



# The connective strategies of Bedouin women entrepreneurs in the Negev

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## ABSTRACT

The study examines various forms of entrepreneurship of the Negev Bedouin women, mostly within the urban settings, in order to determine strategies applied in their entrepreneurial development. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with 28 women entrepreneurs, interviews with representatives of institutions supporting entrepreneurship and on participatory observations. The research draws on existing ethnic entrepreneurship theories and the family-embeddedness perspective, which allows for consideration of the relation between economic processes and family system characteristics and transformations which occur simultaneously and have reciprocal impact.

The Bedouin women entrepreneurs are found to operate mainly within their urban ethnic enclaves, whereby difficult economic conditions combined with gender pressures create a mostly informal sector that complements insufficiencies of the formal market.

These women develop their businesses by applying specific patriarchal connectivity strategies, which were developed due to strong impact of familial factors, such as: transitions in family structure, accessibility to family financial and human resources, adherence to the social codes and values. The impact of the last factor is visible on two levels: gender-separation of economic activities and networks (products and services addressed to women and children) and different roles of male and female family members. Whereas female members become employees or assistants, the male members keep their patriarchal positions as protectors and facilitators between the social requirements and exigencies of the economic activities. The connective strategies of Bedouin women entrepreneurs aim strongly at fulfilling their social roles as women, mothers and wives within the patriarchal order and as such, they bridge the gap between the strategies that previously accommodated desert condition subsistence living and the exigencies of the market economy of their contemporary semi-urban desert environment.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. General definition of the problem

This study examines various forms of entrepreneurship of the Negev Bedouin women, mostly within the urban settings, in order to determine strategies applied in their entrepreneurial development. These women constitute a social group in Israel which suffers from a double marginalization – as Arab minority in a Jewish State and as women within a patriarchal tribal society (Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2016). However, so far, there has been little scholarly work done in order to investigate current economic developments of these Bedouin women, specifically their entrepreneurial activities, notwithstanding, with a closer look at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and entrepreneurship in the Negev Bedouin context.

Minority women entrepreneurship, specifically Arab and Muslim women, have received scarce attention by scholars (De Vita et al.,

2014), though research on female entrepreneurship in the non-European contexts has been growing since 2003 (Henry et al., 2016). Application of qualitative methods of investigation and paying more attention to the contexts in which women's business activities are embedded have allowed for better understanding of the great heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs and the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, religion and entrepreneurship; for instance: Essers and Benschop (2009), Al-Dajani and Marlow (2010), Tlaiss (2015).

The Bedouin women entrepreneurs researched in this study were found to operate mainly within their urban ethnic enclaves where difficult political-economic conditions combined with social pressures create a mostly informal sector; which complements insufficiencies of the formal labour market.

Considering previous studies on women's agency and strategies applied in business relative to their embeddedness in differing contexts (for example Shelton (2006), Brush et al. (2014), Roig et al. (2016)), our study aims at revealing the specific practices that Bedouin women

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use in navigating between their enterprises and contextual constraints and opportunities. This research found that Bedouin women operate their businesses by applying specific patriarchal connectivity strategies, which were developed due to strong impact of familial factors, such as: transitions in family structure, accessibility to family financial and human resources, adherence to the social codes and values. The impact of the last factor is visible on two levels: gender-separation of economic activities and networks (products and services addressed to women and children) and different roles of male and female family members. Whereas female members become employees or assistants, the male members keep their patriarchal positions as protectors and facilitators between the social requirements and exigencies of the economic activities.

This research contributes to the growing body of scholarly work on women entrepreneurs with applied qualitative methods of investigation focusing on their embeddedness and the interplay between contexts and the entrepreneurial processes. By focusing on the family embeddedness of the Bedouin women within their socio-cultural, family environment, this study will add to the extant body of knowledge on the contextualised women entrepreneurship shedding more light on the nature of gendered practices in business and enriching the currently scarce scholarship on minority ethnic women entrepreneurship and on the Bedouin women in Israel specifically.

### 1.2. Theoretical approach of entrepreneurship as a process embedded in context

This research contributes to the growing body of scholarly work on women entrepreneurs with applied qualitative methods of investigation, with focus on their embeddedness and the interplay between contexts and the entrepreneurial processes.

In the entrepreneurial theory, both individual action of entrepreneur and organizational operation are seen as dependent on their surrounding environment of institutions and social relations, which is called embeddedness. This term has been introduced by Karl Polanyi in 1944 as a characteristic of non-market economies and was later challenged by revealing the embeddedness of market economies as well (Gemici, 2008). The level of social embeddedness of businesses has been found to be higher in collective types of societies, where the interdependent self-construal (relative to the social norms) has a more dominant effect on the business decisions and results than business trainings or experience (Siu and Siu-chung Lo, 2011). Greater embeddedness has also been found among ethnic entrepreneurs (belonging to immigrant or an ethnic minority group), though it should be viewed rather as an outcome of intersectional influences (gender, minority status, class, etc.) than mere cultural characteristics (Anthias and Mehta, 2003). Studies on the complexity of institutional, economic, political and socio-cultural factors impeding on the ethnic entrepreneur led to the development of mixed-embeddedness theoretical approach, applied specifically to immigrant entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2014).

Entrepreneurial embeddedness as a theoretical concept has developed further to distinguish four types of embeddedness: structural, cultural, institutional and family embeddedness (Brush et al., 2014). Structural embeddedness refers to networks, alliances and ties. Institutional embeddedness places the entrepreneurial process in the context of formal and informal institutions, policies and legal systems. Cultural embeddedness focuses on the impact of norms, values, traditions and customs on entrepreneurship. Since cultural norms and values affect mental processes of decision making, cultural embeddedness is associated with the cognitive embeddedness approach and has proved to have both constraining and an enabling effects. In studies of entrepreneurship, the family embeddedness is a relatively recent approach (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003) and aims to re-establish the links between the seemingly divided worlds of work and family, the public and private domains. These mutual impacts were found globally to be significant for small and medium enterprises (Welsh, 2006), with a variety

of effects, depending on the local contexts. Aldrich and Cliff (2003) claim that transformations within family structures, shifts in timing of life-cycle processes, as well as changing roles of mothers and children, have impacts on creating new business opportunities. Their conceptual framework emphasizes relationships between the family's characteristics - such as 'transitions, resources, norms and values' - and the processes behind establishing new business entities.

In recent studies on women entrepreneurship, understanding their embeddedness in context helps to uncover the roots of variations between men and women-led businesses. Such differences have been found to arise due to the gendered nature of the entrepreneurial process and could not have been explained in earlier studies conducted with gender as variable (GAV) approach in which the word 'gender' was equivalent to 'sex' and was not problematized (Henry et al., 2016). The degree of family embeddedness of businesses depends on roles and social expectations and as such, may be different for men and women, affecting the distribution of power, assets and availability of time spent on networking and business development (Brush et al., 2014). Studies on female entrepreneurs point to such factors as family support, role models, self-assurance and marriage as having significant impact on the ways that business is run by women (Nikina et al., 2015).

### 1.3. The gaps in literature on minority women's entrepreneurship

The abundant research on women entrepreneurship has been largely focused on women in developed countries, although a significant share of small and medium business activity is undertaken by women living in developing regions (De Vita et al., 2014). These studies focused mostly on women's characteristics, psychology, motivations, networking activities, performance and growth (De Vita et al., 2014). Since 2003, the field's research has expanded into emerging economies within the non-European context, included immigrant women in developed countries and delved more into studying social, economic and institutional context in which female entrepreneurship is embedded (Henry et al., 2016). Although there are common characteristics of women entrepreneurs in developing countries, such as entrepreneurial propensity, sectoral concentration, preference for the domestic sphere as a site of production and the importance of family enterprise (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010), the new perspectives allowed for capturing the heterogeneity of women entrepreneurs, the differing contexts and their diversified impacts.

The reciprocal relation of entrepreneurship and gender has been examined from two angles: how gender effects entrepreneurial processes, for example, the impact of societal legitimation on entrepreneur's activity (Singh et al., 2010) and how the gendered systems are effected by entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013).

A popular theme includes analyses of the microcredit programmes aimed at alleviating the poverty levels in developing regions among women and their families and their effect on women's status; finding that these efforts do not challenge patriarchal systems (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010), but keep women in home-based industries with low-paid jobs (Erdoganaras et al., 2013), and may lead to debt accumulation (Girón, 2014).

Women were also found to be more affected by informal institutions such as social norms and perceptions than men (Roig et al., 2016). Research on women's agencies proves that undertaking entrepreneurial efforts requires women to enact certain strategies and negotiation in situations challenging the existing social orders and to navigate between exigencies of business, family and society (Shelton, 2006) – a practice common to women globally.

The number of studies of Muslim and Arab women entrepreneurs is still relatively scarce (De Vita et al., 2014), though examples include studies of women in their home countries (such as Lebanon - Jamali, 2009; Saudi Arabia - Ahmad, 2011) as well as Arab women ethnic entrepreneurship (Arab women in Spain - Roig et al., 2016; Muslim women in the Netherlands - Essers and Benschop, 2009) which point to

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