

## How are women shaping the family business landscape in Bahrain?

*Women Entrepreneurs in Gulf Family Businesses: Navigating Context and Barriers*

SUMAYA HASHIM · MAURA MCADAM · MATTIAS NORDQVIST

*Published on January 4, 2024*

Family businesses are vital to the economic fabric of the Gulf States, where over 90% of businesses are family-owned, employing a majority of the workforce. But behind these statistics lies an untapped story—how women in these patriarchal societies are stepping into leadership roles within family firms. This article explores the unique context that shapes women's participation in family businesses in Bahrain, where family dynamics, local customs, and gendered expectations create both barriers and opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

### WHAT WE STUDIED

The research focuses on a Bahraini family business, examining how women entrepreneurs have entered and thrived in leadership roles despite cultural and institutional challenges. The study builds on Ibn Khaldun's theory of *Asabiyyah*, a concept representing group solidarity and loyalty, to understand how women navigate the family business environment in a male-dominated society. Data collection included interviews, social media posts, and biographies of prominent women entrepreneurs, offering a detailed case study of how these women "do context" in their family businesses.

### KEY INSIGHTS

#### **1. Two Paths to Leadership**

Women entrepreneurs in Bahrain's family businesses take two main paths—those with entrepreneurial merits outside the family business and those groomed within the business. Women like Abeer first proved their capabilities independently, using their entrepreneurial skills to gain the respect needed to join the family business later. Others, like Hind, joined

directly under the guidance of family members, starting from lower levels and working their way up.

#### **2. The Role of Blood-Ties**

Kinship loyalty plays a significant role in women's entry into family businesses. Support from male family members, especially brothers, was crucial in overcoming institutional barriers. Once these women gained leadership roles, they reinforced family unity and group loyalty, strengthening *Asabiyyah* within the business.

#### **3. Building Alliances**

Women entrepreneurs leveraged their roles to build alliances within their family and beyond, including alliances with powerful external figures like the Royal Family. These alliances not only enhanced the family business's prestige but also provided strategic advantages in navigating government and societal structures.

#### **4. Clientship and Patronage**

Women in these family businesses formed client-patron relationships with employees and external partners, treating them as part of the family and fostering loyalty. These relationships helped build strong internal teams and support systems, further embedding women into the leadership fabric of the business.

### TAKEAWAYS

#### **1. For Women Entrepreneurs**

Women need to leverage both their entrepreneurial merits and family connections to navigate the male-dominated landscape of Gulf family businesses. Whether through proving their independence or

working their way up within the family, women must build strong internal and external alliances.

### 2. For Family Businesses

Family businesses should actively support women's participation, recognizing the value of their contributions to business continuity and innovation. By embracing women's entrepreneurial skills, family businesses can create a more inclusive and competitive environment.

### 3. For Policymakers

Supporting women entrepreneurs through education, resources, and policy can strengthen family businesses, leading to more robust economic development in the Gulf region.

## IMPACT

The role of women in Gulf family businesses is evolving, with increasing recognition of their

contributions. As family businesses navigate intergenerational transitions, empowering women entrepreneurs can ensure long-term business sustainability and social cohesion. This study calls for more research into how gender dynamics in Gulf family firms can inform broader industry trends.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Family businesses in the Gulf should focus on gender-inclusive policies that promote women's entrepreneurial roles, recognizing their unique ability to strengthen family loyalty and business success. Policymakers should also consider how targeted support for women entrepreneurs can enhance regional economic development.

---

Spotlight by CeFEO, *How are women shaping the family business landscape in Bahrain?* Women Entrepreneurs in Gulf Family Businesses: Navigating Context and Barriers. Downloaded on 22 June 2026 from <https://spotlight.cefeo.se>

---

## CEFEO AUTHORS



**Sumaya Hashim**

*Assistant Professor*

*Jönköping International Business School*

[sumaya.hashim@ju.se](mailto:sumaya.hashim@ju.se)



**Mattias Nordqvist**

*Professor*

*Jönköping International Business School*

[mattias.nordqvist@ju.se](mailto:mattias.nordqvist@ju.se)

## PUBLISHED IN



Hashim, S., McAdam, M., & Nordqvist, M. (2024). An exploration of women entrepreneurs “doing context” in family business in the Gulf States. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 16(2), 227–255.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-02-2023-0037>

---

*Spotlight* is an online magazine that translates research from the Centre for Family Entrepreneurship and Ownership (CeFEO) at Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping University, into accessible insights for family business owners, practitioners, and policymakers.

*Spotlight* is supported by the WIFU Foundation. This partnership advances dialogue and education in responsible family entrepreneurship and ownership.

---