



## Saudi Female Entrepreneurs: Business Motivations and Commitment to Solving Women's Social Issues

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There are many rules governing women's professional opportunities in Saudi Arabia; the Ministry of Labor has a set of rules that women are required to follow regarding social and religious expectations. For instance, women cannot work in places where men are employed which limit the job opportunities for women to two significant fields, education and medicine, where women must work in separate schools or medical facilities from men. According to the Saudi Central Department of Statistics & Information, the unemployment rate of Saudi female college graduates is 54%, while the Saudi male college graduate unemployment rate is 23%. Eighty percent of unemployed women in Saudi Arabia have earned a bachelor's degree (Alharbi, 2010). The purpose of this study was to explore the social role of Saudi women who have succeeded in operating their own small businesses, particularly in providing additional job opportunities for other women. As part of this study, two specific research questions were examined:

1. What are the motives that push Saudi women to enter the apparel production industry?
2. What level of commitment do female Saudi business owners have to providing additional job opportunities for other women?

Qualitative data was collected to gain in-depth information about the characteristics of female entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia. In total, 14 respondents were interviewed as part of this study. Prior to collecting data, the respondents were provided a letter of consent, which included an explanation of the research project in general, and the primary research questions in particular. A semi-structured interview format was utilized with a standard probing technique to glean additional information not specifically noted in the initial interview questions. The participants were guided by the interview questions, yet were free to discuss any new thoughts that were not included in the interview questions. The interview questions were developed based on the two primary research questions as noted previously. Each interview lasted for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. As part of this study, 14 female small business owners in Jeddah city, Saudi Arabia, were interviewed. To analyze the data, the responses collected from each respondent were summarized and sent back to respondents. The word-based technique (word repetition and key-word-in-contexts (KWIC)) was used to analyze data as well as to compare and contrast responses to each question. Responses for each question were read across all the participants; then, notes for key concepts and themes were taken. This technique was applied for each interview question. When key concepts and themes for each interview question were identified, the responses to the interview questions were combined to evaluate the primary research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Saudi female entrepreneurs reported financial reasons (i.e., generating more income) as a motive driving them to start small businesses, as well as other non-financial factors, including flexibility, challenge, positive work environment, and limited job opportunities. The meaning of these motives among Saudi entrepreneurs is similar to that of other entrepreneurs as defined in previous studies. For instance, among female entrepreneurs, independence means to be financially autonomous or to have freedom in choices related to work. Flexibility means to have a balance between work and family and/or to have the ability to work from home. Common cross-cultural motivations of female entrepreneurs included the desire to increase personal wealth and/or were necessitated due to limited job opportunities (Hughes, 2005). Yet, in some cases, the meaning of pull motives among entrepreneurs is different. For Saudi female entrepreneurs, a desire to be challenged means to achieve success from nothing; while for other entrepreneurs participating in previous studies, a desire to be challenged means to have creativity, complexity, and variety in daily work.

When asking the participants about their ability or willingness to extend their work to accommodate larger numbers of Saudi women, it was found that the business owners had several reasons for not planning to do this. Among the participants in this study, none felt that their operations would grow enough to accommodate additional workers. Interestingly, the majority of Saudi apparel workers are of Filipino descent. It was discovered that among participants, a perception existed that Filipino workers are better skilled than Saudi workers in apparel production. Saudi women are more likely to be employed in beauty salons. In general, it was found that working as a seamstress is not an attractive job for Saudi women whether for the owners or for the employees in this industry. Female graduates of apparel and textiles departments in Saudi Arabia have not been educated to work in this type of industry as they are mainly educated to be secondary education instructors. Especially in the production of evening dresses, a common product produced in Saudi apparel workshops, Saudi workers are not perceived as possessing advanced sewing skills. Consequently, in coordinating apparel and textiles programs in Saudi Arabia, basic and advanced sewing skills should be included in the curriculum. Enhancing business knowledge is another objective that apparel and textile programs should consider since Saudi women seek more advance positions in business management. Business courses related to management, accounting, and product development should be offered in apparel and textile programs to better qualify Saudi women to manage and operate apparel production workshops in Saudi Arabia.

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