
*INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS, EUROPEAN INTEGRATION,
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**THE ROLE OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN
DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (SYRIAN WOMEN
ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A LIFESTYLE)**

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Abstract: *This study examines the effect of female business projects and their impact on women's economic and social empowerment through increasing women's contribution to income, their role in family decision-making, improving their standard of living, self-esteem, and self-confidence, eliminating poverty and unemployment that rural women suffer from. The gender gap in entrepreneurship persists despite the increasing number of public policies and institutional resources intended to promote women-led enterprises. A qualitative method was used to review the literature related to Women Entrepreneurship in Syria.*

The economic contribution of women in Syria is characterized by its diversity between agriculture, trade, and government jobs. However, the Syrian crisis has heavily affected the level of entrepreneurship. Data shows that the business performance index decreased to 41.6% in 2018, making Syria rank 174 out of 190 countries surveyed. Even though Syria has witnessed a great improvement in the level of women's development in parallel with the development of the level of women's education and their entry into the labour market within the public and private sectors alike, still the most recent Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) shows the relative gender gap in entrepreneurship index rate is currently at 0.2. The percentage of entrepreneurship was limited to 1% of working women, compared to 4.9% of men, meaning there are approximately five male entrepreneurs for every female entrepreneur which clearly highlight the need for support.

Keywords: *Social Entrepreneurship; Female Entrepreneurship; Sustainable Development Goals.*

JEL Classification: Q01; L31; L26

1. Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocated the application of a gender perspective equal treatment as part of sustainable development strategies, while decreasing inequalities, prioritizing equality, and averting bias (SDGs 5 and 10, respectively). Thus, many key players, including governments, non-profit organizations, and researchers, possess an interest regarding promoting the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Herrington and Kew, 2017).

However, the growth of women's entrepreneurship has lagged that of men in many developed countries and in most developing countries. Therefore, understanding the current and potential barriers women entrepreneurs face is important to increasing their participation in entrepreneurial activities.

Syria, like other Arab countries, sought to carry out broad reforms to promote and develop women's projects, remove the obstacles they might face and work to help, finance and support them, even though those reforms represent a small percentage. This was demonstrated by the establishment of many national agencies that support it (Unemployment Control Commission, 2003).

Entrepreneurship is one of the strategies and mechanisms for the economic and social empowerment of women in Syria (Ayoub, 2010). This was adopted within the sustainable development strategy in Syria launched in 2019, which emphasized the need to achieve gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls in the fifth goal by 2030 (General Commission for Family Affairs and Housing, 2020).

The rate of women's contribution to economic activity in Syria is about 12-13%, and they contribute 20% of the Syrian labor force, as the participation of Syrian women in the labor force is evidence of their development. This percentage varied between economic sectors, as it rose significantly in the commercial and service sectors by 31 and 30 percent, respectively, while agriculture occupied the third place with only 27 percent (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

Women's fields of work are limited in relation to men's fields of work, especially in the Arab world, and specifically in rural areas, based on the nature of rural women, their characteristics, and their connection to work as a housewife (Firdous, Syrian Fund for Rural Development, 2003). Therefore, small projects are considered one of the most important options for women economic empowerment, and it is an appropriate opportunity for women to enter the field of entrepreneurship, which was the preserve of men only (General Federation of Trade Unions, 2003).

Where small projects provide an appropriate and proportionate environment for women, enabling them to join the economic participation and to be an effective member in the country's development, in addition to being a housewife and responsible for the affairs of her family, because any woman can set up a project from her home, without the need for a high budget for its establishment or a site to run. Those small projects have proven their effectiveness in the field of female's entrepreneurship (De Bruin et al. 2007; Pardo-del-Val, M. 2010).

2. Literature Review

Women's position as economic actors is frequently improved through the use of entrepreneurship and employment. Examples include microfinance, for which there is evidence of success, and the enhancement of women's living standards (Buvinic et al., 2013).

Many have voiced concerns about such programs, noting that they are typically small, with limited and infrequent returns (Casier, 2010; Chant, 2014; Sweetman). Others have noted that such work from home is frequently extremely difficult to attain because women lack the resources necessary for successful entrepreneurship, such as land, real estate, and other assets (Chant, 2007; Tamale, 2004).

In reality, there is no direct correlation between employment, economic empowerment, and gender equality. Real empowerment and equality continue to require gender-sensitive policies that address the multifaceted obstacles to gender equality in terms of personal and professional development and economic participation. For instance, economic empowerment should entail that women have complete control over their income (Duflo, 2012; Reshi & Sudha, 2023).

Thus, while it is generally acknowledged that women's paid employment is positively associated with poverty reduction and human growth and development, fragile contexts demonstrate that it is also positively associated with reduced gender inequality in societal beliefs (Lechman & Popowska, 2021).

However, the absence of adequate legal protection measures remains a major factor in inequality and the constant pressure on women to seek employment in the informal sector, where the majority of their economic activities range from "domestic or socially necessary work" to volunteer work (cash is rarely exchanged and there are no regulatory institutions) to "shadow and irregular" secondary activities, where some form of enterprise and pressure is expected, but regulation is either non-existent or ineffective (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009: 47).

Entrepreneurship among women has both an economic and a social impact. In addition to the general benefits of entrepreneurship, such as economic development, growth, and employment creation, women entrepreneurs also experience empowerment, emancipation, and self-realization as a result of their activism. In addition, it is the first step toward economic independence for many women (Raman et al.2022).

Although women and men enter the field of entrepreneurship for similar reasons, their motivations for doing so vary greatly. Women entrepreneurs appear to be more motivated to enter the field of entrepreneurship by desires and expectations, such as advancing their professional development, establishing their own business, or administering and controlling their work environment. As an alternative to, say, unemployment, males appear to be more likely to enter business for power-related motives (Sarri & Trihopoulou. 2005).

The obstacles women identify to becoming entrepreneurs and the barriers they encounter on their entrepreneurial journey differ from those men identify. Consequently, women encounter more personal obstacles to entrepreneurship, such as a lack of specific training, a low level of self-confidence, a lack of access to social and business networks, or a lack of motivation due to difficulties reconciling work and family life. (Brindley, 2005). Male entrepreneurs place a greater emphasis on external obstacles, such as access to capital, absence of support, and bureaucracy. Women's views on enabling factors that are beneficial to entrepreneurship differ from that of men (Xheneti et al. 2019). Women are seen to be more intrigued in strategies designed to boost their individual assets and enhance their abilities and skills (training programs, entrepreneurship education, and self-confidence-boosting measures), whereas men show up to be more interested in personalized assistance, such as access to financial resources or advisory services.

Women's entrepreneurship is propelled from within, whereas men's is driven from without. This unique approach must be taken into account during the planning and development of entrepreneurial-supportive policies.

On the basis of these distinctions, institutional conditions must be enhanced. Given that women and men are affected by various factors, it is crucial to strengthen gender-sensitive frameworks in order to encourage entrepreneurship. The male-centric structure is externally focused, whereas the female-centric support system is inwardly focused. In this second framework, actions such as promoting successful women entrepreneurs as role models, mentoring, and reaching out to networks are particularly useful. In addition, the short- and medium-term effects of these actions can be anticipated to be enhanced. Finally, particular procedures can be

implemented to guarantee that one's own desires do not impede entrepreneurial endeavours.

3. Research Problem and Data Gathering

Female entrepreneurship in Syria is still considered a small portion of the total business sector, as women's economic contribution is often concentrated in the governmental or private sector. This indicates the weak financial independence of women and their low competitiveness in the business market, which is dominated by masculine nature.

The research problem is based on a general hypothesis build on the women's weak role in contributing to income improvement, obtaining productive resources, and financing services because of the lack of interest in female entrepreneurship, as well as their low level of education, and the lack of practical experience, due to the presence of traditions restricting women's work, and thus not benefiting from their capability as an active force in achieving economic growth.

Women struggles' have increased recently, which are added to their basic role as a housewife, considering the decrease in the local labor force due to the increase in emigration and the involvement of a large proportion of male in military service, in addition to the economic instability pressures in general, which all prompted an increase in the contribution of women alongside with men to jointly bear the financial responsibilities of the family. Therefore, they had to work, earn, or create additional sources of income for the family.

Generally, collected data on entrepreneurial and other projects in Syria is very limited, especially in the absence of registered data for projects within the private sector in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MOSAL) (ILO, 2014).

Therefore, the data collection process in this field includes various secondary sources, the most important of which are the Central Bureau of Statistics and the International Labor Organization.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Syrian's Women Entrepreneurship Reality

The concept of Syrian female entrepreneurship is relatively new in the Syrian literature, as this concept has not received sufficient attention at the level of academic studies.

Although there are some legislations that focus on empowering women, the term entrepreneurship was absent in these legislations that focused on economic empowerment in general (Al-Mikdad et al, 2019).

On the practical level, the government's interest in female entrepreneurship has focused mainly on the small and micro-enterprise sector as a tool to combat poverty and achieve economic empowerment of women, especially rural women. Despite this, female entrepreneurship has developed more in urban areas than in rural areas, due to the lack of adequate infrastructure for entrepreneurship initiatives in rural areas in general.

4.2. Economic Empowerment and Women Entrepreneurship Indicators in Syria

As already mentioned, there are no local or domestic studies on the indicators and factors related to women's entrepreneurship in Syria. Rather, most studies are conducted by international centers and organizations in the context of international reports, such as the data of the International Labor Organization and the Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria.

4.2.1. Doing Business Index

It is the World Bank's ease of doing business index, which is an aggregate number that includes various criteria that determine the ease of doing business in a country. This index ranges from zero for the lowest ranking to 100 for the maximum ranking. According to the latest data recorded by the World Bank, it was found that Syria ranks late regarding the overall index of ease of doing business, as it ranked 174 out of 190 countries included in the questionnaire, as shown in Table (1), meaning that the evaluation of business performance in Syria is negative according to the World Bank indicator.

As is demonstrated in table (1), the negative performance is concentrated in the international trade and credit indices, while the Protecting Minority Investors index was relatively the best, as Syria ranked 89. Despite this, it is considered a low ranking and insufficient to attract investors.

	Global DBI Score	Starting a Business	Getting Credit	Protecting Minority Investors	Trading across Borders	Resolving Insolvency
DTF	41.6	80.4	15	53.3	29.8	21.4

Rank	174	133	173	89	176	163
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Table 1: Doing Business Index: Global Score and Selected Pillars, Syria, 2018.

Source: ESCWA, compiled from World Bank (2018) doingbusiness.org (190) countries were surveyed.

4.2.2. *Employment Status Indicators According to Gender*

The following indicators in Table (2) include the classification of the labor force in the economy and its distribution between males and females, where clearly we can see a large gender gap, with a large concentration of the labor force in the male category.

	Female	Male
labor force as % of working-age population	7	36
Labor force participation rate, (%)	14.3	74
Employment-to-population ratio (%)	11.3	69.5
Unemployment rate (%)	20.5	6
Own-account workers as % of total employment	7.8	34.9
Contributing family workers as % of total employment	7.2	2.3
Employers as % of total employment	1	4.9
Employees as % of total employment	84	58
Agriculture as % of total employment	10	
Industry as % of total employment estimates, Nov. 2019	26	
Services as % of total employment	63	

Table 2: Indicators of employment status between males and females in Syria for the year 2020.

Source: ILO Stat Data.

https://www.ilo.org/gateway/faces/home/ctryHome?locale=EN&countryCode=SYR&_adf.ctrl-state=ucxdxga52_9

According to the GEM index, the relative gender disparity in entrepreneurship is calculated by dividing the female entrepreneurship rate by the male entrepreneurship rate (Singh et al, 2002). Accordingly, the value of this gap reached 0.2 in Syria (meaning that there are approximately five male entrepreneurs for every businesswoman).

A high unemployment rate among women 20.5%, compared to only 6% among males was also notable. Whereas, most female workers (84%) are employed, which

reflects the low percentage of women entrepreneurs, as the percentage of entrepreneurship, was limited to 1% of working women, compared to 4.9% of men. On the other hand, the research notes a significant percentage (7.8%) of self-employed women (who work on their own without paid employees) compared to 34.9% for men, and this could be related to a decrease in entrepreneurship among women.

This is confirmed when compared to neighboring countries such as the Arab countries, where it was found that the percentage of self-employed women in the Arab world increased to 12.6% compared to 19.1% for men (ILO, 2018), which therefore reflects the low indicators of entrepreneurship among women in Syria in general.

This applies to the percentage of family-contributing workers, as this percentage reached 7.2% among working females, compared to 2.3% for males.

Generally, this percentage is considered relatively low compared to the average at the level of Arab countries, which is estimated at 3.8% and 12.6%, respectively (ILO, 2018).

The higher the ratio, the more likely it is to have weak development, weak job growth, widespread poverty, and often a largely rural economy. Whereas the ratio of self-employed and family workers is an indicator of the percentage of vulnerable employment. With the emphasis that the informal feature is the dominant feature that represents these two types of employment.

4.2.3. Gender Entrepreneurship Indicators in Syria:

As mentioned earlier, there is no recent official data available on Syrian entrepreneurship in general, and this is directly related to the Syrian crisis. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Research Association (GERA), the Adult Population Survey (APS) is carried out often and annually in most countries of the world to track global entrepreneurship (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor).

However, the Syrian data was limited to 2009, i.e. in the period prior to the crisis. Theoretically, they still represent the official trends in the field of entrepreneurship today, given that the political trends remain unchanged. However, in practice, most of these indicators have changed on the ground due to the economic crisis and the difficulty of securing the necessary success components of these projects.

For the sake of ease of interpretation, the average of each indicator of entrepreneurship in the Arab world was adopted for comparison with its corresponding value for Syria, as shown in Table (3).

indicator	Description	Syria	Arab countries (Average)
Perceived opportunities	Percentage of 18-64 population who see good opportunities to start a firm in the area where they live	46.9	54.2
Perceived capabilities	Percentage of 18-64 population who believe they have the required skills and knowledge to start a business	62.1	61.9
Fear of failure rate *	Percentage of the 18-64 population who agree that they see good opportunities but would not start a business for fear it might fail. NOTE: this is a percentage of those seeing good opportunities, and not the total adult population	33.0	18.1
Entrepreneurial intentions	Percentage of 18-64 population (individuals involved in any stage of entrepreneurial activity excluded) who are latent entrepreneurs and who intend to start a business within three years	30.7	54.0
Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA)	Percentage of 18-64 population who are either a nascent entrepreneur or owner-manager of a new business	11.7	8.5
Established Business Ownership	Percentage of 18-64 population who are currently an owner-manager of an established business, i.e., owning and managing a running business that has paid salaries, wages, or any other payments to the owners for more than 42 months	8.5	6.7
Female/Male TEA	Percentage of female 18-64 population who are either a nascent entrepreneur or owner-manager of a new business, divided by the equivalent percentage for their male counterparts	0.4	0.2
High Job Creation Expectation	Percentage of those involved in TEA who expect to create 6 or more jobs in 5 years	30.5	35.1
High Status to Successful Entrepreneurs	Percentage of 18-64 population who agree with the statement that in their country, successful entrepreneurs receive high status	80.2	89.5
Entrepreneurship as a Good Career Choice	Percentage of 18-64 population who agree with the statement that in their country,	78.5	88.8

	most people consider starting a business as a desirable career choice		
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Table 3: Syrian entrepreneurship indicators compared to the Arab region in 2009.

Source: Global Entrepreneurship Monitor <https://www.gemconsortium.org/data/key-aps>

It is shown from the table that Syria has a low ranking in most entrepreneurship indicators, especially regarding the indicator of fear of failure, as the percentage of this indicator rose to 33% in Syria compared to 18.1% as an average for the rest of the Arab world, which indicates a decline in the sense of confidence and security required to engage in entrepreneurial business in Syria.

This was also reflected in the decrease in the percentage of entrepreneurs who intend to start their own entrepreneurial experience by 30.7%, compared to 54%, on average for the rest of the Arab countries.

The research also notes a decrease in the percentage of Syrians who expect to create six or more jobs in five years, see a high status for successful businessmen or consider entrepreneurship as a good career option.

In contrast, the percentage of emerging entrepreneurs or older entrepreneurs (more than 3 years in entrepreneurship) in Syria increased to 11.7% and 8.6%, compared to about 8.5% and 6.7%, respectively, as an average for Arab countries, which indicates a rise in The desire to take risks among Syrian entrepreneurs compared to others, despite the circumstances of doubt and fear, they accept more in this field, and this is what can be classified within the concept of audacity and challenge.

As for gender entrepreneurship, the research notes that the number of female entrepreneurs (either emerging entrepreneurs or owners and managers of a new project) is equal to 0.4 of the number of male entrepreneurs. This percentage is about double the Arab average, which is considered a good indicator for female entrepreneurship in Syria,

Syria was ranked eighth in the Arab world in the Forbes list of the most powerful Arab businesswomen. As for the indicators related to the business environment adopted by the World Bank, there is a slight difference in the measurement of these indicators between men and women in Syria, as shown in Table (4).

	Start-up procedures to register a business (Number)	Cost of business start-up procedures, (% of GNI per capita)	Time required to start a business, female (days)
Male	7	8.10	15
Female	8	8.10	16

Table 4: Business environment indicators in Syria (male/female).

Source: Global Entrepreneurship Monitor <https://data.albankaldawli.org/indicator>

Despite these slight differences, women's participation in companies' ownership is considered very low, according to World Bank statistics for the year 2018, as Syria occupied a late rank among the countries of the Middle East and North Africa region, as shown in Figure (5).

It is evident from the figure that the companies in which women-owned shares in Syria were limited to 15% of the total companies surveyed.

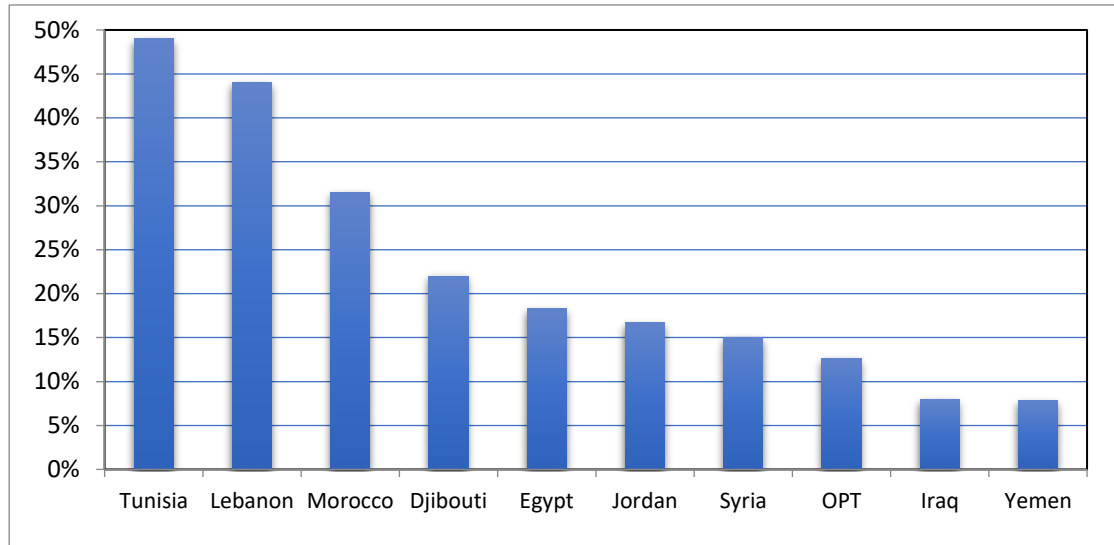


Table 5: Percentage of companies owned by women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Source: World Bank, Enterprise Surveys (2018).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it was founded that the role of female entrepreneurs in Syria began to grow and develop because of the Syrian crisis. It seems that this growth was often driven by pressures rather than opportunities, especially with the increasing economic pressures on Syrian families and the decrease in paid employment opportunities.

However, the female entrepreneurship sector in Syria is currently facing many obstacles, especially those related to the business environment with the deterioration of business performance indicators. Whether for males or females and the deterioration of suitable conditions for investments pushes women's entrepreneurial projects towards the small or micro-enterprise sector, within traditional fields. It is related to the basic needs of the Syrian society.

The official or governmental interest in the field of female entrepreneurship does not exceed the general interest in the entrepreneurial environment. It often considers

female entrepreneurship as a form of self-employment for the purpose of creating self-employment opportunities and combating poverty, while this interest lacks a mechanism that supports and attracts female entrepreneurs whether through financing or regulating.

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