

Contribution of Women's Associations in the Production of Small Projects

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Small projects represent an important place in the economy of developing countries, given that they constitute the vast majority of industrial establishments in general, and that the proportions vary from one country to another. With the beginning of the current century, an important shift occurred in the field of investments, and attention began to be given to small enterprises due to the contribution they make to the national income. One of the countries that has paid attention is the Sultanate of Oman in the recent period to small projects in general and women's projects in particular because of their role in improving the economic situation of women who fall within the framework of social protection. Many developmental and sustainable plans and programs have been put in place at the level of the public and private sectors for the survival of these small projects for poor women who live under the umbrella of social security. This study aims to identify the small projects that Omani women's associations contributed to their success in financing and supporting them financially and marketing them in order to improve the social status of a group of women in Omani society who fall under the social protection system.

Keywords: Omani Women's Associations, Small Projects, Contribution

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Introduction - Aims of this Study

With Oman emerging as one of the major developing economies among the Gulf and Arabian countries, there is a growing need for the participation of women in entrepreneurial business ventures, a popularly known sign of a progressive economy. But Oman is known to have a closed, collectivist, and conservative society which, needless to say, is skeptical of the social and financial independence of women. Although the stand of the society has been consistent for the past few decades, started to change only in the past few years, obviously due to the socio-political changes and growing awareness. Still, women entrepreneurs are often seen to confront various troubles from different areas. So, the aim of this study is to determine the way small projects are getting contributed by Omani women and being guided to accomplish success in terms of financing and helping them to improve their social status within Omani society. The study also attempts to determine how such actions are helping the social protection system.

Objectives

The following objectives are developed to analyse the subject matter in a better way.

- To investigate how the small projects support Omani women's associations socially and financially
- To examine small projects that help Omani women to improve their social status
- To analyse the challenges Omani women, confront in building and running their own entrepreneurial business ventures

Small Projects in the Sultanate of Oman

Oman, located on the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula, is one of the largest nations among the AGCC nations. Oil has been the most prominent contributor to Omani GDP. But with the government having started understanding the need for diversifying the economy focus has been placed on the regional and sectoral development process since the last leg of the past century (Hammami et al. 2022). Oman has acknowledged the importance of liberalization and privatization (by joining WTO in 2000) of its economic policies that can help in boosting the economic growth rate. For this purpose, the Omani government has long started offering encouragement for individuals, both men, and women equally, to involve with their creative business ideas to contribute to the economic development of the nation (Fattah and Al Halbusi, 2022). The fifth five-year plan has conceived the long-term development strategy and has most importantly given importance to diversifying the annual income resources of the country, boosting private investments, both domestic and overseas, in its economy, and enhancing the overall share of the private sector in the overall economic growth process. This five-year plan has also given utmost importance to the development of human resources and increasing the involvement of both men and women in the development of the private sector and the business diversification process.

The Omani government for the past two decades has been taking up a welcoming attitude toward small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The government has taken up a number of important measures in this context, such as availing easy loans for the SMEs from Oman Development Bank, developing incubator services for new businesses, equity funding arrangements through the Youth Fund, and establishing micro-business development services availing via the SANAD program (Hallward and Bekdash-Muellers, 2019). All of these programs importantly focus on promoting the SMEs in Oman. This has been one of the major

reasons the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) reports that the number of SMEs listed with the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development of Oman has spiked by 46.8% to become 81,460 by July 2022, in comparison to 55,491 registered in 2021 during the same period (Abd El Basset et al. 2022). It is also reported by NCSI, that the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Fund (Inma) of Oman has offered funding as high as US\$52.13 million (20 million Omani riyals) for a total of 144 SMEs in 2022, the highest in the past decade (Adikaram and Razik, 2022). With the SMEs performing convincingly in recent years, even after the pandemic impacted them brutally, market observers are expecting that this number is likely to shoot up further in the coming years. Understandably, with a favourable environment in hand, Oman's small business projects are thriving.

The Reality of Small Projects

Small projects are becoming important parts of the economic growth of the developing countries. With small entrepreneurial projects do not require heavy initial investments, and can be started even by ordinary people with little capital investment. Projects of these types, if successful, are seen to return significantly within a short period. Direction (2019) has been of the view that small entrepreneurial projects offer convincing growth for any economy and help SMEs to act potentially in exploring the underlying business gaps. Ali and Salisu (2019) have further added that new entrepreneurial ventures often attempt to explore those business areas with new and innovative ideas that large organisations feel skeptical to invest in. Understandably, SMEs attempt to bridge the operational gap lying in the market. So, the small entrepreneurial business projects of Oman functionally act as strategic units for the structural and holistic growth of the economy of the country.

The small business projects contributed 13.8% of the non-oil Omani GDP in 2019 which is assumed to grow in the coming years (Hallward and Bekdash-Muellers, 2019). NCSI data shows that of the total small and medium size entrepreneurial ventures being run in Oman in 2021, nearly 28.21% are started by female entrepreneurs, mostly in the past decade (Abd El Basset et al. 2022). One might skeptically argue that the contribution of women in small entrepreneurial ventures is really limited, one must not forget that the number of women entrepreneurs was 2.7% of the total entrepreneurs in 2011 (Gbadamosi, 2019). Evidently, a massive change has been noticed in the past decade, and this is a clear sign that the number of women entrepreneurs would increase sporadically in the coming years.

But the researchers like Al-Abri et al. (2018) and Mathew (2019) have observed that there is a high rate of failure of SMEs because of the inability and experience of entrepreneurs to handle inconvenient situations. The same often get true in the case of the SMEs of Oman. Nearly 22.47% of the small entrepreneurial ventures that started between 2015 and 2020 have either reportedly closed their operations or merged with other large organisations (Hammami et al. 2022). Most of the Omani entrepreneurial ventures that failed to cut the market due to their unconventional concepts lacked enough originality. Additionally, a number of entrepreneurial ventures fail to take into account the present market challenges and the level of competition, making them confront market growth issues. Besides, in an attempt to encourage diversification, the Omani government has opened door for the overseas companies, making them offer potential competition to domestic small entrepreneurial projects. Further, Oman, despite taking up significant endeavours, is yet to increase its non-oil exportation (in 2021, non-oil export contributed merely 13.5% of the total export) (Adikaram and Razik, 2022). Understandably, the domestic market of Oman which has almost reached the maturation stage, is making challenges for the new entrepreneurial

ventures to sell their products and services. Moreover, the growing effort of multinational overseas organisations to establish a monopolistic market in Oman is adding further survival challenges for the small and medium size domestic business projects in the country.

Obstacles to Small Projects Faced by Omani Women

Absence of the role models in entrepreneurial ventures can be considered as being one of the major obstacles that the women entrepreneurs of Oman face in starting and running small business projects. The survey by Corrêa et al. (2022) has found a strong correlation between the existence of role models and the generation of women entrepreneurs. Historically, Omani women have not acted as entrepreneurs and resultantly potentially strong role models. Faisal et al. (2017) have argued that the inspiration drawn from role models is often gender-based – an individual of a particular gender is likely to get more encouraged by another individual belonging to the same sex. This trend has been seen to yield fruitful results in different nations, encouraging women entrepreneurs to come forward with new business ideas. So, due to the lack of enough idols to look up to, the women of Oman feel uninterested to come up with small business projects.

Shortness of experience and awareness among Omani women can consider another significant obstacle that restricts them from engaging in new entrepreneurial projects. Al-Harhi (2017) has pointed out that the stages of entrepreneurship development somewhat rely on the experience of the related events, ranging from determining the opportunities to abilities to righteously execute the business actions. But it is often seen that Omani women often lack the skill and enough experience that often demotivate them to take up bold actions. Al-Abri et al. (2018) have importantly, argued that the chances of those surviving in this extremely competitive business world is high who are well-groomed and properly informed in handling information which, in turn, helps in making appropriate decisions. Since the concept of women's entrepreneurship is relatively new to Omani society, it is likely to take time for women entrepreneurs to gain enough experience and ideas.

Omani women entrepreneurs failing to access the right and relevant network to manage their businesses is also becoming an impediment. Oman is a conservatism culture, and the societal position of women is not as similar to any other developed country (Ghouse et al. 2021). Normally, women are in a lower social position in comparison to their male counterpart, which adversely impact the type of networks needed to access or build to make a small business project successful. Welsh et al. (2017) have shown evidence to indicate that Omani women are normally less engaged in networks in comparison to men, and they are to face added difficulties in building their networks. The personal networks that Omani women are conventionally be seen to involved in are well-associated with family-oriented tasks which can prove to create significant hindrances in the market (Hammami et al. 2022). Thus, Omani women face significant challenges to acquire both social and financial capital (e.g., critical resources, required entrepreneurial support, and information), normally acquired by the entrepreneurs from their networks.

Non-availability of enough wealth is another hindrance that a small project run by women needs to encounter. To start a new business financial assets and relevant knowledge assets play an important role (Fattah and Al Halbusi, 2022). But as already mentioned, women's present positions in the conservative Omani society have essentially guided them to lack enough assets in hand in both of these cases. Due to the conservative society, the women of Oman are expected to follow family obligations more, making them abstain from building

their professional careers. Naturally, such a glass ceiling reduces the scope of possible work opportunities for Omani women and also restricts them from developing their experience and skill, which, needless to say, adversely impacts their business operations.

Since women are often considered not good at handling business ventures (which is a social stereotype) in Oman, angel investors often show a lack of interest in investing in small projects run by women. The study by Ghouse et al. (2017) shows that women are to march long distances in the Gulf and Arabian countries to get financial independence. Naturally, lack of financial independence, considering them eligible in making decisions, social stereotypes, and others work as significantly demotivating factors for women of Oman become yet to be highly successful in the short business project ventures.

Contributions of Omani Women's Associations to the Sustainable Development of Small Projects

There is hardly any isolated policy or program in Oman for the purpose of developing women's entrepreneurship, still, the involvement of women in small business projects is encouraging. Reports show that the majority of women have attempted to break the prolonged stereotype and ventured into businesses in the last decade. Two of the important programs – the SANAD and the Fund for Development of Youth Projects – launched to promote entrepreneurial activities among both men and women appear to have been intensively successful to make offering significant encouragement for women entrepreneurs (Hallward and Bekdash-Muellers, 2019). The contribution of different voluntary private organisations in helping women to develop an entrepreneurial network through various entrepreneurship programs is really important to encourage women to come forward with innovative sustainable business ideas and turn them into reality. Ali and Salisu (2019) have argued that effectively sensitizing society with respect to the Omanization program of ownership and employment can play a key role in this context. This attempt can also help the stakeholders play an active role to inspire and promote the small enterprises to develop a separate identity.

One should mandatorily mention the contributions of the Omani Women's Association (OWA) in this context. OWA is focused on engaging more women to become its members so that enough support for women can be rendered, helping them to become more productive and self-reliant, and paving the way for new entrepreneurial ventures. Direction (2019) has mentioned that growing awareness among women is the most important affair to engage women entrepreneurs and in turn, this can act importantly for the economic growth of Oman. To grow awareness among the women to come forward with small and sustainable business projects OWA arranges different activities and seminars and its members participate in different workshops and seminars arranged by different international women's agencies and forums. These endeavours certainly aim at assisting women to become highly empowered and help in increasing their visibility within Omani society (Gbadamosi, 2019). The role of the Local Community Development Centres (LCDCs) sponsored by the Ministry of Social Development in assisting women in sustainably developing their overall social and financial quality is also essential in this regard. There is no point to refute the fact that both LCDCs and OWA have become essential associations to boost entrepreneurship endeavours among Omani women.

Another voluntary association of businesswomen, named Women in Focus, is also playing an important role in Oman to boost women to come up with entrepreneurial ideas. The key

objective of this association is focused on developing a platform that can be used by Omani women to contribute dynamically to the unconditional development of the community. This association emphasise the contribution of women being important leaders and partners for small business ventures and in the professional development process (Ennis, 2019). The major areas focused by this association for the sustainable development of women are: offering training to the women, focusing on network building, mentoring, and promoting sustainable research and development. Women in Focus essentially inspires women networking that essentially assist them in sharing their experiences and lessons with others, hence paving the way for more women to come forward and thereby ensuring sustainable growth of the entire community (Khan, 2019). This venture provides those women who are comparatively new in their workplaces with opportunities and helps them in developing their skills, encourages them to manage their entrepreneurial venture, and thereby supports women empowerment which, needless to say, is considered to be one of the major aspects of the sustainable organisational growth process.

Marketing Outlets That Adopt Women's Small Projects

The marketing outlets offering their support for the small business projects run by women essentially act as a strategic factor to give more exposure to these entrepreneurial ventures. Mathew (2019) has been of the view that program like "Intilaaqah" run by Shell Oil Company of Oman essentially focuses on boosting women entrepreneurs in the market. These marketing ventures typically assist young women entrepreneurs with the right training and offer them required counseling along with consultancy services. At the same time, they give them space and highlight their works across the country and internationally, which, needless to say, not only acts as encouraging for other women entrepreneurs to come forward but also makes common people attach to the entrepreneurial venture, helping them to stay in the substantial growth trajectory. Chaudhry and Paquibut (2021) can be quoted as saying that it is important for large organisations to extend their support to small organisations and help them in sustaining in this competitive market. Definitely, this support rendered by large organisations for small entrepreneurial ventures is guiding them to substantial growth.

A number of marketing outlets to support and promote women's entrepreneurial ventures have started procuring their raw materials only from women-run concerns. Additionally, large organisations are also including various women-run organisations in their supply chain and distribution chain networks. These supporting endeavours definitely act as a strategic factor to render support for small business projects, especially for those run by women. Ghouse et al. (2019) have importantly asked for developing a coordinating and collaborative atmosphere between the large and small enterprises which paves the way for strategic and sustainable growth. Essentially, the coordinating nature between the large and small organisations in Oman helps them to sustain themselves in the market and address the difficulties and challenges co-ordinately. Various retailing outlets in Oman prioritizing selling products designed or developed by specifically women-run organisations is a definite sign of how large organisations are working as an encouraging factor for women running small projects (Abd El Basset et al. 2022). There is no point to deny the fact that such friendly business gestures act encouragingly for other women to come forward with new and sustainable entrepreneurial projects, a fervent step toward women's empowerment.

Conclusion

All through this study, the main purpose has been centered on discussing how small entrepreneurial projects contribute to Omani women's growth and their role in helping this group of people become financially sustainable and independent. It has been seen that with Oman being one of the emerging economies among the Gulf nations, the demand for women engaging in entrepreneurial ventures has increased by multiple folds, even after the Omani society is known to be collectivist and highly conservative. It has been seen that along with the private and public sector organizations, there are a number of dedicated women's associations offering support and assistance for women entrepreneurs. These success stories are definite examples of how small projects by women entrepreneurs are proving to be successful by gaining support from large organizations, and there is a higher chance of them emerging in higher numbers in the coming years.

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