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Women entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa: A review of knowledge areas and research gaps

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# Women entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa

Knowledge areas and research gaps

## A review of knowledge areas and research gaps

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to attempt to collate and understand the fragmented research on female entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The review assesses the literature at the macro, meso and micro analysis levels and addresses the obstacles, challenges, motivations and characteristics of female entrepreneurship in the MENA region.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The analysis bases on a gender aware, narrative review, which is an appropriate method when aggregating studies of different methodological approaches, covering broad and fragmented topics in different settings. The study analyzes the areas that have received sufficient research attention and those which are still under-developed.

**Findings** – Important gaps in the field are lack of theoretical foundations; an over emphasis on macro level indicators, such as culture and religion and an under emphasis on organizational level variables; a lack of studies that analyze female entrepreneurship within ethnic groups, or studies that acknowledge the complex social, cultural and religious diversity of the region; and inattention to particular regional experiences (e.g. refugees crisis) and emerging trends.

**Originality/value** – This is the first integrative review of the literature in the growing field of female entrepreneurship in the MENA region that identifies areas of particular research interest and questions that are still under-developed. The study proposes further avenues for future research.

**Keywords** Women, Entrepreneurship, Culture, Institutionalism, Middle East and North Africa, Work

**Paper type** Literature review

### Abbreviations

GEM = Global entrepreneurial monitor  
KSA = Kingdom of Saudi Arabia  
MENA = Middle East and North Africa  
UAE = United Arab Emirates

### Introduction

The emergence of the role of women as business-owners in the global economy has been mirrored by a proliferation of studies examining female entrepreneurship over the past three decades (Jennings and Brush, 2013), with a dominance of studies examining women entrepreneurs in Anglo-Saxon countries (Tlaiss, 2013; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010). However, a better understanding of the factors influencing women entrepreneurship in other regions is a must. Given that female entrepreneurial activities in the Middle East



and North Africa (MENA) aggregates to a strikingly low rate of 4 per cent (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [GEM], 2013), there is a need to understand female entrepreneurial activity in this region. Research in this regard is still in a developing stage, and no integrative view of the available body of literature exists.

The entrepreneurial trends observed in the region are coupled with prevailing gender ideologies engendered by patriarchal socio-cultural norms. Certain religious understandings and legislative traditions limit women's ability to start and develop their own businesses. For example, in most of the MENA countries, women are not granted equal rights at work (UNDP, 2009), and their participation in the labor market remains at a dismal rate of 24 per cent (World Bank, 2015). What is even more alarming is the significant variation between male and female labor market participation rates (Sidani, 2016). On the other hand, the professional environment in the MENA region is highly gendered, where women are predominantly employed in education and social and health care, while men predominantly hold leadership positions (Metcalfe, 2011; Sidani *et al.*, 2015).

Those disturbing indicators have attracted a number of scholars to try and understand the female entrepreneurial activity in this region. Research in this regard is still in a developing stage, and there has been no integrative review of the body of literature on women entrepreneurs in the MENA. Studies on this topic have been sporadic and unbalanced either in terms of focus or in terms of geographic coverage within the region. Thus, this paper contributes to the development of female entrepreneurship in two ways. First, we provide a review of the literature uncovering the areas that have received sufficient research attention and those which are still under-explored. Second, we propose research avenues that provide further insight into the larger field of entrepreneurship.

In reviewing female entrepreneurship in the MENA region, we apply a gender aware framework, paying attention to social and normative institutions while identifying current knowledge areas and research gaps. Our analysis ties a fragmented research field together and offers important insights into the larger field of entrepreneurship. This contextualization has the potential to increase knowledge in the larger entrepreneurial field (Steyaert and Katz, 2004). We tackle the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis and identify gaps that we recommend should be addressed by future research.

### Research approach

We used a specific protocol to decide on which studies to include in this review. The criteria for inclusion included a focus on female entrepreneurs, business ventures owned by women, a comparison of male and female entrepreneurial activity or studies that use a research methodology that explicitly addresses gender as an analytic dimension in the MENA region. We considered MENA countries to include the following Arab countries "Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, West bank and Gaza, and Yemen" (World Bank, 2015).

We opted for the combined use of the "Wildcard operator" search method and the "Boolean operator" to perform an integrative search of the literature (Rau, 2004; Henry *et al.*, 2015). We aimed to achieve both a broad coverage of the literature and a refined search to single out the distinct relations of gender and entrepreneurship in MENA countries. Our initial search yielded over 50 publications including working papers, region-wide reports and articles published in over 31 journals. Considering the narrowness of this field, we did not set any delimiters in terms of publication timeframe.

Three researchers reviewed all the titles and abstracts filtering out publications that lack a focus on female entrepreneurial activity. We only considered journals having an Impact

Factor higher than 0.3 and an H-index of at least 10 (Kiss *et al.*, 2012; Henry *et al.*, 2015), but – as we are dealing with a niche field – we included papers in journals that do not meet this condition and that were cited 20 or more times. The process resulted in 29 articles published in 20 journals from 2003 till 2015 (25 articles from 2009 and on), which served as a basis for a content analysis of the literature.

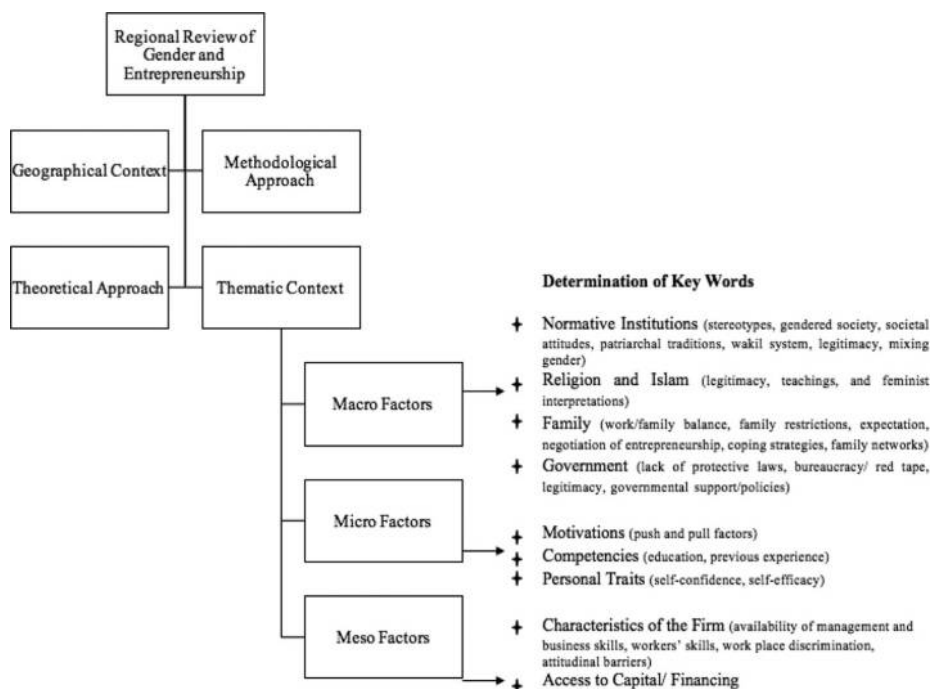
We adopted a narrative review in this paper, which is considered appropriate when aggregating studies of different methodological approaches, covering broad and fragmented topics in different settings (Kiss *et al.*, 2012). Brush *et al.* (2009) argue in favor of a gender aware framework; they criticize the assumption that access to markets, availability of financial resources and management of capabilities are the only pivotal factors for business success and viability. Due to the social embeddedness of entrepreneurship, the analysis encompassed factors which create specific barriers for women entrepreneurs.

### Analysis

We followed Haney's *et al.* (1998) coding approach and identified key recurring themes. After reviewing about one-third of the material, we were able to produce a list of keywords related to different levels of analysis. These served as codes for analyzing the remaining material in light of a gender aware framework. We then added pertinent keywords if they emerged later on during the analysis (Figure 1).

### General trends

Each of the journals in our analysis published a maximum of three relevant papers during the period of review, with an average of 1.5 publications per journal. With the exception of



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual  
framework for female  
entrepreneurship in  
the MENA region

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two highly cited studies, all articles included in the review were listed in the Scopus database. Five gender-oriented journals published nine articles representing almost one-third of the selected articles. In addition, only 5 of the 20 journals were specialized in entrepreneurship, and only one of these journals has been ranked as a top-tier journal (Westminster College, 2015).

The distribution of articles by geographic location is clearly skewed toward the Arab Gulf region (13 of 29 articles covering the UAE). Five other articles focus on Oman and four of them on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) (Table II).

The selected articles included qualitative (59 per cent), quantitative (28 per cent) and mixed-methods (13 per cent) research approaches. Qualitative methodologies included structured or semi-structured interviews, whereas quantitative methods relied mostly on survey research. Most studies were based on small samples, with an average size of 90 participants. Three quantitative studies included large samples: Naser *et al.* (2009) with 449 participants, Weeks (2009) with 1,228 participants and Sarfaraz and Faghieh (2011) including 3,119 participants. However, those papers merely included an analysis of secondary data retrieved from the World Bank's Enterprise or the GEM. Although they represent reliable sources of data, the analysis of secondary data usually yields an a-contextual view of gender

Journal title	ISI journal impact factor 2015	H-index score	No of articles	Citations of key articles	Year
<i>African Journal of Business Management</i>	1.11	36	2		2008-2010
<i>Career Development International</i>	1.29	32	1		2003
<i>Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues</i>	0	10	1		2012
<i>Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal</i>	0	9	1	53	2011
<i>Foresight</i>	0.62	20	1		2013
<i>Gender in Management: an International Journal</i>	0	22	2		2009-2015
<i>International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal</i>	0.765	27	2		2005-2010
<i>International Journal of Business and Social Science</i>	0.305	N/A	2		2011-2012
<i>International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation</i>	0	N/A	1	20	2012
<i>International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship</i>	0	6	3	45- 25	2009-2011
<i>International Journal of Organizational Analysis</i>	0	11	1		2009
<i>International Small Business Journal</i>	1.8	46	2		2010-2013
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	1.52	98	1		2015
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	1.48	114	1		2014
<i>Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship</i>	0	13	1		2004
<i>Journal of Global Entrepreneurship Research</i>	0	N/A	1	20	2012
<i>Journal of International Women's Studies</i>	0	12	1		2011
<i>Journal of Middle East Women's Studies</i>	0	3	1	23	2010
<i>Management Decision</i>	1.42	48	1		2015
<i>Women's Studies International Forum</i>	0.46	40	2		2011-2012

**Table I.**  
Academic journals  
and their specific  
ranking

because it does not encompass the collection of data with a specific research question in mind (Henry *et al.*, 2015).

The use of theoretical approaches throughout the body of chosen literature was highly limited, with 6 theoretical perspectives used in all of the 29 articles reviewed. *Institutional Theory* was applied three times. Other theories included *Social Constructivist View*, *Feminist Theory and Legitimation* and *Post-Materialism Theories* (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Tlaiss, 2013, 2015).

### Female entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa region

In line with Brush *et al.* (2009), we analyzed the literature through a gender aware lens applying a three dimensional perspective (the micro, meso and macro). Micro level research explores the individual entrepreneur. It focuses on *women's motives, orientations* and *self-confidence* and explores *personal attributes* and characteristics of female entrepreneurs. Macro level factors pertain to the larger environment in which women live and act, such as the normative constraints, the government and the economy. The meso level concentrates on factors related to organizations, such as processes, structures and strategy (Chelariu *et al.*, 2008).

In this context, scholars often apply the pull-push model (Uhlener and Thurik, 2007) and contextualize it within the realm of gendered societies. Pull factors suggest individuals are attracted to entrepreneurship by a prospect of greater material or non-material benefits. Push factors are the result of the dissatisfaction of individuals with their current situation (Verheul *et al.*, 2006). Jamali (2009), for example, found that the motives of Lebanese entrepreneurs included a combination of both, as women faced problems with proper integration into the labor market or were frustrated by gender discrimination. Women were also pulled into entrepreneurship by arguments such as work flexibility, the possibility to generate double income for their families, and by challenge and creativity. In the UAE, it was found that expatriates are drawn more by push factors such as financial security, lack of job opportunities and low income, whereas Emirati women are more influenced by factors like independence, social status and self-esteem (Itani *et al.*, 2011). Other studies noted that the pull effects were the result of governmental efforts to encourage and support female entrepreneurs (Tlaiss, 2013).

In regards to self-confidence, the results are mixed. Some studies noted that low confidence levels of women entrepreneurs had negative effects on venture growth (Kirkwood, 2009). Other studies uncovered a high level of self-confidence, which was a key

Knowledge areas and research gaps

Countries	No. of articles
Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, UAE	1
Jordan (Palestinian refugees)	1
Kuwait, Oman, UAE and Lebanon	1
Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Yemen	1
Bahrain	1
Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, KSA, UAE	1
Iran	3
KSA	4
Lebanon	1
Morocco	2
Oman	5
UAE	10

**Table II.**  
Distribution of articles according to their geographic focus

motivator for Saudi women (Sadi and Al-Ghazali, 2010), Iranian women (Javadian and Singh, 2012) and Lebanese women (Jamali, 2009).

At the meso level, gendered cultural expectations were found to create organizational barriers hindering women from advancement (Tlaiss, 2013). One of the major problems that women suffer from is lack of capital access at different venture stages (Dechant and Lamky, 2005; Zamberi Ahmad, 2011). Less than a third of women surveyed by Weeks (2009) had a bank credit, or received financing from formal financial institutions. Instead, their initial financing came from friends and family with some regional variations. In Iran, access to capital seems to be an equally big problem for both genders (Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2014). As to Tunisia, half of the women there have access to formal funding (Weeks, 2009), while women in the KSA control significant enough wealth to fund themselves. Other challenges frequently addressed in the literature include lack of skilled workers (Zamberi Ahmad, 2010; Goby and Eroglu, 2011; Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2014; Weeks, 2009), expensive bureaucratic processes (Zamberi Ahmad, 2010; Weeks, 2014), lack of managerial skills (Welsh *et al.*, 2014) and limited access to training (Zeidan and Bahrami, 2011; Weeks, 2009; Welsh *et al.*, 2014).

On the macro level, the literature shows how pervasive cultural norms “trickle down” to the cognitive social constructions of individuals and influence their beliefs and ideas of appropriate behavior in society (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2003). MENA societies are patriarchal, very much immersed in gendered assumptions about behavior. Men are viewed as decisive and women as more intuitive and relationship focused (Hofstede, 1992; Omair, 2008). Moreover, women are viewed as being less powerful and influential than men (Zamberi Ahmad, 2011). Female entrepreneurial activities contradict traditional ideas, which ascribe the role of homemaker and mother to the woman and the role of breadwinner to the man (Goby and Eroglu, 2011; Tlaiss, 2013). Prevailing social norms affect women negatively across the region, including KSA (Zamberi Ahmad, 2011), Oman (Al-Sadi *et al.*, 2011), Jordan (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010) and Iran (Javadian and Singh, 2012). Practically, Al-Dajani and Marlow’s (2010) research reveals how Palestinian embroiderers in Jordan are forced to constantly negotiate their entrepreneurial roles with their families, constantly reassuring them that their family obligations would still be met. This creates additional barriers for female entrepreneurs regardless of their social status. Women interviewees expressed explicit concern over these normative pressures (Javadian and Singh, 2012) that are reinforced by certain religious understandings endowing men with significant authority over women in terms of financial responsibility, inheritance, marriage and divorce (Kazemi, 2000).

Islam has a strong and defining impact on women’s role and status and thus has been argued to impact entrepreneurial motivations (Dechant and Lamky, 2005; Eroglu and McCrohan, 2008; Sidani, 2005; Zamberi Ahmad, 2011). It emphasizes motherhood as a priority above all other occupations (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). However, the prevailing gender norms and traditions are often related to local cultural practices and do not represent actual Islamic values (Hilsdon and Rozario, 2006). Other evidence suggests that other meaningful indicators include demographic differences – like women’s educational level – that make them more susceptible to conservative patriarchy (Dechant and Lamky, 2005).

Some studies interestingly argue that female entrepreneurs often feel inspired by the teachings of Islam, and they perceive it in a positive light (Madichie and Gallant, 2012; Tlaiss, 2015). Across social classes, women refer to Khadija, Prophet Muhammad’s first wife and a successful businesswoman, as an inspiration and role model. Highly educated women in the UAE (Naguib and Jamali, 2015) and underprivileged Palestinian refugee women working as freelance embroiders both drew on Khadija’s role model as a woman who

established and ran her own business and managed financial assets without male interference (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010). In this sense, women developed a more feminist understanding of Islam and considered constraints on their female development a result of patriarchal interpretations of the Quran (Naguib and Jamali, 2015).

Work-family balance has been found to be a great challenge in many countries including the UAE (Erogul and McCrohan, 2008; Itani *et al.*, 2011), KSA (Zamberi Ahmad, 2011; Welsh *et al.*, 2014), Jordan (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010) and Bahrain (Sadi and Al-Ghazali, 2010). Women are obliged to combine family responsibilities with their entrepreneurial roles (Erogul and McCrohan, 2008). Women in those countries have developed different coping strategies, e.g. hiring of domestic helpers, efficient time management strategies, lobbying for greater support of the family or networking strategies (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Itani *et al.*, 2011).

Women's social networking behaviors are affected by the specific collectivist context of MENA societies and predominantly include a network of family and close friends (Erogul and McCrohan, 2008; Weeks, 2009; Zamberi Ahmad, 2011). Individuals are often merited by their relationships and connections (Rosen, 2000). Trust and cooperation tend to be maintained through small and personalized groups – Webs of indebtedness that rest on reciprocity, reputation and repeated interactions (Rosen, 2000). In the KSA, for example, women are dependent on their family networks as they traditionally need the permission of a *wakil*, a male legal intermediary, who acts on the woman's behalf to proceed with a business transaction (Welsh *et al.*, 2014). UAE husbands provide women with vital connections in a wider social space, and the lack of such spousal backing can potentially jeopardize female ventures (Erogul and McCrohan, 2008). Across many countries like Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain and the UAE, women tend to lack extensive business support systems and rarely consult outside advisors (Weeks, 2009).

Almost all MENA countries have announced their commitment to maintaining international standards to achieve more development for women, and many countries are signatory to the millennium development goals. Governments in the region have increasingly been playing a pivotal role at the macro level for women's entrepreneurship (Zamberi Ahmad, 2011). However, gendered rules and regulations create obstacles (Gray and Finley-Hervey, 2005) and government officials frequently lack the information about particular difficulties female entrepreneurs face (Al-Ghazali, 2010; Welsh *et al.*, 2014).

In the KSA, the government grants women the permission to own a license for a business without asking for the consent of their husbands (Zamberi Ahmad, 2011) and provides legal protection of female investors and customers (Al-Ghazali, 2010). In the UAE, women prefer to interact with the government to access funds since legal dependency on men precludes developing relationships to access external funding (Naser *et al.*, 2009). Traditional funding is usually not available to less wealthy women who cannot provide adequate collaterals (Naser *et al.*, 2009). The UAE creates legitimacy around female entrepreneurial activities through policies, educational programs and different initiatives aiming to give women the tools to start their businesses (Van Home *et al.*, 2011).

## Research gaps

Our review reveals some gaps in the literature that need to be addressed by future research. These are outlined below.

### *Lack of theoretical framework in most studies*

Many papers merely provide empirical and descriptive statistics and lack a rigorous conceptualization of expected relationships at the micro, meso and macro levels. Only few



articles use theories that provide a better backdrop for their research. Only three studies used institutional theory which is an adequate window to look at entrepreneurship in the region. In addition, entrepreneurship literature has witnessed an increased referral to feminist theories; yet, in our research, only one study ([Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010](#)) used this perspective. Future research would benefit from increased inclusion of social constructivist analysis, as it gives room to reflect on gender biases and gender-related assumptions underlying entrepreneurship research. This is especially relevant for research on the micro level concerned with entrepreneurial attitudes and motivations. Here, many of the measures are socially constructed and vary in time and place ([Ahl, 2006](#)).

*Over-emphasis on macro level indicators (culture, religion, etc.) and under-emphasis on organizational level variables*

Our review revealed that macro level indicators (culture, religion, etc.) have been extensively studied at the expense of organizational (meso) level variables, such as women's management styles, structures and business cultures, besides the performance and survival of women-owned firms. This gap prevents addressing the interplay between different levels of analysis. For example, there is a need to better understand how the challenge of balancing business activities with domestic responsibilities is concretely reflected in the profitability of women-led ventures. On the micro level, many studies focus on comparing men and women but remain oblivious regarding gender constructions. By searching for gender differences rather than similarities, they inadvertently reproduce gender inequality in entrepreneurship research ([Ahl, 2006](#)). For example, the analysis of women entrepreneurs is often made using male-related criteria to draw conclusions about their progress and success ([Wilson et al., 2007](#); [Zamberi Ahmad, 2011](#); [Hattab, 2012](#); [Javadian and Singh, 2012](#)). This does not provide much insight. Studies do not dwell on explaining the specific paths of female entrepreneurs that do not need to coincide with male paths. Such modes of analysis imply conceptions of female entrepreneurs that are deviant from the prevailing male entrepreneurial norms, and they often reflect a "dichotomized and gendered understanding" ([Ahl, 2006](#), p. 8).

*Lack of studies within ethnic groups or studies that acknowledge the complex social, cultural and religious diversity in the region*

There is a paucity of studies concerned with the entrepreneurial implications of the large ethnic diversity within the region and within the context of single countries. This diversity is reflected in tribal, regional, confessional or national specificities. For example, papers almost unanimously address Islam when considering the interplay between religion and patriarchy. This suggests a unique and homogeneous cultural attitude toward women which some scholars have criticized as a stereotypical view ([Karam and Afiouni, 2014](#)). Moreover, Islam itself has a variety of gender-related traditions that depend on the various Islamic confessional communities ([Bullock, 2002](#)). The region offers a great opportunity to include other faiths, notably Judaism and Christianity, and to compare how their historic experiences, cultures and traditions interact with female entrepreneurial activities. This would also give voice to diverse Arab cultures and the way they view women ([Metcalfe, 2011](#)). There is, for example, a dire need to understand female entrepreneurship among the Coptic women of Egypt, Sunnis of Iran, Maronites of Lebanon and Greek Orthodox of Jordan. There is also a need to understand female entrepreneurship among the Kurds and Yazidis in Iraq, Amazighs in North Africa, Armenians in Syria and Lebanon, Circassians in Jordan and various other ethnicities across the MENA region.

*In-attention to emerging trends in the Middle East and North Africa region*

The region has gone through many violent conflicts throughout history. Since 2010, a profound political and economic upheaval has taken place, which started with the Yasmine revolution in Tunisia and swept across the entire Arab world with mixed outcomes for the region. This has had many implications for female entrepreneurship. Previous research shows that the most significant gender difference relates to women's sensitivity to risk perception, environmental hostility and political uncertainty (Greene *et al.*, 2003). At the exception of Al-Dajani and Marlow (2010) who studied Palestinian refugees in Jordan, research does not address these topics and does not explore female entrepreneurship under adverse conditions. Doing this would help in improving the socio-economic prospects of refugees and developing their livelihood in camps in host countries. Refugee entrepreneurial activities can create employment opportunities and can help them contribute to the growth of their host countries. Our main arguments and findings as well as possible future research questions are summarized in Table III. Table IV presents the main studies included in the review.

**Implications and conclusion**

The present paper set out to give an overview of the research on female entrepreneurship in the MENA region. Our content analysis identified and analyzed publication trends and theories as well as methodological approaches applied by researchers. We analyzed the literature based on a gender aware framework covering micro, meso and macro levels, which allowed for the identification of important research gaps. Policymakers and practitioners would be able to develop better support policies and programs when they understand the gendered dimension of entrepreneurship. They would also become better at anticipating the difficulties that female business starters and entrepreneurs suffer from.

Through this work, we were able to identify important gaps in the present research on MENA women entrepreneurs. For one, there is a need for more solid theoretical foundations in the research. Most of the research studies so far have been trying to gauge the situation of female entrepreneurs, understanding their status and the profiles of their operations. This has been very useful. Yet it is about time for future research studies to delve in building a solid theoretical framework by which we can understand female entrepreneurship in the region. The uniqueness of the region and the distinctiveness of some of the factors that motivate or obstruct female entrepreneurship have the potential to contribute to the general field of entrepreneurship as a whole.

Researchers need to continue to pay attention to the role of cultural variables. Among the issues that deserve consideration is the role of societal institutions in impacting women's access to resources and professional networks. In addition, it is worthy to better understand how women are able to build and maintain legitimacy for their ventures. In negotiating their role in public space, women use several strategies that we need to better comprehend. It seems that such strategies differ in the region from one country to the other. How do women gain legitimacy in Saudi Arabia compared to Tunisia, for example. The role of institutional forces varies significantly between those two contexts. This reinforces our earlier point regarding the need to apply the relevant theoretical framework in addressing such issues.

One area that has not been addressed in prior studies is the role of social class and how it interacts with female entrepreneurship. Prior studies outside the region have found that social class is related to high levels of human capital (Anderson and Miller, 2003). Social affiliation endows people to access to knowledge, education and relevant networks that could explain variances in entrepreneurial behaviors. Women in the MENA region do not represent a monolithic group and their experiences vary not only according to the specific

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Research area	Main focus and findings	Potential for future research/questions of interest
Methodological issues	Geographic focus of research is skewed towards the Gulf	More research from across the region is necessary as the Gulf does not reflect the realities and context of women in MENA
Theory	Most research fails to apply and to test theory	Increased referral to theoretical frameworks necessary when examining female entrepreneurship in the region
Analysis levels	The research focuses on micro level is on entrepreneurial motivations, "self-efficacy", "self-confidence" Meso level receives little attention Research focuses on macro level aggregates to three major topic: normative constraints; families and networks; governmental institutions	More attention could be played to the interplay of different analysis levels and meso level factors How women's socialization does affect resource acquisition, professional networks, professional legitimacy, or entrepreneurial activity? How does social class interact with female entrepreneurship? How is the important issue of balancing business activities with domestic responsibilities reflected in the profitability of women-led ventures? Research misses to address ethnic and cultural diversity and heterogeneity: How do women's intentions and strategic choices differ between developed and developing countries in the region? What are the dynamics of the diverse Islamic cultural and political forms of expression (e.g. different sub-confessional groups or the rise of political Islam and fundamentalism in the region) regarding female entrepreneurship? How do different processes and dynamics within various religious groups and ethnoses affect the entrepreneurial agency of women? Research could elaborate more on the ambivalent role of government as change agent: What is the role of the government and other assistance providers from a gendered perspective? What is the effect of governmental policies and procedures that target female entrepreneurship, and how can they best stimulate and assist the development and growth of female ventures in the region? What role do non-governmental organizations play to foster female entrepreneurship in the region?
Regional topics	In-attention to emerging trends in the MENA region, particularly, the refugee crisis	How do women refugees manage to circumvent institutional and political obstacles in order to start their own businesses? What policies can be developed in order to make refugee camps more conducive to female entrepreneurship?

**Table III.**  
Main focus/findings  
and potential for  
future research

Authors	Country	Data type	Sample size (women entrepreneurs unless otherwise indicated)	Theoretical perspective
Al-Dajani and Marlow (2010)	Jordan (Palestinian refugees)	Qualitative: in-depth interviews	43	Feminist theory
Al-Sadi <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Oman	Mixed-methods	101 (survey) 22 (Interviews)	contextualization framework of El Namaki and Gerritson (in Birley 1988)
Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014)	Iran	Quantitative: Survey	126 Female owned firms	NA
Belwal <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Oman	Qualitative: based on two questionnaires developed by Pardo-del-Val (2010) and Economic Times	33	NA
Bodolica and Spraggon (2015)	UAE	Qualitative: case study and semi-structured interviews	6	NA
Dechant and Lamky (2005)	Bahrain & Oman	Qualitative: Interpretive case study	12	NA
Erogul and McCrohan (2008)	UAE	Mixed-methods	100 (survey) 11 (interviews)	NA
Goby and Erogul (2011)	UAE	Qualitative, conceptual interviews	NA	NA
Gray and Finley-Hervey (2005)	Morocco	Qualitative: structured interviews	15	NA
Hattab (2012)	Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, West Bank & Gaza Strip, Yemen	Mixed-methods	NA	NA
Irani <i>et al.</i> (2011)	UAE	Mixed-methods	16	Push -and Pull theory of entrepreneurship
Jamali (2009)	Lebanon	Qualitative: Semi-structured Interviews	10	relational multi-level framework approach
Javadian and Singh (2012)	Iran	Qualitative: archived interview data	28	Syed and Ozbilgin (2009)
Kargwell (2012)	UAE		75	NA

(continued)

Knowledge areas and research gaps

Table IV.  
Main analysis elements

Table IV.

Authors	Country	Data type	Sample size (women entrepreneurs unless otherwise indicated)	Theoretical perspective
Madichie and Gallant (2012)	UAE	Qualitative: Questionnaire	10	institutional theory
Majumdar and Varadarajan (2013)	UAE	Mixed-methods Quantitative: survey	244 (male and female)	NA
Mathew (2010)	Oman, UAE	Qualitative: 2 case studied	2 country cases	NA
McElwee and Al-Riyami (2003)	Oman	Qualitative: in-depth interviews	25	NA
Naser <i>et al.</i> (2009)	UAE	Quantitative: Survey	449	NA
Sadi and Al-Ghazali (2010)	KSA	Quantitative: Survey	150 (men and women)	Push and Pull theory of entrepreneurship
Sarfaraz and Faghhi (2011)	Iran	Quantitative: Survey	3,119 entrepreneurs (GEM Survey)	NA
Tlaiss (2015)	UAE, Kuwait, Oman, and Lebanon	Qualitative: in-depth interviews	30	Institutional theory and social constructivism
Tlaiss (2013)	UAE	Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews	20	Dissatisfaction, Legitimation and Post-Materialism Theories
Weeks (2009)	Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, UAE	Quantitative: Survey	1,228	NA
Welsh <i>et al.</i> (2014)	KSA	Quantitative: Survey	164	5M Framework of entrepreneurship Brush <i>et al.</i> (2009)
Zamperi Ahmad (2011)	KSA	Qualitative: in-depth interviews	19	NA
Zamperi Ahmad (2010)	KSA	Mixed-methods	250	NA
Zeidan and Bahrami (2011)	Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE	Conceptual	NA	5M Framework of entrepreneurship Brush <i>et al.</i> (2009)

context in which they operate but also in terms of the social group to which they belong. The interplay of gender and social class, and perhaps other variables such as religion and ethnicity, is thus worthy of further investigation.

Comparative studies have the potential to explain the myriad ways by which women are able to develop their entrepreneurial ventures. There is a need to gauge the commonalities and discords in this field across different countries, as this has implications for scholarly reasons and also has significant policy implications (Minniti and Naudé, 2010). This does not only include studies that compare countries within the MENA region but also those that are outside the region including developing countries. While some studies have made an attempt to make cross-country comparison in the region (Hattab, 2012), those remain a few and broader scope studies are still needed.

Another important avenue for future research relates to the impact that governmental support has had on female entrepreneurship. While studies emphasize the fact that many governments in the region are sympathetic to the potential role of women in the public space in general, and the entrepreneurial arena in specific, we know little about whether such backing is translating into real benefits for aspiring women entrepreneurs. Some of the questions that remain to be answered include whether governmental support has been substantive or merely ceremonial. In addition, we ought to know more about the outcomes of governmental policies and initiatives that target female entrepreneurship. Moreover, more insights are needed into how can governments better stimulate and assist the development and growth of female ventures in the region. Are governments acting in real and substantive ways to facilitate female entrepreneurship across the region? Those and similar questions offer interesting areas for future investigation.

In the MENA region, culture and national affiliation represent important angles by which we can interpret female entrepreneurship. These do not, however, represent the only explanatory variables. There is still a need to address particular regional experiences, yet those have to be approached from various levels of analysis. This would help in developing theory in addition to offering more concrete policy recommendations benefitting female entrepreneurship in general.

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