

Barriers and Catalyst of Female Social Entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: Case Study

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in fostering societal well-being and economic growth. Unlike traditional businesses focused on profit, social enterprises balance social objectives with financial sustainability by reinvesting revenues into their missions. Women's contributions to social entrepreneurship are significant but remain underrepresented in academic discourse, particularly in less-developed nations. This study explores how informal institutions—such as cultural norms, family networks, and social support systems—shape women-led social entrepreneurship ventures in Saudi Arabia. Using institutional theory, this research examines how informal institutions influence the motivations, opportunities, and challenges of Saudi women entrepreneurs. Informal institutions, including societal norms and cultural beliefs, play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial activities, especially in societies where women's entrepreneurship often operates within the informal economy. Given Saudi Arabia's unique socio-cultural landscape, deeply ingrained traditions significantly impact women's entrepreneurial roles. Through qualitative methods, particularly in-depth interviews, the study explores the interplay between cultural, religious, and personal motivations in driving women toward social entrepreneurship. Findings reveal that cultural norms and social networks can both enable and constrain women's entrepreneurial efforts. Supportive community networks provide crucial resources, mentorship, and empowerment. However, traditional gender roles and rigid societal expectations pose significant barriers, requiring strategic adaptation by women entrepreneurs. This study underscores the dual role of informal institutions as both facilitators and obstacles in entrepreneurial development. Additionally, it highlights the potential of social entrepreneurship to empower women by fostering autonomy and challenging historical gender inequalities. The study contributes both theoretically and practically by advancing institutional economics perspectives on women's

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entrepreneurship and offering actionable recommendations for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners. Addressing cultural barriers, strengthening community support, and promoting inclusive policies are essential steps toward enhancing women's participation in social entrepreneurship. Recognizing their contributions is key to achieving gender equality and addressing pressing societal challenges.

Keywords: informal institutions; institutional theory; Saudi Arabia; women social entrepreneurship