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The Gendered Complexities of Promoting Female Entrepreneurship in the Gulf

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores women's entrepreneurial activities in the Oman and Qatar in light of the state attention given to promoting entrepreneurship in the region over the past decade. In the Gulf Arab countries, like in many rapidly developing economies, neoliberal growth discourse abounds. Along with this, the promotion of entrepreneurship and embrace of individual enterprise is paramount. Despite the dominance of the state in political and economic spaces, Gulf governments have embraced the rhetoric of the market and entrepreneurship. Drawing from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation conducted between 2011 and 2015, this paper examines this phenomenon. In a region stereotyped with weak gender development outcomes, female entrepreneurship is largely cast as a positive development aimed at liberating and empowering women through individual enterprise. In contrast, this paper finds that the same forces that are meant to empower women often reproduce or reinforce certain gender norms while introducing new forms of dependency. Gulf female entrepreneurs confront competing tensions within three intersecting political economy logics: the structural logic of the economy, the logic of development narratives, and the logic of socio-economic organisation.

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Introduction

This paper explores the facets of female entrepreneurship promotion in Oman and Qatar to analyse the broader entrepreneurship agenda in the Gulf region.¹ The top-down promotion of entrepreneurship across Gulf Arab states has been a prominent feature of the regional development programme over the past decade. All six states actively promote entrepreneurship and cast it as central to employment, private sector development, innovation, and diversification strategies. Examining how this unfolds in two diverse countries within the region not only sheds lights on global development policy frameworks but also on the challenges of resource dependency, and the rationale, means, and efficacy of such economic policies. This paper specifically centres on gender not only because female entrepreneurship has received a loud push throughout the region, but also because it uncovers real tensions in economic and academic treatments of Gulf women.

Despite global rates of female entrepreneurship expanding, studies suggest that less than 10 per cent of entrepreneurship research focuses on these entrepreneurs (Brush and Cooper 2012: 1, Welsh *et al.* 2013: 2). Even fewer examine gender and entrepreneurship with a critical lens. This is especially

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true of work on Middle Eastern and Gulf entrepreneurs. One of the few studies that looks at entrepreneurship in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) from a critical, feminist perspective is Altan-Olcay (2014).

This paper shows how gender intersects with entrepreneurship and how together their intersections with neoliberalism and broader economic transitions like rising consumerism, a growing middle class, and weakening commodity markets inform understandings of entrepreneurship ecosystems, economic relations, and socio-economic and political change. This is significant because it extends scholarship on the political economy of neoliberal development in the non-West and the consequences of oil dependency while expanding engagement with the controversial issues of gender and the economy in the Arab and Muslim world. It also challenges common misconceptions of the region as duly exceptional because of oil or Islam and therefore not subject to global neoliberal economic pressures and transformations. Moving beyond these tired caricatures of the Gulf allows us to bring the region back into international political economy scholarship on topics beyond oil markets.

Primary data for this project were gathered between 2011 and 2015 from 40 semi-structured interviews with policy makers in the Oman and Qatar, 40 with entrepreneurship initiative directors and academics, and 30 deep interviews and 5 focus groups with female entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs interviewed came from a cross-section of social classes, with a majority of the millennial generation. These data were supplemented with participant observation in multiple entrepreneurship training events, educational activities, entrepreneurship competitions, small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) promotion forums, entrepreneur support groups, and conferences.

Drawing from these findings, this paper offers a critical analysis of female entrepreneurship promotion in Oman and Qatar. Situated on opposite ends of the Gulf wealth spectrum, these cases have been selected to reflect the diversity of economic conditions and challenges in the region. This paper uses the nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems in Oman and Qatar as sites to evaluate the intersection of female entrepreneurship promotion in Gulf rentier economies with the political peculiarities of autocracy and neoliberalism and the economic realities of hydrocarbon dependence and foreign labour abundance. The paper demonstrates that Gulf female entrepreneurs confront competing tensions within three intersecting and overlapping political economy logics that shape and constrain their economic interaction: the structural logic of the economy, the logic of development narratives, and the logic of socio-economic organisation.

Theorising female entrepreneurship promotion in the Gulf

It may appear paradoxical that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments have embraced the rhetoric of the market and entrepreneurship. These same states are known as autocracies characterised by the dominance of the state in political and economic spaces. And yet, in Oman and Qatar, like in their other GCC neighbours, neoliberal growth discourse is pervasive and frequently coupled with entrepreneurship advocacy and the embrace of individual enterprise (Ennis 2015). Why do these autocratic, wealthy political economies so actively promote entrepreneurship, and female entrepreneurship in particular, and how do local women respond to the entrepreneurship agenda? Through exploring this question, this paper contributes to the broader debate over the ostensible contradiction but emergent complementarity between neoliberalism and authoritarianism (Abboud 2013, Hanieh 2013, Bruff 2014).

The terms neoliberal, neoliberalism, and the idea of something becoming neoliberalised run into difficult definitional territory. The very idea of neoliberalism has been the victim of such wide concept stretching, it risks losing its analytical value. Here I engage two meanings of neoliberalism featured in academic debates. First, neoliberalism is an economic ideology associated with the privileging of free markets, growth, and private enterprise as represented by the thinking of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. This ideology emerged as a political project in the 1980s and 1990s in the international political economy, advocating privatisation, deregulation, and liberalisation as generalisable

strategies for development across the world (Williamson 1990). Second, neoliberalism can be used to express a (perhaps manufactured) cultural consensus around markets and economic rationalities which is utilised by governments to both galvanise support for policies and engender responsible citizens (Barry *et al.* 1996, Harvey 2005).

Despite appearing contradictory, governments across a wide range of political spectrums have been adopting aspects of neoliberalism and integrating it with existing authoritarian practices and developmentalist policies. Scholars have pointed to the emergence of 'neoliberal developmentalism' (Liow 2012, Lai and Samers 2017), 'patrimonial capitalism' (Schlumberger 2008), and 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bruff 2012) to explain this pattern. Likewise, research focused on the Middle East increasingly shows the predominance of neoliberalism occurring alongside secular and religious authoritarianism (Guazzone and Pioppi 2009, Hanieh 2011, Kanna 2011, Buckley 2012, Yesil 2016), noting a shift from state developmentalism to 'intrinsically authoritarian modalities of neoliberal government' (Bogaert 2013: 215). Where the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism has been observed across Western democracies (Bruff 2014), a similar melding of authoritarianism and neoliberalism is observed across states with recent histories of rapid economic development. The latter 'seem to be converging on a style of governance that places an ethos of regulated self-reliance at its core' (Honeyman 2016: 5–6).

The top-down promotion of entrepreneurship in Oman and Qatar is one example of this pattern. The rationale of female entrepreneurship promotion in the Gulf is rooted in two overlapping accounts, economic, and ideological. I set these forth below, and illustrate their multiple facets across three political economy logics throughout the remainder of the paper.

The first account is grounded in a story of economic necessity – the imperative of economic diversification, growth, and private sector jobs for citizens. The promotion of entrepreneurship and SMEs in the Gulf, then, is underlined by a two-pronged economic rationale. The first, and key, is a desire for the type of entrepreneurship which prompts innovation required for growing and diversifying economies heavily dependent on hydrocarbon export. The diversification imperative is felt with acute depth when oil prices reach lows such as those experienced in 2015 and 2016 – critically restricting state revenue and expenditure. Although the necessity of diversifying the economy has been featured in development plans and reports since the 1970s in many Gulf countries, it is especially during periods of oil lows that the urgency feels exigent.

Intrinsic to this discussion, sharp revenue declines constrain the ability of the state to function in its traditional role as the primary employer for Gulf nationals. Thus, the second aspect of this account is connected to the first, yet at a more basic level of employment provision. Entrepreneurship carries with it the hope of contributing to one of the region's largest problems, private sector jobs for Gulf citizens. Entrepreneurship becomes a way for nationals to engage in a private sector. Despite also being cloaked in the language of innovation, this type of entrepreneurship promotion is more akin to microenterprise initiatives and focuses on self-employment programmes encouraging nationals to create their own private sector employment.

Gulf nationals are poorly represented in the private sector, and find most of their employment in the public sector. Unemployment among women is high. In the broader Middle East, the female unemployment rate in 2010 was 18.1 per cent compared to a global average of 6.4 per cent (OECD 2014: 43). In Gulf countries, the youth unemployment rate is double national averages. Conservative estimates place these from 10 to 30 per cent in all GCC countries but Qatar (Oxford Business Group 2016: 20). Even though Qatar's youth unemployment rate is quite low comparatively, 76.4 per cent of discouraged jobseekers are women indicating the greater difficulty women have securing employment ('The Global Gender Report 2017' 2017: 279). Although the gender gap for jobs that require advanced qualifications is much lower than in occupational categories that require fewer qualifications, female millennials are the worst affected by poor unemployment statistics. Nearly half of young women seeking work in the region are unable to find it despite comprising such a small number of job seekers (OECD 2014: 43, 51–52). The promotion of entrepreneurship allows the state to encourage a form of employment in the private sector, without necessarily addressing

underlying structures which make the private sector so unattractive to citizens and, particularly, female citizens. These conditions are outlined in the next section.

The ideological account of female entrepreneurship promotion is connected to the economic one, in that it uses the narrative of economic explanations and solutions to development challenges. In a region stereotyped with weak gender development outcomes, female entrepreneurship is cast as a positive development aimed at liberating and empowering women through individual enterprise. It becomes yet another means through which Western-rooted ideologies and institutions can 'save' and liberate women in the Middle East (Spivak 1988, Abu-Lughod 2002, Roberts 2015). In contrast, this paper finds that the same forces that are meant to empower women, while on the one hand succeeding, on the other often reproduce or reinforce gender norms while introducing new forms of subjugation. This account of female entrepreneurship is grounded across multiple levels of developmental governance – global, regional, and local. It is rooted in a neoliberal rationality, which is influenced by and in turns influences local interpretations of gender, culture, and religion.

The promotion of entrepreneurship in the Gulf reflects a certain global pulse. Indeed, entrepreneurship is high on the global development agenda, and prominently featured within the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Three of the 17 SDGs (4, 8, and 9) specifically reference entrepreneurship, indicating its significance to the sustainable development agenda (United Nations 2015). Along with UN bodies, leading international financial institutions (IFIs) like the IMF, World Bank, WEF, among others have put forward entrepreneurship alongside their policy reforms since the turn of the millennium. This advice intensified after the global financial crisis and the Arab uprisings. In fact, the 2016 Arab Human Development Report highlights the critical role of youth entrepreneurship for responding to the regional need to create more than 60 million new jobs over the next decade for new labour force entrants (UNDP 2016: 32). Correspondingly, a World Bank report explains why 'we' ought to be concerned about women's entrepreneurship in the Middle East. 'Unlocking women's skills and creativity', it claims, 'can critically contribute to the testing of new ideas and increasing competitiveness in the global marketplace' (World Bank 2007, forward). The report further suggests that 'promoting women's entrepreneurship' in the region is important for diversification and to 'create more and better jobs' (World Bank 2007, forward).

At the regional level, policy advice from IFIs and consultancies to encourage entrepreneurship is embraced and pushed forward by the state. Entrepreneurship promotion activities are highly visible across all the Gulf states. In Oman and Qatar, the cases of this study, entrepreneurship features prominently in newspapers and government press releases, across universities, colleges, schools, and multiple government ministries, organisations, and commercial agencies.² Each of these institutions have established programmes dedicated to the promotion and support of entrepreneurship, including training facilities, incubators, accelerators, and funding schemes designed to help potential entrepreneurs develop ideas and launch them on the market (Ennis 2015). Entrepreneurship promotion targets the individual, what they can do to contribute to private sector growth and national development. Its promotion therefore has a labyrinthine relationship with both neoliberal narratives and national developmentalist ones.

Entrepreneurship can therefore be viewed through the lens of its political use as a mechanism of government, in the Foucaultian notion, which integrates the economic doctrine of free markets and private enterprise with a sense of individualism, obligation, and patriotism. According to Lemke, the neoliberal agenda shifts:

the regulatory competence of the state onto 'responsible' and 'rational' individuals. Neo-liberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form. It responds to stronger 'demand' for individual scope for self-determination and desired autonomy by 'supplying' individuals and collectives with the possibility of actively participating in the solution of specific matters and problems which had hitherto been the domain of state agencies. (2001: 201–2)

Neoliberal ideologies also intersect with and influence local interpretations of work, gender, and religion. A study of Muslim Keralite entrepreneurs in the Gulf shows that Islam may be used to set

boundaries or justify ethical engagements with neoliberal economy (Osella and Osella 2009). Likewise in the area of women's work, stories from Islamic history are sometimes used to legitimise the acceptability or importance of women's entrepreneurial engagement (Hürriyet Daily News 2012; Wamda 2012; Ullah *et al.* 2013). Capitalism and neoliberalism occupy the foundations of economic and social life across cultural and religious spaces. One can see evidence of how 'moral economies' are 'over-determined by existing market conditions and rhetorics' while Islam too may 'permeate capitalism' (Osella and Osella 2009: S217). In this regard, we can view social and economic life, whether in religious or other forms, as co-constituting of economic rationalities. This can help us understand how neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and religious views on economic life, which may seem competitive, can in fact be co-constitutive.

This paper illustrates a tension in the experience of women's entrepreneurship, where the rhetoric and practice of entrepreneurship can be experienced as empowering, but can also be a means of reconstituting patriarchal structures to accommodate the market. This is not to make a normative argument about female entrepreneurship as good or bad, but rather to draw out the contradictions and tensions which exist between the rhetoric and the realities, and also to underline the (orientalist) assumptions which ascribe positive value and liberating power to capital and neoliberal modes of economic organisation premised on the idea that women in the region are awaiting exogenous economic liberation.

Structural logic of the economy

This section examines the gendered dynamics of entrepreneurship within the structural realities of Gulf rentier economies. It demonstrates how support for women's entrepreneurship is met with contradictions endogenous to the political economy. The most relevant structural features here include the heavy dependence of Gulf economies on oil and gas, and labour market segmentation.

Oman and Qatar, like other GCC states, use public sector employment to manage unemployment and redistribute hydrocarbon wealth. With hydrocarbon revenue unable to keep up with the growth in the working-age population, this strategy has become especially unsustainable in Oman (Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2010, Ennis and Al-Jamali 2014). Research points to a high unemployment rate in a rapidly expanding working-age population as one of the major concerns of oil-dependent economies. These concerns are a strong motivator of the entrepreneurship agenda in the region. Despite some studies suggesting that oil-rent dependency significantly dampens entrepreneurship (Torvik 2009, Bjorvatn and Farzanegan 2013, Farzanegan 2014: 709–10), some view the recent government agenda promoting entrepreneurship as a key way to reduce this effect (Farzanegan 2014: 716–18). In addition to promoting economic growth, entrepreneurship offers a potential means to shift some of the state's employment burden onto the private sector and, importantly, into the hands of the individual. This agenda therefore both privatises and individualises the national employment challenge.

In order to understand the gendered dynamics to the labour market in the Gulf, it is important to understand the many segmentations that are present in the labour market alongside gender itself, including nationality, sector, and class. Most scholarship that discusses the labour market in the region only engages with the first segmentation, that is, the division between nationals and non-nationals (Winckler 2002, Gonzalez *et al.* 2008, Shah 2008). This is a critical feature of Gulf political economies. The early oil boom years propelled a demographic imbalance in the region connected to a sharp rise in the import of foreign labour to fill a human resources and skills gap. Today, the regional labour market is still highly dependent on expatriate workers in skilled and unskilled categories. This dependency creates certain rigidities in the labour market that are difficult to alter.

For example, policy advisers frequently point to SMEs in Europe as an example for how small business creation can contribute to the bulk of GDP and employment growth. Yet in the Gulf, SME activity only accounts for 15 per cent of GDP, compared with 16 per cent for low-income, 39 per cent for middle-income, and 51 per cent for high-income countries (Oxford Business Group 2016: 21). Whereas between 2002 and 2007 European SMEs contributed 85 per cent of employment

growth, these outcomes do not match well with Gulf economic realities (Hertog 2010a: 23). Job growth in GCC countries adds expatriates to the labour market, contributing little to the employment of citizens. SMEs in the region generally reproduce existing employment patterns and hiring practices, with small businesses especially keen to minimise costs and hire the cheapest available labour. The low cost and high flexibility of foreign labour in the region perpetuates a segmented labour market between nationals and non-nationals. Just as nationals have a preference for higher paying, more secure employment in the public sector, employers in the private sector prefer hiring from abroad. SMEs in Qatar almost exclusively hire foreigners. In Oman, statistics show the largest companies in the private sector hire the most nationals, while smaller companies primarily hire expatriates (Ennis and Al-Jamali 2014: 10). In fact, in 2015, the government of Oman responded to popular pressure for more favourable business regulation for SMEs by exempting new start-ups from hiring Omani nationals during the first few years of operation (Muscat Daily 2015). The depth of dependency on cheap foreign labour contravenes government efforts to encourage employment creation through entrepreneurship.

The other segmentations present in Gulf labour markets, sectoral, class, and gender, are highly connected to the first. The division of Gulf labour markets into public and private sectors takes on a particular gendered dynamic as demonstrated by Figures 1–4. In both Oman and Qatar, the private sector labour force is primarily non-national and male (Figures 1 and 2).

Citizens are concentrated in the public sector, where women also have a much stronger presence (Figures 3 and 4). This highlights the attractiveness of the public sector to nationals, and particularly female nationals. The private sector, with its limited job security, lower pay, and longer hours, is far less attractive. As well, female nationals who wish to pursue career paths in the private sector often encounter resistance. With the private sector mostly reluctant to absorb Gulf citizen labour where non-nationals dominate and tend to be more cost-effective, the neoliberal logic of efficiency and profit maximisation drives these distorted employment outcomes.

Class factors significantly into this discussion, and within the Gulf nationality takes on particular class formations (Hanieh 2010). Divisions are not merely limited to bifurcation between public and private sectors, but also occupational categories. In the private sector, construction provides the most jobs in the economy yet almost exclusively attracts male expatriates. Domestic workers, the most vulnerable in the labour market because their work is within the boundaries of private spaces, are also nearly all foreign but primarily female (MDPS 2016, NCSI 2017). This pattern is reflected in multiple fields in the private sector, where certain professions become associated with non-nationals – particularly migrants from South and South-East Asia. Wage levels, citizenship, and

Private sector employment, by gender & citizenship in Oman (2016)

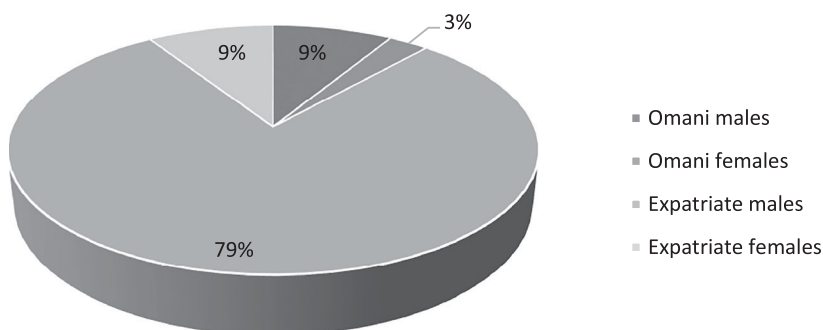


Figure 1. Author's calculations based on NCSI (2017).

Private sector employment, by gender & citizenship in Qatar (2016)

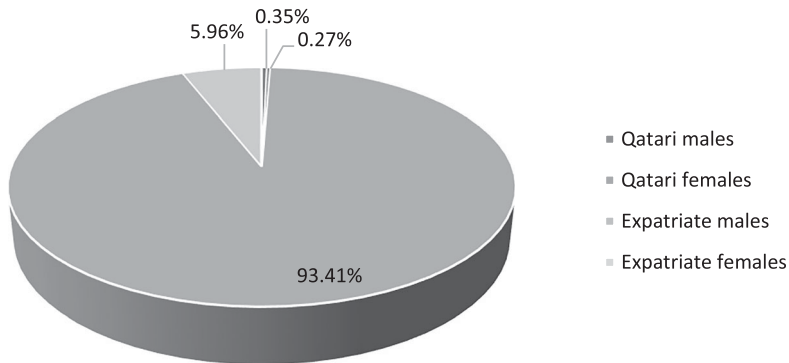


Figure 2. Author's calculations based on MDPS (2016).

ethnicity become tied to a perceived value and prestige of particular occupations. These dynamics reduce the appeal of certain jobs to citizens.

Within the citizen population, quieter divisions of class and socio-economic status are apparent upon close inspection. As in many political economies, women from certain family backgrounds may be more willing to work in particular occupations than others. As an illustration, some Omani women of lesser means or from a perceived 'lower' community status may be willing to work in service positions in hospitality and retail, where many citizens would view these fields as occupations best left to migrants. Looking to another example, women from elite Qatari families may have more cultural leeway to be in highly visible public roles in their work than their compatriots who may have to more carefully navigate socio-cultural aspects of appropriateness. The evolving boundaries of acceptable work are continuously shaped and re-shaped by gender, class, and nationality. Certain occupational categories, like education for instance, are viewed as socially appropriate for women. Banking and human resources perform well. Work in health care is also emerging as a sector appropriate for female work (Ennis and Walton-Roberts 2017). Often families prefer female members to work in all female environments or, at least, refrain from being the only female in an office.

Public sector employment, by gender & citizenship in Oman (2016)

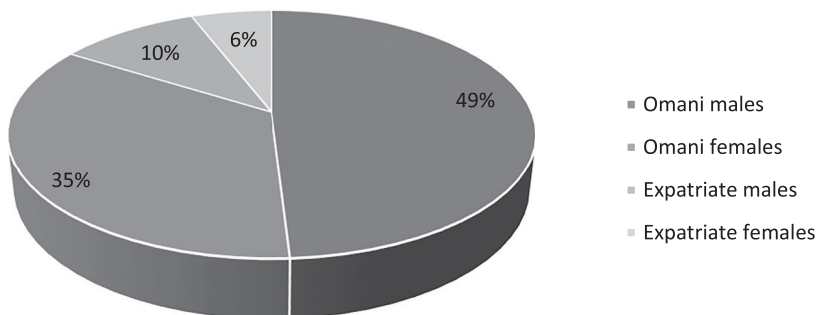


Figure 3. Author's calculations based on NCSI (2017).

Public sector employment, by gender & citizenship in Qatar (2016)

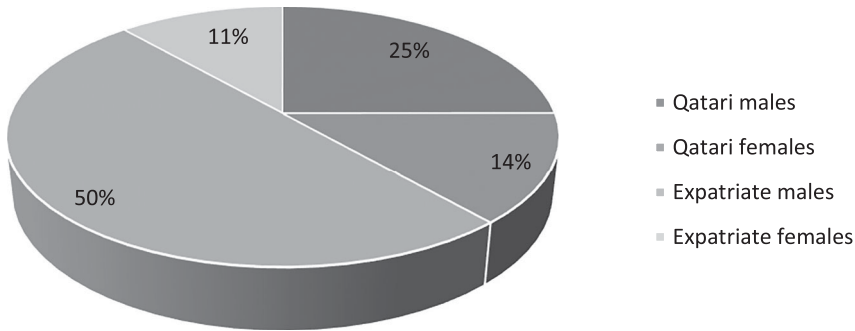


Figure 4. Author's calculations based on MDPS (2016).

Anecdotally, these preferences seem to be dissipating as female labour market participation rates rise in the region and it becomes more common for women to work in a wider variety of fields. Gender, class, ethnicity, and the desirability of certain forms of employment are linked in complex ways.

These complex class formations spill over to the entrepreneurial ecosystem, which centres on Gulf nationals although is not always exclusive to them. Certainly, there are successful female entrepreneurs, often tied to elite circles or royal families. These women tend to be connected to large business dynasties or political power. Some capitalise on connections to become agents of luxury retail brands. Such entrepreneurs balance in the shifting borderline between being entrepreneurial and benefiting from rent recycling, a common mode of income generation among rentier classes (Hertog 2010b). Other highly educated women have launched successful enterprises within the nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems in their country and region, creating training initiatives, incubators, or funding instruments. It is in the entrepreneurship support industry where one can most strongly see the triumphs of entrepreneurship promotion through the successful entrepreneurship initiatives it has conceived.

National entrepreneurship promotion has also inspired hobby entrepreneurship among women. Hobby entrepreneurship refers to practices of opening small side businesses to operate after the regular working day. This practice of moonlighting as an entrepreneur is facilitated by short public sector hours. Hobby entrepreneurship also includes small microenterprises some women pursue for optional or supplementary income for themselves in households where men are viewed as the primary breadwinners. This form of entrepreneurship allows some activity within the private sector, without complete commitment and reliance upon it.

The opportunity presented by a female-run microenterprise is growing in attractiveness to women in more vulnerable socio-economic positions as well. Omani and Qatari women from low-income families, those who live in conservative households, and divorcés look to microbusiness as an income-generation option.³ In global comparisons, few women in Qatar can be considered needy. Despite this, divorced women comprise a segment of the Qatari population that especially benefits from entrepreneurship initiatives. In a still heavily patriarchal society, women rarely remarry and micro-entrepreneurship becomes an attractive venue for economic autonomy.⁴

Some women find a type of independence in entrepreneurial endeavours which, perhaps paradoxically, preserve patriarchal structures that shape how certain forms of business activity or re-marriage is accepted. A senior figure at the Social Development Centre (SDC) in Qatar noted that divorce was a growing problem in the country, and one of the push factors for women into entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship was pitched as a form of economic self-help.

You know the more that you are modernised, the more that you need help actually. Economically you need also help. So, back in 1996, when we started, everybody thought that the SDC is a charitable organization. 'Why don't you help us and give us money?' But now in 2012, *no!* Everybody knows that the SDC could help you if you are really, really want to help yourself; if you really know what you need and what is your objective in your life. If not, we can also teach you how to know yourself and what your competencies are. It starts always from you. [*sic*]

Even at the local programme delivery level, entrepreneurship is framed as an individualised, bootstrapped mechanism for private economic challenges. The responsibility for well-being becomes connected to the individual rather than a statement about social or government failures. This is representative of the reification of the individual in both state and private sector discourse. Female entrepreneurs, thus, try to adjust conservative social expectations concerning gender and responsibility with neoliberal individualism. In this way, the 'adaptation of neoliberal conceptions of the self entail not a rejection of traditional patriarchal structures but a reinterpretation of them' (Kanna 2010: 104).

What entrepreneurship offers for many women of varying socio-economic status is a way to make their own income. The bulk of business activity focuses on microenterprises and the creation of small-scale, consumer-driven products. Among the most common female entrepreneur booths at exhibitions are cupcake creations, uniform design, and *abaya* embroidery. There is limited attention to the types of technological innovations required to respond to real national and regional economic ailments.

At a basic level, entrepreneurship becomes an attempt at correcting some of the systemic economic failures by providing a means of self-employment. Yet it lacks the focus on innovation demanded by diversification imperatives. That the entrepreneurship agenda in the Gulf has centred on self-employment is also reflective of much wider global failures of political and economic systems. Like in Oman and Qatar, colleges and universities around the world are expected to prepare students to create their own establishments with the logic that if graduates desire employment, they can make their own. The promotion of entrepreneurial behaviour becomes part of an offshoring of collective or government responsibility onto the shoulders of individuals.

Logic of development narratives

The second political economy logic are the narratives used around development. Two are particularly relevant here. First, the framing of women as subjects needing to be liberated by the power of the market; that is, women's injection into the private sector as market citizens. Second, women as empowered members of society with patriotic roles legitimising state feminist narratives. This section, then, examines the overlapping domains of governance and politics which thrust women forward as subjects of market liberalisation and as agents of both change and stability.

The narrative of entrepreneurship's importance for Gulf women in international policy advice and Western media points to its liberating potential. Within the Middle East neighbourhood, the Gulf states are regarded as some of the more restrictive (Schroeder 2013: 149). With a throwback to orientalist imagery of Middle Eastern or Muslim women being oppressed and needing liberation from the West, capitalism and private enterprise has emerged as the panacea. This mode of framing entrepreneurship as beneficial to women, because it facilitates their contribution to economic growth and empowers them as individuals, is problematic on its own (Altan-Olcay 2014, Roberts 2015). It says nothing of the deep inequalities, feminisation of labour and poverty, and broader economic structures and trends that systematically marginalise women within global capitalism (Rai 2002, Peterson 2005, Marchand and Runyan 2010), but rather eludes to assumptions of Arab culture, Gulf culture, or Islam as inherently oppressive.

Moreover, the purchase of this narrative speaks to the prevalence of sensationalised Western stereotypes that have constructed certain contradictory images of Gulf women. On the one hand, Gulf women are frequently cast as oppressed by social and religious structures, and viewed as marginalised, silenced, and hidden behind veils and embedded patriarchal systems (Weiss 1994, Al-

Sabah 2013). At the same time, Gulf women are often portrayed as cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial, benefiting from vast national oil wealth which gives them access to free education and abundant opportunities (Al-Rasheed 2013, Schroeder 2013). Scholars focusing on the Gulf have an obligation to push beyond these dichotomous constructs, cease reducing women to objects of orientalist imaginings while ignoring their agency, and explore the lived experiences of women in the region, and the range of marginalising and freeing forces at work in economic life. Through examining two divergent countries within the GCC, this contribution begins to chip away at common monolithic treatments.

In the MENA, estimates suggest that 12 per cent of women are engaged in entrepreneurial activities in contrast to 31 per cent of men (OECD 2014: 56). It is worth mentioning that the rates of entrepreneurial women in MENA economies outpace those in OECD economies where 5.9 per cent of women and 10.8 per cent of men are active in entrepreneurial activities (OECD 2014: 55). Corresponding with increasing entrepreneurship, overall female labour force participation rates have also been rising across the Gulf. In Oman, these rose from 7.6 per cent in 1980 to 30 per cent in 2016, while in Qatar, female labour market participation increased sharply from 14.4 per cent in 1980 to 53 per cent in 2016 (World Bank 2017, 2004: 59).

Due to their weak participation in labour markets, women are labelled an 'untapped resource' in the region (World Bank 2004: 2). The Omani and Qatari public and private sectors are therefore sold on motivating women to be entrepreneurial because of the potential dividends, returns, and gains possible from the productive engagement of women in the economy. This agenda results in a twofold *problématique*. Inserting Omani and Qatari women into entrepreneurship locates their productivity in economic accounts and buttresses state narratives of supporting women in economy and politics. The first aspect is a problem of global scope, often the object of critique by feminist economists contesting the means through which economic production is calculated in economies (Peterson 2003, Parisi 2006, Bakker 2007). Social reproduction and work in the home is not counted and therefore not valued in measurements of economic development (Hoskyns and Rai 2007). Women 'count' by becoming market citizens; their value enumerated in market terms. Privileging women as market citizens has resulted in what Roberts characterises as 'a partial shift away from promoting women's social and economic dependence on men toward promoting their dependence on capitalist markets' (2013: 26). Women's importance and freedom are hence tied to the market.

The promotion of women in the private sector via employment or small business creation can serve as a means of managing domestic opinion. Rapid economic development and modernisation in the Gulf is interweaved with a story of rentierism, where political loyalty is manufactured through the benevolence of the state in its redistributive role including the provision of jobs along with free education, health care, and other goods (Beblawi and Luciani 1987, Hvidt 2011). Today, the provision of new economic alternatives through forging an entrepreneurial ecosystem an important component to reframing and re-centring allegiance on the state. Conveying these goals in terms of local growth and employment benefits underscores the state role as patron. Indeed, the top-down support of entrepreneurship necessitates state resource backing and thus ultimately becomes a new broader mechanism of rent circulation (Ennis 2015).

The narrative of female entrepreneurship promotion is politically expedient for Oman and Qatar. There is some degree of legitimacy to be ascertained by speaking to broader international agendas at the global level while integrating these with the narratives around diversified growth and employment alternatives at the local level. Neoliberal policy goals raise the Gulf states' international economic image while the gender dimension validates its female-friendly branding (Cooper and Momani 2009). Female empowerment and entrepreneurship become part of government strategy for legitimising liberal credentials in international opinion.

Omani and Qatari women are in fact frequently highlighted in media as part of state branding campaigns; the modernity associated with powerful women in business demonstrating the success of the Gulf state (Oman Economic Review 2015, Times of Oman 2015, 'Qatari Women Entrepreneurs Break the Glass Ceiling' 2015, Balkhi 2017). Through media and conferences, women are

often provided platforms to praise the support of the state. Thus, 'gender equality machineries in nation states becoming ever more embedded in neoliberal market reform' (Kantola and Squires 2012: 383). Even in my interviews, participants regularly point to a perceived benevolence of the state in making way for women to have more powerful roles in business, politics, and society. Gulf entrepreneurship ecosystems are in this sense inextricable from the state propaganda one.

The promotion of women as entrepreneurs contributes to a broader state feminism. State feminism usually refers to the effectiveness of alliances between policy agencies and women's movement activists in securing state responses to their demands (Kantola and Squires 2012: 382). It is commonly top-down championing of women's liberation from the state. In authoritarian contexts, women's liberation can be used to paint autocratic governments as reformers. The paradox is government involvement in women's rights spaces occurs alongside tight state controls and censorship on the one hand and governmental withdrawal from the economy on the other (Zheng 2005). Thus, a peculiar convergence of neoliberal advice with state-directed political goals occurs and impacts the modes of female engagement within the economy. Murphy observed similar patterns and suggested that while:

women may benefit from the direct sponsorship by the government, they are increasingly vulnerable to its withdrawal from certain economic arenas. They must themselves find ways of reconciling the role assigned to them by the state with the combination of other roles demanded by society and the market. (Murphy 2003: 187)

These tensions become apparent in language concerning the construction of good, female citizens and entrepreneurs.

In states like Qatar, the citizen population is not large enough to be meaningfully productive on a national scale. Foreign labour is required for economic productivity. The demographic make-up of Oman means there is more productive potential, but this is not well realised in practice. Thus, like Kanna's work on Dubai shows, state discourse around productive citizenship instead focuses on 'national ethics and the modes of proper and authentic citizenship' (Kanna 2010: 104). Productive citizens do not just contribute to economic growth but to the reputation of the state.

Likewise, by advocating local women in the economy, private sector actors in Oman and Qatar are able to brand themselves as pro-national, patriotic, and contributing to national development. The Omani and Qatari state focuses attention on individuals contributing to society by being good, patriotic citizens. Just as men are called sons, women are spoken of as 'daughters' of the nation. Sultan Qaboos, for instance, regularly speaks to an Omani pride, or nationalist sense of self, in his speeches on national day and to the Council of Oman. A 1990s speech declares 'productive work, no matter how [trivial], is a key element in the structure of the nation' (cited in Kéchichian 2008). In 2012, Sultan Qaboos praises the success of local consultative practices and attributes this to Omani culture, understanding, and a consistence with societal values and principles (Al-Said 2012). Being in tune with cultural values is stressed alongside the individual obligation to contribute to the nation. Being entrepreneurial and working in the private sector is framed as a means of 'sons and daughters' contributing to the state developmental project (see speeches, Al-Said 2016).

Obligations on female entrepreneurs stretch to the market, the state, and the family. Female entrepreneurial discourse in the region advises women who want to be entrepreneurs on the importance of maintaining work-family balance. In the words of Emirati state minister Dr Maitha Al-Shamsi, 'only [a woman] who successfully runs a family can also be successful as an entrepreneur' (Kaiser *et al.* 2011). Likewise, the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) describes the priorities of Sheikha Moza, the wife of the former Emir, as giving 'high priority to all aspects that promote the role of Qatari women and motivate them to perform their social obligations and participate in the public life'. The same web page also points to state goals:

to establish the appropriate work environment that conforms with the familial responsibilities of the Qatari woman in addition to enhancing equality between men and women by providing women with equal chances for quality education, training and development to upgrade their administrative and leadership skills. (2013)

The state, in encouraging entrepreneurship, simultaneously reinforces the role of women in their families and societies. Rhetoric around desired economic behaviour interacts with the tensions between a communal sense of loyalty to culture and nation and the individual burden of being productive and successful in both professional and private life.

Logic of socio-economic organisation

Extending from the competing pressures neoliberalism has placed on economic and political realms, women experience complex pressures from the advocacy of individual responsibility intersecting with traditional patriarchal structures and senses of familial obligation. Interviews revealed that young female entrepreneurs in Oman and Qatar were keen to respond to the state promotion of entrepreneurship, and exploit the training, mentoring, and financial support available. How these entrepreneurs perceive themselves as strong and entrepreneurial, and how they interpret their role within the state and society, are important components of this story. These negotiations are where neoliberal economic deepening has especially complex interactions with gender.

Although this paper has put gender at the centre of the analysis and claims that gender is crucial to understanding many spheres of socio-economic life, this does not imply a singular experience of all Gulf women engaged in entrepreneurship. Gulf women are, of course, not a homogenous group. Women do not experience business relations in the same way, just as they do not experience discrimination and subordination, or privilege and access, equally. As earlier sections elucidated, gender interacts with class in ways that shape the level of necessity of entrepreneurship and the forms it takes.

Despite rapid social change over the past four decades, kinship ties retain high significance and social relations remain primarily centred on the family unit in Oman and Qatar (Al-Azri 2010: 137). Gulf women in particular have faced a contradictory environment reflective of other changes occurring in the region during this time. On the one hand, governments have encouraged literacy, education, and bureaucratic environments amenable to female progress. At the same time, however, they 'fostered sociocultural climates that were hostile to women fulfilling the roles for which they were trained' (Foley 2010: 181). The oil state is said to have 'liberated' society from the financial imperative for women to work. So, at the same time as women became better educated and equipped for the labour market, there were countervailing cultural forces encouraging their return to the home in the role of mother and wife (Foley 2010: 180–84).

Although some of these pressures persist, many women's ideas around traditional roles have evolved. A 2011 study found that although 59 per cent of young Gulf men think that the primary role of women in society is to be a wife and mother, only 22 per cent of young women hold the same view (Almunajjed and Sabbagh 2011: 39). Indeed, socio-cultural expectations can prove challenging for entrepreneurs to navigate. Although they frequently play a positive role, they often comprise an additional hurdle for aspiring young female entrepreneurs to overcome. Like other entrepreneurs, women confront fear of family or societal reaction to potential failure alongside socio-cultural norms that would internalise failure as damaging to a family's reputation in the community. Despite these pressures, entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly popular among young Gulf women.

Gulf female entrepreneurs experience entrepreneurship in a range of ways. Some have found it to be empowering through providing autonomous income, others as constraining because of a financial imperative to work in the formal economy, and others interpret entrepreneurship as a means to participate in the economy without having to work in a (male-dominated) corporate environment.⁵ As Prügl suggests, the 'outcomes of the neoliberalisation of feminism are not univocal ... [but] have contradictory effects in terms of the way in which they redirect power, strengthening some social forces and weakening others' (2015: 627). Different types of engagement in the economy can be liberating or constraining, while simultaneously negotiating patriarchal social structures that limit choices.

Most interviewees who were directors of entrepreneurship promotion initiatives in Oman and Qatar expressed a mixture of surprise and pride when revealing that a majority of their clientele are women. Many claimed that not only are their female clients better prepared, more detail-oriented in their business and financial planning, but they achieve success more often than their male clients. This should not be particularly surprising. Young women comprise the highest-educated demographic in the Gulf states. Yet despite outperforming men in educational attainment, female graduates struggle to find jobs that match their training (World Bank 2011, 2007, UNCTAD 2014: 41). This partly explains the attractiveness of the entrepreneurial option.

From high school graduates to college students to women in their early-career stages, every young female entrepreneur interviewed pointed to an aspiration for freedom as a primary driver towards entrepreneurship and self-employment. That traditional roles are being challenged, and that millennial women are emerging as strong participants in entrepreneurial activities, hold more advanced levels of education, and are more willing to work in non-traditional occupations than men, is of socio-cultural and economic significance (Foley 2010: 167–210). According to one survey, monetary independence, a sense of achievement, and ambition are among the strongest reasons Gulf women choose to work (Bayt 2007: 14). Young millennial women have new expectations for themselves, and these transfer into their entrepreneurial ambitions. It was evident in interviews and focus groups that millennials (of both genders) have a desire to participate in the regional change narrative. This is combined with a desire for economic independence and freedom.

Freedom, naturally, does not hold the same meaning for all interviewees. As indicated in numerous interviews, freedom could mean freedom to be ‘your own boss’, to be ‘independent’, ‘to not have to rely on parents’, to contribute to family well-being, to make a difference and help ‘change the world’ around them, or to pursue particular creative ambitions.⁶ Freedom was used with a certain whimsical romance around an imagined potential that successful entrepreneurship could facilitate. Many, however, pointed to their struggles to navigate bureaucratic hurdles in the start-up and operation of business as hindering these aspirations.

In both cases, female entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs often characterised owning an independent business operation as liberating and empowering. In Qatar, many interviewees pointed to the former Emir’s wife, Sheikha Moza as a strong role model for their entrepreneurial engagement.

I’ve been working for 12 years. Before 2000, it was rare to find women interactive in business or women in the business environment. Now you find it all over. Society and business has become more open. I think this is primarily because of Sheikha Moza – she is a great role model for working women. She works hard, for long hours. I came in contact with her several times. She was really involved and working hard.⁷

The same sentiment was repeated time and time again. Many felt that, despite the gendered criticism directed at Sheikha Moza in private (and mostly male) circles for her perceived domination of certain sectors and activities, she was transforming norms in the country concerning accepted and appropriate behaviours for Qatari women. Rajakumar came across similar conclusions in her research, finding that Sheikha Moza and her daughter, Sheikha Miyasa play an affirmative role in the public sphere. Rajakumar states that Sheikha Miyasa’s ‘presence in the public arena as a young woman respectful of Islamic tradition is an example of the agency Sheikha Moza has given younger Qatari women through her balancing of traditional values and modern behaviours’ (Rajakumar 2014: 140).

Some women interlocutors did not label gender as a significant barrier to their experiences in entrepreneurship. When asked about the greatest barriers to their entrepreneurial ambitions, instead of focusing on gender-related obstructions, some women responded with specific technological or policy constraints related to their particular endeavour or field. Gender seemed secondary to their concerns. It is important for researchers to keep this in mind when examining issues of gender in the region, and be cautious not to impose external perceptions of behaviours, patterns, and

constraints onto their analyses (Mikdashi 2012). Research shows Emirati entrepreneurs expressing the same sentiment,

When working in my business I rarely think about my gender, I have to make the same decisions, take the same responsibilities and look after the same staff. Who said that we have an easier job? The only difference between a female entrepreneur and a male one is that the man has a longer time to reflect on what he would like to achieve. We, on the other hand, have to think of our second job at home (Gallant 2007: 14).

Interviews often revealed gendered concerns connected to household obligations, and the 'double work burden' that women often shoulder globally (Kabeer 2014: 67). Many of the choices and constraints confronting women entrepreneurs in the region are similar to those that women confront around the world. One should be careful not to essentialise the challenges women face and conflate their causation with preconceptions of cultural exceptionalism.

In fact, the business environment for women in the Gulf often defies expectations. For example, business regulation and access to finance are considered high barriers to female entrepreneurship. A study finds, however, that although these barriers exist, both male and female-owned firms are affected similarly (World Bank 2007). Such findings should be assessed critically. Regulations often disproportionately affect women even if that was not the regulatory intention. The MENA region follows a global trend where poor business climates affect women's business prospects more negatively than men's (OECD 2014: 59).

While legally there may be no formalised restrictions on women registering businesses in Oman or Qatar, gender difference can be experienced through unwritten cultural codes. This is particularly true of rural Oman, although also mentioned in Muscat, and common throughout much of Doha. In interviews, several women noted the surprise they saw in expressions as they registered their business at the relevant ministries and government bodies. Others noted their discomfort at being in heavily male-dominated spaces. Women also speak about feeling unspoken pressure, sometimes even receiving verbalised advice, on how they might wish to dress when visiting commercial and financial sites like ministries of commerce, chambers of commerce, and the stock exchange.

Several young entrepreneurs noted the cultural challenges they were greeted with when launching their initiatives. 'We are facing some social problems', noted one group of female entrepreneurs. 'People have spoken ill of us and our goal, speaking about our dream to work independently ... But we do not mind. We also have a lot of support.'⁸ Articles on female entrepreneurship are becoming a common feature in women's magazines in the region. These often encourage increasing the visibility of women in entrepreneurship and trade shows. Here, fellow entrepreneurs urge women to have strong resolve to challenge familial and cultural norms which can make women hesitant to engage in SME creation (Abu Maghli 2016).

In focus groups, entrepreneurial meetings, and in volunteer organisations and events, gender norms and the boundaries of the acceptable for women and young people were regularly discussed and contested. 'The mixing of genders', as my young interlocutors often called co-ed environments, were often the target of societal pressures. Social entrepreneurs in Doha were responsive to these concerns. Their central tasks were organising youth volunteer activities to contribute to various social needs in Doha. In the volunteer activities they coordinated, they learned to respond to the concerns of parents and other senior members of society, even while continuing to push boundaries. At times, they would integrate some degree of gender segregation in their activities, while at others they would purposefully address the appropriateness of the expected level and type of gender interaction to the participants and their families in advance. Women regularly exercise agency through their understanding of cultural norms, and where or how much these may be challenged. It becomes a way of 'negotiating practice' (Knez and Lisahunter 2015: 114). Micro and small-sized businesses run by Gulf women emerge from an complex amalgamation of forces – neoliberalism's promotion of private enterprise, the necessity of financial support, the desire for economic independence, and patriarchal constructs on the appropriate behaviours and place for women's engagement (see also Rankin 2001, Elyachar 2005).

Conclusion

How Gulf female entrepreneurs navigate empowering and constraining pressures from political, economic, and social directions is integral to understanding their role as agents in development. The structural logic of the economy, the logic of development narratives, and the logic of socio-economic organisation each influences women's opportunities with, and engagement in, entrepreneurial practices. Moreover, the ways neoliberalised entrepreneurship, feminism, and economic rationalities connect with local constructions of identity, expectations, and beliefs about economic participation are as significant to interpretations of the entrepreneurship agenda in the region as to how female entrepreneurs understand themselves as part of economic change. The intersections of gender with entrepreneurship and the varieties of entrepreneurship practices, as well as with broader economic realities and transitions such as rising consumerism, growing middle classes, weakening commodity markets and constrained state capacity inform understandings of entrepreneurship ecosystems, economic relations, and socio-economic and political change.

This research illustrates how female entrepreneurship, whether working from home or operating an SME outside the home, relieves the state of two forms of pressures: social and economic. Competing social forces push for more female engagement in the market while others encourage women to remain in the domestic domain. These forces come from both female and male sources. Thus, while some women are in favour of liberalising social structures, others advocate for the maintenance, or even the return to, stronger conservative patterns. The promotion of entrepreneurship within these competing pressures allows women to sanction their active engagement in the private sector while allowing others to respond to entrepreneurial promotion and engage in the market within the boundaries of private space. Understanding this provides us a more nuanced view of how competing realities and narratives can coexist.

Second, entrepreneurship promotion also relieves the state from economic and political pressures. Responding to the economic challenges in the Omani and Qatari economies would require multiple regulatory adjustments to incentivise the integration of women into workplaces as well as a top-down reorganisation of certain sectors of the economy which, by design, discourage women's employment in them. These types of interventions would necessarily be controversial and difficult to implement. Instead, promoting female entrepreneurship theoretically opens a space for women to create a private employment alternative. The rhetoric of female entrepreneurship support therefore alleviates some labour market pressures by refocusing attention.

Promoting female entrepreneurship in the Gulf is intended to liberate women through the power of the market. The championing of these activities by state and business actors essentially constructs a positive, female-friendly brand image. State feminism and corporate use of tokenisation are often recognised as evidence of progress or liberalisation. Introspection rarely goes further and then misses how entrepreneurship advocacy sometimes reproduces certain gender stereotypes and practices. Female entrepreneurs, as targets of top-down, state-directed entrepreneurship promotion, navigate their way through competing tensions of state and market, traditional and progressive, global and local, and more. Failing to problematise these relationships and interventions neither challenges the power of the state or business elite in the development process nor their power in reinforcing distorted economic realities that contribute to weak diversification endeavours and limited employment opportunities for women in the private sector. Moreover, it ignores the lived consequences of not tackling the multiple segmentations and marginalisations that persist throughout the labour market.

Notes

1. I use the term Gulf and Gulf Arab interchangeably in reference to the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).
2. See the website of the Qatar Business Incubation Center (QBIC) at <http://www.qbic.qa> for an example of a state-directed initiative aimed at fostering local entrepreneurship. Qatar and Oman are full of entrepreneurship

initiatives run out of various ministries, government institutions, public universities and colleges, and more. These have been discussed at length in Ennis 2015. Newspapers across both cases, where media is tightly controlled by the state, regularly put a spotlight on entrepreneurship promotion. Examples include: Abishek Bhaya (21 April 2013), 'Entrepreneurship is the way forward in Oman, says national youth commission', *Muscat Daily*: <http://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/Entrepreneurship-is-the-way-forward-in-Oman-says-National-Youth-Commission-278i> and 'QDB and SDC launch the largest mixed business incubator in the Middle East' (10 March 2014), *Marhaba Qatar*: <https://www.marhaba.qa/qdb-and-sdc-launch-the-largest-mixed-business-incubator-in-the-middle-east/>. A comprehensive list would be vast.

3. Repeated in focus groups and interviews with initiative directors and workers across both cases.
4. Interviews with experts at the Social Development Centre, Qatar, and focus group with female programme beneficiaries (22 February 2012); Interview with faculty at the College of the North Atlantic, Qatar (11 April 2012), and (QSA 2012)
5. Interviews and focus groups (2011–2014).
6. Interviews and focus groups (2011–2014).
7. Interview with female Qatari entrepreneur (7 May 2012).
8. Interview with Qatari entrepreneurs (22 April 2012).

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