Spotlight by CeFEO

Can passion, merit, and family support overcome patriarchal norms in family entrepreneurship?

How do Arab women turn family ventures into nationally recognized enterprises?

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Imagine launching a business in a society where many still believe a woman's place is in the home. Now imagine doing it not just alone, but with your siblings, building a brand that carries your family's name, and then being recognized by national leaders—including royalty—for your accomplishments. That is the journey captured in this landmark study on female-led family ventures in Bahrain.

The Gulf States, known for their deep-rooted family and tribal traditions, are witnessing a noteworthy rise in women entrepreneurs. Yet, navigating a business world shaped by patriarchal authority and societal skepticism is far from straightforward. This article, based on academic research published in the *Journal of Family Business Strategy*, uncovers how female founders gain legitimacy through a blend of passion, strategy, social validation—and yes, royal endorsement.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The authors—Sumaya Hashim, Lucia Naldi, and Magdalena Markowska—used a multiple case-study approach to analyze three female-led family ventures in Bahrain. The study is grounded in **legitimacy-as-perception theory**, which views legitimacy not as a status granted by default, but as a series of judgments made by individuals and institutions.

The Data

- 14,722 social media posts
- Over 180 media articles and press releases
- In-depth interviews with 7 individuals
- Life stories and real-time reflections

Each case was selected for its achievement in gaining legitimacy at various levels—from initial family support to national awards.

KEY INSIGHTS

1. Legitimacy Is a Process, Not a Moment

The study outlines a three-stage process model:

- **Individual Legitimacy**: Gaining support from oneself and close circles.
- **Market Validity**: Proving worth in the broader business and institutional environment.
- **Royal Validity**: Securing recognition from royal figures—seen as the ultimate stamp of approval.

2. Meritocracy as the Guiding Principle

Founders emphasized their education, skills, and achievements—not just their family connections. Success was earned, not inherited.

3. Social Media as a Modern Legitimizer

Platforms like Instagram and Facebook acted as powerful tools for sharing achievements, building credibility, and forming emotional connections with the public.

4. Four Catalysts That Accelerate the Journey

- **Family/Business Spillover**: Drawing credibility from past ventures and family networks.
- **Large Voices**: Aligning with national development goals.
- **Bargaining Power**: Leveraging recognition to access new resources.

- **Influence on Family Norms**: Gaining influence within the family, sometimes reversing traditional roles.

TAKEAWAYS

For Female Founders

- Build legitimacy in stages: start with self-belief, gain family support, then expand outward.
- Prioritize competence and visibility—credentials matter, and so does narrative.
- Engage with national agendas: aligning with social and economic reforms creates momentum.

For Family Business Leaders

- Legitimacy isn't automatic, especially for women. Family backing can make or break the early phase.
- Merit-based roles empower not just the individual, but the entire firm's credibility.
- Encourage a cultural shift within the family to accommodate evolving leadership models.

For Policymakers and Institutions

- Recognition mechanisms like awards and public events matter deeply in traditional societies.
- Supporting women's entrepreneurship means supporting a broader ecosystem: education, media access, public funding, and legal clarity.

IMPACT

This study doesn't just tell the story of three ventures—it offers a framework for understanding how legitimacy is *built* when tradition says it shouldn't be. It's about resilience, relationships, and the redefinition of who gets to lead.

More broadly, it challenges the assumption that legitimacy in family firms is something to preserve or repair. Here, legitimacy must be earned, step by step, often against institutional and familial resistance. It shows how entrepreneurial women in Arab societies can shift cultural paradigms—not only in business but in family life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Start with Passion—but Don't Stop There

Legitimacy begins when founders internalize their value and share that conviction with others. Personal belief, however, needs to be matched with strategic action and professional skill.

Leverage the Ecosystem

Tap into institutional programs, awards, and networks that elevate your visibility. Link your business to national objectives—such as youth employment or women's empowerment—to resonate with broader audiences.

Use Visibility as a Power Tool

Don't underestimate the symbolic power of being seen and heard. Whether it's a photo with a royal figure, a public speech, or a widely shared Instagram post, each moment of visibility builds trust.

Redefine Family Roles

Family can be a gatekeeper or an enabler. Encourage open conversations that allow for changing dynamics, especially around gender and leadership.

Institutionalize Recognition

Governments and business chambers should formalize support for women entrepreneurs—not just through funding, but through symbolic and narrative validation.

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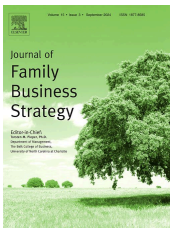

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