this rapidly changing country. The present survey paper overviews for the international reader four key areas affecting the success of UAE female entrepreneurship: (1) the legislative attempts to enhance female entrepreneurial achievement; (2) the socio-cultural realities constraining women in business ventures; (3) the impact of the UAE's strongly collectivist culture on business networking among women; (4) UAE women's motivation for entrepreneurial endeavor given the abundant options for more secure employment.

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Introduction

The purpose of this survey paper is to highlight for the international reader some of the unique realities which impact on female entrepreneurship in the UAE. These issues depict a scenario of a particular kind of female empowerment against a backdrop of what to Western eyes would be regarded as significant female disempowerment. What makes the UAE a compelling context for studying female entrepreneurship is that it is a country in which traditional female roles are privileged, yet it is also the country with the world's highest rate of females in third-level education. This latter fact results from government agencies prioritizing female engagement in business and public ventures in the attempt to replace some of the country's vast numbers of foreign workers with UAE citizens. Traditionally social values have curtailed female activity outside the home but recent robust government intervention has sought to mold a rapidly developing economy in which female figures can rise to public forums, while at the same time adhering to traditionally enshrined female roles. In our survey, we look at the

increasingly important activity practice of networking in an environment where female movement is curtailed and family-based and single-gender networking is overriding. We also summarize the factors that motivate Emirati women to become entrepreneurs in a country which offers them more secure sources of income such as the government sector, and we illustrate the empowering role of business education for UAE women.

Business women in UAE history

In the pre-oil era, the UAE's economy revolved largely around pearl diving, fishing, and maritime trading. These were publicly regarded as strictly male-only activities. However, it was not uncommon to find women engaging in these commercial pursuits when they had no male provider to help care for their children as a result of divorce, widowhood, or husbands engaging in distant commercial maritime activities (Ebrahim et al., 2008). During this period, some local women owned many ships and others conducted trading (Abu Nasr, Khoury, & Azzam, 1985). However, such women did not negotiate directly with non-related males but required a male family member to act as intermediary. Their

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