

# An exploration of women entrepreneurs “doing context” in family business in the Gulf States

Doing context  
in family  
business

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Drawing on indigenous theory of Ibn Khaldun, the rise and fall of States, this paper explores the agency of women entrepreneurs in family business in Bahrain and the underlying enablers in supporting and facilitating the exercise of this agency. This study attempts to move beyond the Western-centric studies to reflect and bring to light the unique institutional settings of the Gulf States.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research builds on a rich qualitative single case of a family business based in Bahrain. The single case study methodology was motivated by the potential for generating rich contextual insights. Such an approach is particularly valuable to gain a more holistic and deeper understanding of the contextualized phenomenon and its complexity.

**Findings** – In this study the authors show how women entrepreneurs take two different paths to enter and become involved in the family business, the barriers they are subjected to and the active role they play in dismantling the challenges to the extent that they become the main mediators between the family business and central institutions in society.

**Originality/value** – By incorporating indigenous theory with Western family business concepts, the study extends existing understanding of women entrepreneurs in family business by underscoring the agency that women entrepreneurs have in “doing context” and the role that women play in strengthening common cause and destiny within the family and the business by building and drawing on different forms of loyalty.

**Keywords** Women entrepreneurs, Women in family business, Contextualizing family business, Gulf States, Ibn Khaldun

**Paper type** Research paper

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The authors stress that the analysis reflects their own interpretation of the findings.



## Introduction

This paper investigates the agency of women entrepreneurs in family business in the Gulf States. The significance of this lies in the increasing prominence of women in family businesses across the Arab Middle East. While the Arab Middle East is often perceived as a homogenous group, it consists of 22 countries spanning across the Middle East and Africa with distinct culture, ethnicity and history (Basco, 2017). This study focuses on a specific region, the Gulf States and Bahrain more specifically.

Family businesses are significant forms of businesses in the Gulf States, representing 90% of the private sector, employing 80% of the workforce and contributing 60% to GDP (PWC, 2019). This underscores family businesses' substantial impact on regional development (Basco, 2015) and the growing geopolitical influences and power (Samara, 2021). However, many of these family businesses are at a critical intergenerational transition stage, with estimated US\$1 trillion of assets at stake (FBCG, 2015).

It is increasingly common for the family patriarch in Arab family businesses to support women's entrepreneurial careers (Hashim *et al.*, 2021; Kemp and Zhao, 2016; Samara, 2021; Welsh *et al.*, 2014), by investing in women's education to study abroad in well-reputed western universities and by providing necessary moral support and access to resources that contribute to entrepreneurship within or outside the family business (Davis *et al.*, 2000; Samara, 2021; Welsh *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, scholars have argued that women's involvement in senior roles in this context might only be a ceremonial act (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Belwal *et al.*, 2014) and in situations where women are not genuinely empowered may actually hamper the development and growth of a business (Barragan *et al.*, 2018; Goby and Erogul, 2011).

While extant research has advanced our understanding of how context influences women's involvement in family business in the Arab Middle East (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Belwal *et al.*, 2014; Davis *et al.*, 2000; Samara, 2021), it disregards the emerging literature related to the agency that individuals have in "doing context" (Baker and Welter, 2020; Welter, 2020). In other words, there is a gap in our knowledge regarding how women exert influence in both the family and the business spheres, constructing a context that enables them to perform as credible entrepreneurs and family business leaders. In light of this, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do women entrepreneurs use their agency in family business in the Gulf States and Bahrain more specifically? (2) What are the underlying enablers in supporting and facilitating their agency?

Addressing these research questions, we draw on Ibn Khaldun's indigenous theory (Alatas, 2014) which provides a lens that is tailored to the Gulf States and allows us to explore and better understand the local issues, lived realities and phenomena of women entrepreneurs in family business (Hashim, 2023). We argue that Ibn Khaldun's indigenous theory, the rise and fall of States (Alatas, 2014), is particularly apt in addressing the emerging critique of "applying Western assumptions to unrelated context" (Bruton *et al.*, 2021, p. 1058) as we will study a local phenomenon by local language, subjects and constructs (Van de Van *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, we argue that the construct of "Asabiyah" – common cause and destiny – which is weaved into the social makeup of most of the Gulf States societies (Alatas, 2014; Hashim, 2023) will help us analyse the different constructs discussed in the literature on women in family business. While Ibn Khaldun's theory of the rise and fall of States was instigated by observing the dynasties of Arabs and non-Arabs such as Persians, Syrians, Copts, Israelites, Nabataeans, Greeks, Byzantines and Turks, in this study we focus on one of the smallest Gulf States, namely Bahrain, in order to capture the contextualized phenomenon (Khaldun, 2015). Empirically, we rely on an in-depth single case of a family business established in Bahrain in 1940, which has a business portfolio across different industries such as automotive, construction and electronics. Specifically, we interviewed and collected supplementary data (i.e. 3300 social media, biography books/websites and 100 press and

media coverage items) about five women entrepreneurs who were owning-family members and members of the board of directors.

Within this paper, we make the following theoretical contributions. First, we identified two distinct paths in which the women entrepreneurs leveraged their agency to attain and secure the role(s) in the family business which we define as “entrepreneurial merits independent of the family business” and “entrepreneurial merits within the family business”. These paths are contingent on the patriarch’s support to join the family business. Specifically, we show how the women entrepreneurs can navigate the various barriers and the roles they play and become a valuable resource for the family business. Second our empirical analysis shows that women entrepreneurs by “doing context” play an important role in strengthening Asabiyyah through their interaction with different types of relationships. We also show that depending on the relationship, the women use or build different forms of loyalty that becomes the “glue”.

This paper is structured as follows: first we present our theoretical framing which discusses Ibn Khaldun and family business. This is followed by a presentation of the extant research on women in family business in the Gulf States. We then describe our methodology, data collection processes and analytical methods. We then present our findings and position them within the context of extant literature. In so doing, we highlight the implications of our research for researchers and practitioners.

## **Our theoretical framing**

### *Social relationships and family business*

While Ibn Khaldun introduced the concept of strengths and weaknesses of Asabiyyah – the common cause and destiny – as a core mechanism of three types of social relationships that are either based on blood ties, alliances and/or clientship, mainstream family business literature has mainly drawn on the work of [Granovetter \(1973\)](#) that emphasizes the power of weak and strong social network ties to access various resources. Other scholars have used social capital as a theoretical lens. For instance, [Mulnix et al. \(2014\)](#) underscore that familial ties grant access to knowledge, socioeconomic and financial resources, conceptualizing these benefits as social capital. This term, encapsulating trust and goodwill relations, was further developed by [Arregle et al. \(2007\)](#), who identified it as a repository of unique resources. The centrality of goodwill in social capital, as discussed by [Adler and Kwon \(2002\)](#), traces its roots to [Hanifan’s \(1916\)](#) pioneering work, which highlighted the significance of sympathy, trust and compassion in social relations ([Woolcock and Narayan, 2000](#)).

Social capital, according to [Adler and Kwon \(2002\)](#) and [Sirmon and Hitt \(2003\)](#), provides avenues for information exchange, technological know-how, market access and cost-free resources. Trust, an area that has received some attention in the family business literature, has been recognized as a crucial element in governance mechanisms ([Eddleston et al., 2010](#)), reducing transaction costs ([Steier, 2001](#)), fostering cooperation ([Kudlats et al., 2019](#)) and enhancing a family businesses’ social capital ([Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2015](#)), ultimately contributing to competitive advantage ([Steier, 2001](#)). Nevertheless, these studies predominantly focus on the outcome of trust and social capital, often overlooking the underlying mechanisms that enable familial ties to share resources and the processes through which goodwill and trust are cultivated ([de Groote and Bertschi-Michel, 2021](#); [Deferne et al., 2023](#)).

Scholars have discussed how the historical, structural, cognitive and relational dimensions of a family shape its values and norms subsequently influencing relational dynamics by reinforcing trust, care and sense of responsibility among the family members ([Cabrera-Suárez et al., 2015](#); [Hoffman et al., 2006](#); [Pearson et al., 2008](#)). This notion of common or collective good further influences the family to be selfless and assist each other more freely without the expectation of immediate returns and benefits ([Sanchez-Famoso, 2015](#)).

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Sharma (2004) and Sharma and Manikutty (2005) suggest that the family and the firm are embedded in different sociological contexts including cultural norms, family values and structures. These factors significantly influence the decision-making of family business leaders and contribute to the heterogeneity of family firms (Chirico and Nordqvist, 2010). For instance, in cultures where multi-generational cohabitation is the norm, values such as authority often take precedence over liberty.

The cultural norms surrounding inheritance systems are also pivotal. These systems, whether advocating for equal or unequal distribution of parental wealth, extend beyond mere wealth distribution, in that they significantly influence succession and investment decisions within family businesses (Bornhausen, 2021; Carney, 2005). Todd's (1985) typology of authority-liberty and equality-inequality, applied by family business scholars like Ling (2002), indicates that in collectivist societies like the Gulf States, women often find themselves in authoritarian family structures. In these contexts, the patriarch is viewed as the family's head, responsible for the collective welfare and establishing a common cause and destiny. This responsibility in turn informs the distribution of wealth and the inheritance system – for example, an inheritance law that is gender based and stipulates that a woman should inherit half of the share of her male counterpart (Karolak, 2012). In such patriarchal contexts, men have the legal right, endorsed by social norms and financial means to lead and guide the family's and business's common cause and destiny. However, there is a notable gap in understanding how women, often stripped from these benefits in a patriarchal context, exercise their agency to play a more active role in influencing the common cause and destiny of the family and the business.

Vallejo and Langa (2010) draw a compelling parallel between the role of loyalty in ensuring the survival of the family and the survival of nations, which relies on the loyalty of its citizens. Tagiuri and Davis (1996) further elaborate on this theme, suggesting that the overlap and simultaneous obligations among members involved in the three social systems foster a strong bond, anchored in loyalty. This loyalty manifests as mutual support of each other's decisions, cooperation and trust potentially mitigating power struggles within the family business. Vallejo (2008) observed that the commitment of second-generation family members to the business is often driven by a deep sense of loyalty and identification with the founding generation, engendering pride and enthusiasm that can have a spillover effect to non-family employees.

Similar to Salganicoff (1990), who has stressed women's "extreme loyalty" to the family and business, other scholars have found that the socialization process of women can play an important role in the success and survival of the family business. For instance, Martinez Jimenez (2009) analysed the leadership approach that women adopt in family business and found that the loyalty that women have towards their family and business along with the traditionally ascribed gender roles equips women to take on important leadership roles in both the family and the business especially during the succession process.

While loyalty is associated with many benefits, it can also be a source of family and group pressure with accompanying costs (Salganicoff, 1990; Vallejo, 2009). Generally, loyalty has been found to be high amongst employees and nonfamily managers that work in family firms due to their feeling of obligation to remain in the business (Chua *et al.*, 2003; Vallejo and Langa, 2010). Likewise, the loyalty that women have in the context of the family business may prevent them from seeking their legitimate rights or expressing concerns that may hurt others (Salganicoff, 1990). Another potential drawback of loyalty pertains to altruism (Schulze *et al.*, 2003) where women and in this case daughters may be able to convince their parents to obtain a senior position in the family business regardless of their merits or in other times may push the daughters out of the family business in cases where other family members are promoted without any merit-based grounds (Ahrens *et al.*, 2015; Akhmedova *et al.*, 2019; Van den Berghe and Carchon, 2003). Thus, the concept of loyalty,

while widely recognized, has not been thoroughly problematized or unpacked in the literature (Connor, 2007). It is often taken at face value, leaving its deeper implications and dynamics unexplored.

Alliances can be seen as an alternative mechanism to formal market and potential hierarchies to address certain strategic goals (Saxton, 1997). Family business scholars, such as Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2006), emphasize alliances in preparing the next generation for leadership, involving stakeholders like partners, suppliers, customers and the wider community (Palmer and Barber, 2001). These alliances are crucial for securing resources, investments and networks to support successors (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Anderson and Reeb, 2003; Gomez-Mejia *et al.*, 2001; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) and enhancing competitive advantage. Carney (2005) discusses alliances as a governance mechanism, enabling access to capital through partnerships. This form of governance supports a continuous and long-term reciprocal relationship with partners (Ring and Van de Ven, 1992). Furthermore, scholars have provided novel insights into certain alliances that can provide family businesses especially those with exceptional track records of business portfolios, job creation and economic vitality the potential to influence political processes and formal institutions (Backman and Palmberg, 2015). This is particularly common in the Asian context (Claessens *et al.*, 2000) where resourceful, powerful and well-connected families can influence policymaking, legislative actions and political lobbying (Soleimanof, 2016; Soleimanof *et al.*, 2018). In other words, different actors, traditionally represented by men, within the family, business and beyond convene to build reciprocal relationships and benefits. In certain contexts, such as the Gulf States, these meetings and alliances take place in the traditional “Majles”, gender-segregated spatial contexts, that restrict women’s participation, both socially and physically, limiting their ability to engage in these crucial relationships. This gender-based exclusion highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to understanding and fostering alliances within family businesses.

The last form of relationship is clientship. The family business literature argues that family businesses are deeply embedded in their community and play a critical role in the community (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Miller *et al.*, 2009). Family business scholars have found that this form of community engagement supports the family in enhancing their socioemotional wealth (Cennamo *et al.*, 2012), obtaining economic benefits (Surroca *et al.*, 2010), improving reputation (Aragón-Correa and Sharma, 2003) gaining legitimacy (Cennamo *et al.*, 2009) and community leadership (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2010). These findings typically reflect a patron–client relationship dynamic, with the family business often positioned as the patron. However, in certain contexts, notably in the Gulf States, the dynamic can be reversed, with the family business acting as the client, especially in relation to elite merchant families and their unique relationships with ruling royal families (Kamrava *et al.*, 2016).

This discussion brings to fore a significant gap in Western developed organizational theories, particularly in the domain of family business: the insufficient consideration of the interactions and relationships with royal family members. Despite the prominence of monarchies in Europe and globally, monarchs – crucial and influential stakeholders – have been notably absent from mainstream family business literature. This oversight is where Ibn Khaldun’s theory proves to be particularly relevant and insightful. Ibn Khaldun’s theory offers a nuanced understanding of the roles of Kings and royal family members, delving into the dynamics of blood-ties, alliances and clientship. This approach not only deepens our comprehension of family business dynamics in the context of monarchies but also provides a broader perspective on power structures and network relationships in the business world. By integrating these insights into family business studies, scholars can develop a more holistic understanding of the diverse forms of relationships that influence and shape family businesses, especially in culturally and politically distinct environments.

*Indigenous theory*

Banerjee (2022) offers explanations to the different connotations of the term indigenous. We adapt Van de Ven *et al.*'s (2018, p. 452) definition of indigenous research "as scientific studies of local phenomena using local language, local subjects, and locally meaningful constructs, with the aim to build or test theories that can explain and predict the phenomena in their local social and cultural contexts".

In this study, we draw on the work of a Muslim historian and philosopher, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), recognized as one of the founders of sociology. Ibn Khaldun descended from a Yemeni aristocratic family that migrated to Andalusia in South of Spain during the eighth century and occupied prominent government positions with a great passion for history (Gierer, 2001). His position as Judge and his other senior roles in government in a geographical place that intersected with Jewish, Christian and Muslim societies along with access to Greek science, Arab poetry and Asian history and trade enabled him to distinguish himself from other scholars of his time and contribute novel and unique insights (Lawrence, 2005).

The seminal and indigenous work of Ibn Khaldun, the rise and fall of States, discussed and supported by empirical material in his books the *Muqaddimah* and the *Kitab Al-Ibar*, brings to fore locally meaningful constructs by focusing on the key differences of social organization of the two most prominent types of local social systems in an Arab society: the Bedouin (pastoral nomadic) and sedentary societies (Alatas, 2014; Lawrence, 2005). One of the primary constructs that underpinned most of Ibn Khaldun's work is "Asabiyyah", an Arabic word that stems from "ta'asub" which refers to "... bounding the turban round (his own) head" (Halim *et al.*, 2012, p. 1232), in other words, a construct coined to reflect common cause and destiny (Alatas, 2014, p. 26) "the cyclic processes of the rise and fall of 'dynasties'" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 4).

According to Ibn Khaldun, "Asabiyyah" initially arises due certain groups or nations' need to protect themselves from an external threat (Halim *et al.*, 2012) something that Ibn Khaldun claims to be biologically based, naturally arising and strong among blood-related ties due to the "compassion and affection for one's blood relations and relatives" (Alatas, 2014, p. 31). Thus, the common cause and destiny provides the group with a sense of security but also reinforces the need for a superior power embodied in a person that can "exert authority and command obedience" from the members of the group (Alatas, 2014, p. 30). Important to highlight here is that the contribution to strong Asabiyyah is not the common descent *per se*, but more so the "common socialization" (Gierer, 2001).

Consequently, allies and clients can be integrated to share a common cause and destiny (Alatas, 2014; Gierer, 2001). An alliance is a relationship that is based on mutual exchange of resources and benefits, whereas clientship signifies relationships of patron and client where non-family followers and supporters earn and access important positions (Alatas, 2014). According to Ibn Khaldun, Asabiyyah "in large communities leads to a concentration of power, often resulting in kingship" (Gierer, 2001, p. 4). The relationship between the ruler and the ruled is reciprocal and the quality of this relationship dictates the rise and fall of States. In such contexts, rulers can strengthen Asabiyyah by attending to their subjects' needs and emotions. If the ruler exerts excessive force, it will weaken the common cause and destiny which may lead to the fall of state. Consequently, it is important for the ruler to show interest and support to his subjects (Gierer, 2001).

While these local constructs may have been introduced in the context of the rise and fall of States and the dynastic succession, we find many of Ibn Khaldun's conceptualizations relevant and applicable to family business context and literature. First, while mainstream family business literature has attended to explaining and exploring the access and benefits gained from different relations, the concept of Asabiyyah brings specific attention to what makes people come together to share a common cause and destiny. Second, one of the important aspects of Ibn Khaldun's work is the distinction, interaction and connection

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between the nomadic/primitive and urban social systems (Lawrence, 2005). Family business literature attends to different social systems: the family, ownership and business (Tagiuri and Davis, 1996; Zellweger, 2017). Using Asabiyyah as a concept will thus shed light on important enablers between the family and the business. Third, Ibn Khaldun's work is characterized and well-known for using metaphors (Lawrence, 2005). Yet, Ibn Khaldun coined the concept of Asabiyyah, a term that stems and reflects a man's traditional clothes which clearly signals the exclusion of women in this process. However, mainstream family business literature has recognized the important role women play in enhancing family cohesiveness (Aronoff, 1998; Cole, 1997; Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt, 1990). Applying Asabiyyah as a theoretical lens, in a context where women have blood ties and are family but have been traditionally excluded from having an active role in the family business, has the potential to provide novel insights. In order to facilitate this, we will discuss women in family business in the context of the Arab Middle East before presenting our empirical setting, Bahrain.

### *Positioning women in family business and Gulf States*

The Gulf States are collectivistic societies that reinforce the importance and strength of the family system and demand and expect loyalty from family members (Hofstede, 2001). Additionally, these countries are ruled by monarchs and share a closely intertwined history. They also exhibit a common drive for economic transformation, which includes initiatives to encourage and support women's participation in entrepreneurship and the broader economy (Ennis, 2013, 2019a; Zahlan, 2016). Despite this, family law and cultural norms continue to regard the patriarch as the head of the family with the ultimate authority over family members particularly women (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Barakat, 1993). Inheritance norms for Muslims in the Arab Middle East are complex and are dependent on various factors, such as the relationship between the deceased and female relatives. For example, if a person dies and leaves behind his maternal grandmother and grandfather, the grandmother has the inheritance rights but not the grandfather. Women may inherit half of what their male counterparts receive in some cases, while in others, their share may be as little as one-sixth or one-third (Hoque *et al.*, 2013; Karolak, 2012). Given the complexities of inheritance shares distribution, estate planning becomes crucial before the person dies. Women's agency may have a significant role in the estate planning process given the complexities of inheritance norms for Muslims in the Arab Middle East.

Historically, the family in the Arab context has played a critical role in securing family members resources for both social and economic activities and as such still plays an important role in shaping individual identities (Weiner, 2016). For instance, the family name can convey important information about the family's genealogy, the "apical ancestor of the family", place of origin, traditional occupation and sometimes even family members' characteristics (Weiner, 2016, p. 2). These qualities may grant an individual certain benefits, power and resources but can also have the opposite effect (Weiner, 2016). Just as an individual may enjoy the positive and negative effects of being a member of a certain family, the family may also be affected and face spillover effects from an individual's actions and behaviour (Peterson, 2001; Weiner, 2016).

Another unique aspect of the family in most Gulf States is in relation to the interaction between the Royal Family and elite family business members, that has historically been used to maintain domestic stability and address local issues (Hashim *et al.*, 2021; Peterson, 2001; Weiner, 2016). This has paved the way for strong and vivid mutual interaction that is evident in the current economy (Davis *et al.*, 2000; Weiner, 2016). For example, it is evident in how members of family businesses in Bahrain occupy senior roles in public institutions and act as advisors to the ruling Royal Family. This is clearly reflected in the appointments of the members for the Shura Council that are appointed by the King, which has included

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representatives from known family businesses such as Fakhroo, Al-Maskati, Al Kooheji, Al Arrayedh, Al-Noaimi, AlMannai, Jamsheer, AlHaddad and AlAradi. A similar pattern can be observed in relation to ministerial posts. Consequently, attending to the social aspects and relations is paramount in understanding how women are able to attain certain role(s) in a context where loyalty is the foundation to strong social relationships (Bastian *et al.*, 2023). However, given the patriarchal nature of this context, this interaction has historically been between men from family businesses and men from the royal family in spatial contexts where only men were allowed such as the “majlis” or “diwan”. Majlis is the Arabic term for “sitting place” or “council” that has traditionally been used and continues to be used as a space to offer hospitality, discuss local news and issues including business (UNESCO, 2015). These spaces have historically been gender segregated where women and men have their own respective majlises. Given the fact that more women are actively involved and encouraged to have more roles in business and in the economy today, this also means that women, especially the ones who come from a family business background, have to navigate interactions and spaces that were mainly open to men.

In light of the preceding discussion, we observe that the family business literature has sporadically addressed different dimensions of Assabiyyah (royal family, blood-ties, loyalty, alliance and clientship). However, we argue that by linking and connecting these different concepts together as suggested by the indigenous theory of Ibn Khaldun, not only enables us to obtain a better and more holistic understanding of how women “do context” in an empirical setting that stresses common cause and destiny but also addresses the growing criticism of management theories that have applied Western theories to non-Western contexts without regard to the underlying assumptions of the theories (Bruton *et al.*, 2021; Filatotchev *et al.*, 2022). In line with Van de Ven *et al.*'s (2018) arguments, we believe that the adaptation of Ibn Khaldun enables us to have an emic perspective on research where the inquiry is conducted from the inside rather than the outside. More importantly, drawing on an indigenous theory can “offer detailed and penetrating insights into a given context” (Bruton *et al.*, 2021, p1058). We thus embrace indigenous theory (Bruton *et al.*, 2021) in order to help understand the underlying enablers that support and facilitate women’s agency the context of family business and beyond.

#### *The empirical context - Bahrain*

Family businesses in the Gulf States, particularly in Bahrain, have historically played a pivotal role in the region’s political landscape and economic stability. This influence stems from their longstanding mutual arrangements with rulers and tribal leaders (Kamrava *et al.*, 2016). Before the discovery of oil in Bahrain in 1931, these family businesses primarily operated as merchants, dominating trade, shipping and the pearling industry (Kamrava *et al.*, 2016; Zahlan, 2016). Their alliance with the ruling family not only strengthened the ruler’s position but also granted these businesses significant political influence and protection for their economic interests (Kamrava *et al.*, 2016).

The advent of oil wealth enabled Bahrain to pioneer infrastructure, healthcare and educational developments in the region. Notably, Bahrain led the Gulf States in the promotion of women’s education, establishing the first schools for girls in 1940 (Al-Barghouthi, 2016). This progressive step towards women’s education laid the groundwork for their future involvement in higher education and the broader economy.

The oil discovery solidified the alliance between the ruling family, tribal leaders and elite family businesses in Bahrain (Kamrava *et al.*, 2016). The ruling family controlled wealth distribution, granting lucrative import licences and access to public contracts in infrastructure and urban development (Al-Rumaihi, 1973; Joyce, 2004). This era marked the rise of male-led family business dynasties (Kamrava *et al.*, 2016).



In recent years, the Gulf States, including Bahrain, have been actively working to diversify their economies beyond oil. This strategic shift, reflected in each nation's Vision 2030 agenda, emphasizes strengthening the private sector, predominantly led by family businesses – and supporting entrepreneurship (Ennis, 2013, 2019b). A key component of Vision 2030 is the encouragement of women's active participation in the economic domain (Hashim *et al.*, 2021). Bahrain has been at forefront of this initiative, launching various programs to support women entrepreneurs. These include the UNIDO-led enterprise development and investment promotion programs in 1996, the establishment of the Supreme Council for Women (SCW) in 2001 under the leadership of the King's first wife, Sheikha Sabika bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, the opening of Riyadat Mall, an incubation centre dedicated to women entrepreneurs and the launch of the Royal Awards recognising successful entrepreneurs (Hashim, 2021; Hashim *et al.*, 2021).

These concentrated efforts, combined with Bahrain's early emphasis on women's economic participation, positions it as an exemplary empirical setting to study the nuanced agency of women entrepreneurs across multiple generations. The nation's progressive and liberal stance offers a unique lens to understand the evolving roles and the agency of women in the family business sector and the broader economic landscape.

### Methodology

To answer our research questions, we adopted a qualitative analysis based on a single case methodology (Dyer Jr and Wilkins, 1991). This adoption was informed by De Massis and Kotlar's (2014) guidelines for family business researchers when conducting case study research and in particular with regards to defining the unit of analysis and case selection. The choice of an in-depth, single case study was motivated by the potential for generating rich contextual insights (Leppäaho *et al.*, 2016). Such an approach is particularly valuable to gain a more holistic and deeper understanding of the contextualized phenomenon and its complexity (Merriam, 2002).

#### *Sample selection*

We used purposive sampling strategy (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to identify a well-established family business in Bahrain that involved different women in senior positions. The sampling criteria were (1) the women should belong to one of the elite family businesses in Bahrain; (2) they occupy a senior position in the family business such as director or a board member role; (3) the women should represent different generations and (4) the women should have an active social media account. We used rich and diverse data to explore how women interact with their social context to break down different barriers and the role they play in the family business (Dyer Jr and Wilkins, 1991; Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010). In our endeavour to maintain the anonymity of our case, we provided the family business and our informants with pseudonyms. Furthermore, we purposefully refrained from delving into exhaustive discussions about the business or providing in-depth narratives of the women. This strategic approach was implemented to protect and safeguard the anonymity of our case.

#### *Data collection*

Diverse rich qualitative empirical material was collected for this study including more than 3300 social media posts from Instagram accounts that belonged to five women that occupied a board of director role in their family business. We also conducted in-depth interviews with two of the women (Abeer, second generation and Hind, third generation). Additionally, we collected and reviewed biographies of the women either on their personal websites and one of them have also published her biography in a book. We also reviewed more than 100 press and

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media coverage about the five women. Additionally, the first author attended a conference session that was held in Bahrain where Abeer, Hind and Munira (second-generation) were invited to share their achievements and the challenges they faced. For instance, it was during this session when Abeer shared her story about how close she was to her father growing up and the shock she felt when her father did not allow her to join the family business because she was a woman. However, her father did not object when she launched her own entrepreneurial business.

Media coverage was another important data source and included newspaper articles, TV interviews and podcasts about and with the women entrepreneurs. The majority (75%) of the media coverage obtained was about Munira. This is not surprising given the important political role she held. Some of this media coverage included in-depth video interviews about Munira's life journey, the struggles she faced, her role in the family business and in politics. This became an extremely important data source not only because of its richness but more importantly because we were able to capture how the mainstream communication channels perceived and reported about Munira and the other women in our study to better understand their respective roles and exercise of their respective agency.

Interviews were conducted in-person by the first author in 2021 at a location preferred by the interviewees. The in-depth interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted in Arabic or English, with frequent code-switching, or switching back and forth, between Arabic and English. To eliminate translation-related problems and increase the validity of the translation process, the interviews were recorded and transcribed, and back translation was performed (Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021). During the interviews, the women referred to themselves as entrepreneurs, and it was the informants' self-identification as women entrepreneurs that shaped the focus of our study on women entrepreneurs rather than leaders. The focus of women entrepreneurs in family business is not an alien concept and is evidenced by Maseda *et al.*'s (2021) literature review that identifies women entrepreneurs in family business as one of the main themes. The in-depth interviews were conducted to gain a better understanding of the complexity and specificity of the context as well as their experiences of the various challenges they were exposed to and how they managed to overcome them in their interaction with different social networks.

The social media posts were information rich (Highfield and Leaver, 2016) in that the women used social media platforms to communicate and share certain aspects about their professional and personal lives to shape the perception of their followers (Hall-Phillips *et al.*, 2016). In other words, the social media posts offered longitudinal, diary records of snippets of the women's lived experiences and everyday entrepreneurship (Hashim *et al.*, 2021). LinkedIn account information and information the entrepreneurs shared on their personal websites was also obtained where possible helped and assisted in forming a better understanding about the timeline. In addition, one of the women have published a biography that contains valuable information about the family history and the business. Table 1 offers an overview of the empirical material.

### *Data analysis*

Given the heterogeneity of our empirical material, the analysis was carried out in multiple stages. First, we reviewed the social media posts to familiarize ourselves with the range of the visual and discursive content and coded the material into different themes such as awards, handing out prizes to employees, networking with important public figures, family gatherings, sharing news and expressing pride in other family member's achievements. This first step allowed us to transform the visual material to text. Having all the empirical material in text format, we conducted a thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). An initial

	Informants characteristics	Education	Marital status	Number of children	Instagram accounts	LinkedIn/Personal website/Biography	Interviews	Media coverage
Munira AlTayyar	Second generation: Established herself as an entrepreneur in the family business	Bachelor	Married	4	377	Yes	No	
Abeer AlTayyar	Second generation: Established herself as an entrepreneur before joining the family business	Bachelor	Married	3	NA	Yes	Yes	
Sana AlTayyar	Second generation: Established herself as an entrepreneur before joining the family business	Bachelor	Married	3	667	Yes	No	More than 100
Hind AlTayyar	Third generation: Established herself as an entrepreneur within the family business	Bachelor	Married	4	82	Yes	Yes	
Amjad AlTayyar	Third generation: Established herself as an entrepreneur before joining the family business	Bachelor	Single	0	2287	Yes	No	

**Source(s):** Authors' own creation

Doing context  
in family  
business

**Table 1.**  
Overview of empirical  
material

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codebook was constructed based on our review of the literature (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Subsequently, the research team individually and manually reviewed and coded the interview transcripts and the social media text. The initial set of codes was then compared to those independently created by the researchers. Inductive coding was applied to refine these codes into more detailed first-order concepts. Employing the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), this approach facilitated the identification of new codes and an ongoing process of modification and enhancement to create a more comprehensive list of codes (Leitch *et al.*, 2010). Subsequently, the research team reflected upon the theoretical connections among the codes (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). These first-order codes were then organized into second-order themes and consolidated into three overarching theoretical dimensions, as depicted in Figure 1, which represents our Data Structure Model.

To clearly outline how each data source informed our codes in our Data Structure Model, we refer to the different data sources as follows: A refers to Instagram, B refers to interviews and C refers Media Coverage, D refers to the conference session. In the final stage, we developed a timeline of the most critical events. Here it was useful to use some of the information obtained from the women's LinkedIn accounts, personal website and personal biography book written by one of the informants. The book also provides important insights of the background of the family and the business.

## Findings

### *Family background*

Using the different sources of our empirical material, we find that Muhammed AlTayyar was born in 1918 and was the sixth child to a large pearl merchant family that traded between India and Bahrain. He travelled with his father from a very young age on his merchant trips. At the start of the Second World War, Muhammed became aware of the decline of the demand for natural pearls and decided to establish a different business with the help of his father who gave him start-up capital of 2,000 rupees (€470). This is when AlTayyar and Sons was formally established and commenced trading by selling different goods imported from India. Soon he became one of the main suppliers for Bahrain Petroleum Company (Bapco), British Navy and Royal Air Force. Around mid-1940s, Muhammed travelled with a group of local businessmen to London to secure exclusive sales rights of various international brands. This opened new business avenues that allowed the business to grow and enter different markets in the region.

Ahmed, the eldest son, was welcomed and expected to join his father's business after graduating from London in the late 1960s. In contrast, Muhammed's daughters, Munira, Abeer and Sana, were not given the opportunity to join the family business after completing their studies in the United Kingdom. Abeer, the youngest child and known to be her father's favourite, explains in the interview that she was especially surprised by this decision. As a result, Abeer felt compelled to prove her father wrong and started her own business, which her father eventually supported. So did Sana and Munira. Nevertheless, Abeer and her sisters were never given the opportunity to join the family business during his lifetime. It was only after their father's death when their brother Ahmed became the chairman that women from the family were invited to take on leadership roles in the family business. We find from Sana's biography, that the family in this context could consist of multiple wives which can lead to large number of offspring. For example, she explains that she married her cousin who had 31 siblings from eight different mothers. Some of these wives passed away and the uncle remarried. Consequently, Figure 2 illustrates the family tree and focuses on the individuals included in this case study.

Munira, Ahmed's sister, was appointed as managing director of the family business group while Abeer was appointed as an executive director of one of the subsidiaries in mid-1990s. In

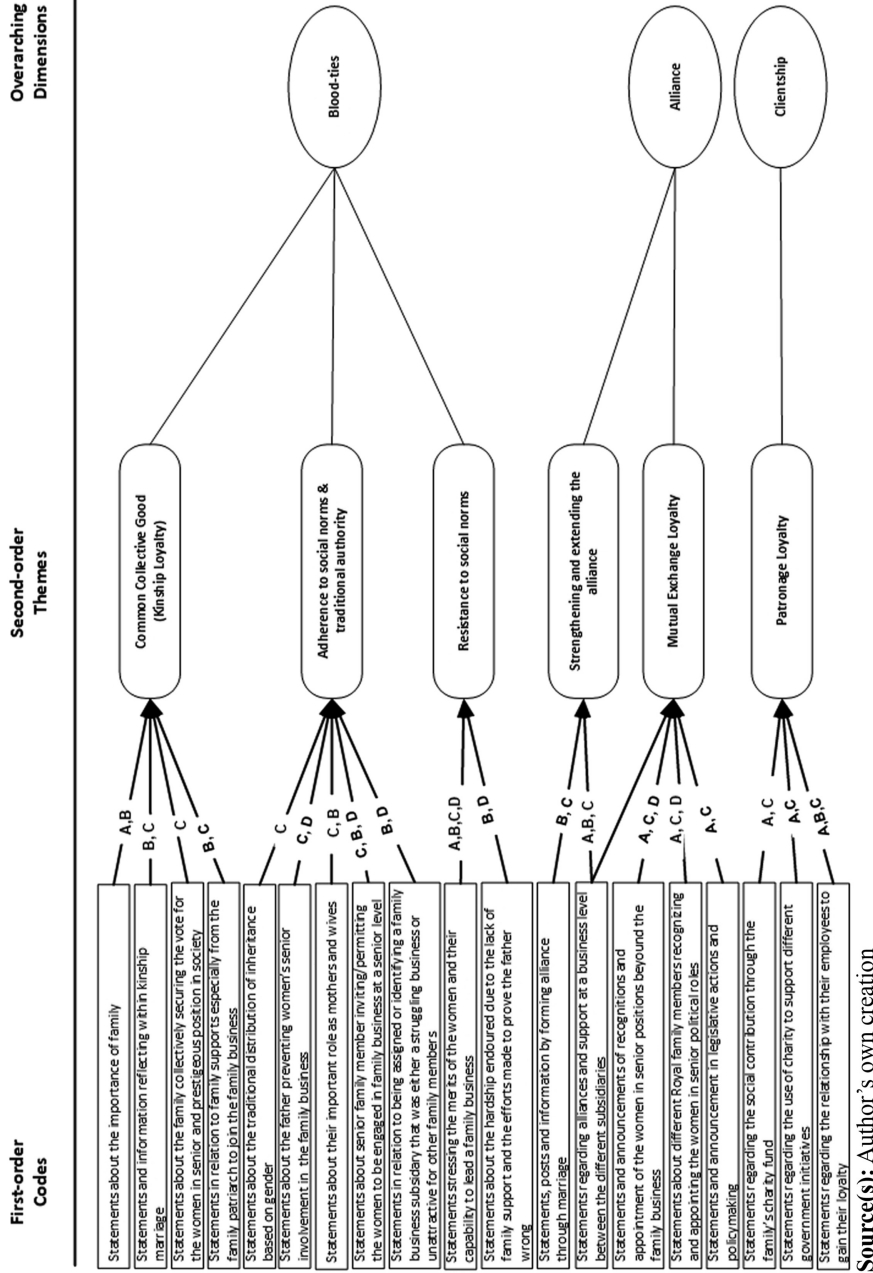
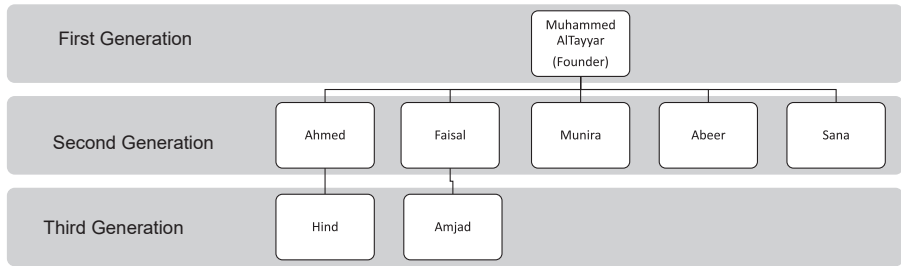


Figure 1.  
Illustration of data  
structure



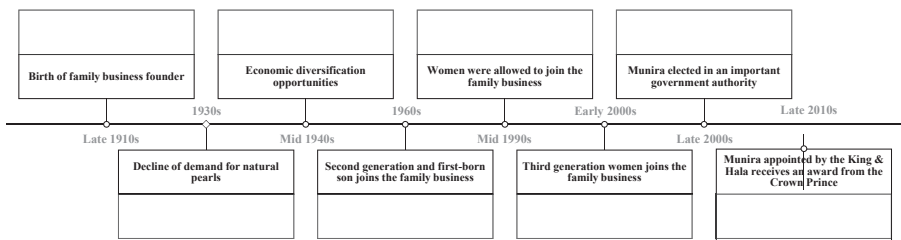
**Figure 2.**  
Family tree

**Source(s):** Author's own creation

the early 2000s, Ahmed's daughter, Hind, completed her business education in the United States and was encouraged to join the family business. She worked in various groups and roles before she was appointed as executive director of another subsidiary within the group. The leadership skills and achievements of these women extend beyond the family business and have been recognized both nationally and internationally through various awards and accolades. For instance, Munira was the first and only woman to be elected to an important government body and was also appointed by the King to another government entity. Her success and influence have been recognized by Forbes, which has listed her multiple times as one of the most powerful women in the Middle East. Hind AlTayyar was also recognized for her entrepreneurial achievements when she received an award from the Crown Prince, as noted in the timeline below. Interestingly, today AlTayyar's Board of Directors consists of twelve members, of which seven are female family members (including the women featured in this case), three male family members and two male non-family members (see Figure 3).

The findings reveal how the women entrepreneurs used their agency on an individual and collective level. On an individual level, two different paths to becoming involved in the family business emerged. These paths were dependent on family support or the lack of family support to be involved in the family business. Our findings also provided insights into the barriers that the women entrepreneurs were subjected to and the active role they played in dismantling the challenges to the extent that they became one of the main mediators between the family business and highest national authority.

*PATH1* (Entrepreneurial merits independent of the family business) – The majority of the women in our empirical material seem to have followed this path. We observe for example that Abeer, second generation and the youngest child of the founder, who was not supported by her father to join the family business for the simple fact that she was a woman. What is evident from our findings is that her success in her own independent entrepreneurial business enabled her to gain valuable hands-on knowledge, wide recognition and legitimacy which in



**Figure 3.**  
AlTayyar family  
business timeline

**Source(s):** Author's own creation

turn assisted the women to break institutional barriers at the business level. However, despite her entrepreneurial merits independent of the family business, when joining the family business, she was assigned to an underperforming subsidiary, which leads us to the second path. A similar theme was observed with the other second generation of women. While Amjad is third generation and similarly to her aunts has established her own entrepreneurial activity independent of the family business, she had the support from the family to join the family business.

*PATH 2* (Entrepreneurial merits within the family business) – Unlike the other women in our case study, we find that Hind, third generation was supported and encouraged by her father to join the family business. However, just like her aunt, she was assigned to leadership of an underperforming subsidiary that she managed to successfully turn around. The success of her entrepreneurial activity in the family business allowed her to break institutional barriers at the political level. What is interesting about both these paths is the fact that none of the women engaged in activities that openly defied or confronted their rejection. This resulted in the exercise of agency on a collective level whereby the women took an active role in building and further strengthening the Assabiyyah (common cause and destiny) in the family business, not only with blood-ties but also through alliances and clientship relationships. Interestingly, the underlying enabler that drove and strengthened the Assabiyyah was different types of loyalty depending on the type of relationship. In the remainder of this section, we will discuss our findings in detail supported by the empirical evidence.

#### *The role of blood-ties*

While Abeer's older brother received senior positions in the family business, Abeer, the seventh and youngest child, did not receive her father's permission to join the family business despite her academic qualification from a UK university. From the interview and during the panel discussion at the conference Abeer claims that this unexpected treatment from her liberal father triggered a sense of unfairness and a journey to prove her father wrong by starting her own entrepreneurial activity. During this journey, she felt that she was on her own, especially at the start of her journey in the late 1970s, before she got married. She established a boutique where she imported both high-end and low-end fashion clothes from Europe which became a huge success. She explained that even though she comes from a wealthy family and could have lived a life of luxury, it was important to her not to use the family's resources for her business and to be self-reliant. This subjected her to a lot of criticism and placed her in situations where she was used, abused and sometimes found herself in awkward situations. Abeer elaborated on this openly both in panel discussions as well as in the interview where she stressed that being self-reliant also meant that she had to learn things and build her business acumen on her own: "I've learned it through experience. You wouldn't believe it but if you come to my library, it has all kinds of books, just learning and learning and learning about business".

She explains in the interview that all these hardships that she endured on her own and independent of the family business made her resilient: "Now I am another person; I am a very valued person. I really value myself. I feel very strong about myself, and nothing affects me. I'm like a turtle now, my skin is like a turtle, it does not get affected" (Abeer). However, this also came at a high price. During the interview she claims that soon after she started the business, she got married but decided not to have any children for the first nine years so that she could dedicate her time and efforts to the business. Thus, she had to clearly communicate to her husband-to-be that she would not be the traditional housewife but rather would focus on her business. By doing so, she argues that she drew clear boundaries and expectations of her role in the marriage. However, this does not mean that she did not have responsibilities at home as illustrated in the following quote: "My husband is a Rotarian, so he really requires a

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lot of attention because he had to go Rotaries at night, we have to attend functions and even though I'm exhausted, I go. I never say no to him. I go forcefully sometimes, like I feel like I will die because I've had a full day, the kids finish their homework, started this and this" (Abeer).

It was only when her father passed away in the late 1990s that the discussion about her and her sister to join the family business emerged. Two important aspects are worth mentioning here. First, the inheritance of the founder was distributed based on gender, i.e. the daughters received half of the share of the brothers. During the interview she explained: "My dad was from the old generation, when he died, he gave us all women ten percent of what he gave the men, 20 percent. Unfortunately, it's the way . . . My brother gets double, which is unfair, but there's nothing we can do about it now. That's how it is. But there is no way I will do that to my children. I've already spoken to my son, 'You take exactly equal to what your brother and sister'. And he's in agreement totally." While Abeer seemed to accept how her father's inheritance was distributed, she was taking proactive measures to ensure her daughters were not subjected to the same gender-based inheritance distribution. The other interesting aspect was in relation to how her older brother who had been working in the family business played a key role in changing the culture and mindset in relation to women's involvement in their family business. Once he became the chairman of the family business, he invited his sisters Munira, Abeer and Sana to join the family business at a senior level. These efforts reinforced common cause and destiny and were evident in various interviews where Munira stated that her brother's wisdom and efforts has maintained the family group feeling and saved them a lot of hardship and potential conflicts that could have led to court battles and the end of the family business group. During this phase, Sana became a board member, Munira was appointed as the managing director of the family business group and Abeer was invited to assume the leadership of one of the subsidiaries. However, this subsidiary was a struggling business as narrated by Abeer both in the panel discussion and during the interview:

I was very proud that it was me that was chosen to run it [the subsidiary]. The shop was losing a huge amount of money at that time, and it was old, it looked like a ghost house. The stock was old, the corruption . . . it was terrible. I swear to God, I had four sleepless night thinking, "Am I crazy to take this? It's like a nightmare, how am I going to do it?" I don't even know how to open a TV honestly, I don't. I hate electronics. The fourth night I decided, "I'm going to take it," because I read something from Richard Branson . . . "When you're asked to do something, never say no, say yes and then learn how to do it" (Abeer)

Third generation Hind and Amjad are currently involved in the family business. Similar to her aunt Abeer, Amjad established her own entrepreneurial activity and received recognition for her business independent of the family business. However, unlike her aunt she had the support to join the family business first as personal assistant and was able to climb the ladder and become a board member. This reflects how the first generation of women in the family business have been able to pave the path for future generation of women to enter the family business and assume senior positions in the family business. This is clearly articulated in the interview with Hind where she stressed the effect of blood-ties in her narrative but unlike her aunt she was invited and supported by her father, the chairman, to join the family business following her graduation from the United States and the United Kingdom in 2002. Hind started by rotating from the bottom-up in different subsidiaries of the family business, something that gave her access to different resources, experience, and know-how. This equipped her with important knowledge about the family business. As the Chairman's daughter, some managers did not take her seriously or assumed that she did not want to work and therefore did not assign important or serious tasks to her. She believes being unmarried during this period and living with her parents, afforded her the possibility to discuss and learn about different aspects of the family



business from her father. Having the support from the family especially the father resulted in Hind taking Path 2 in joining the family business.

When Hind joined one of the autonomous subsidiaries of the family enterprise, the CEO at the time invited her to work by his side, shadow him, and encouraged her to join him in all the meetings including the ones with important officials, ministers, and clientele. This resulted in strong rapport with the CEO, and he has been and continues to be the most important mentor in her professional life. This mentorship paved the way for her to become the executive director of the same subsidiary, in a very male dominated sector. Interestingly, she argues that this subsidiary was at the periphery of the family enterprise and was neglected by other family members as illustrated in the following quote - "I liked this company because I felt that it had really good potential for growth, and I felt also none from the family was engaged in this organization" (Hind).

Another approach that seems to have helped Hind in her growth and development in the family business was that she had the space to make mistakes and learn from them. She explained that one of the most difficult times she experienced in leading the subsidiary was when she decided to enter a new market without being fully prepared, something that she argues was devastating for her and the business. However, her father used to assure her that as long "she made sure to keep her head above the water" things would be fine. She further explained that as part of this subsidiary, they had eight different companies at that time, where seven were doing very well and one business was struggling. While business wise, the subsidiary was "above the water" she argues that this mistake really got to her and was very difficult time for her. She explains during the interview that one major lesson that she learned from her mistakes was the importance of the legal aspects. As result, she has since focused on building a competent team and has put formal procedures in place that can provide an accurate overview of the situation. Additionally, interesting to note from the quote below is her self-identification as an entrepreneur.

I'm Hind the entrepreneur, if I want to start a business, I start it within the organization because the support system is strong. If I go into a new business line, such as, waterproofing work. I go into that business line, but have the accounts reviewing my financials, the commercial department are reviewing my contracts, the HR are bringing me the right people on board. I have the support system within this organization that I have built.

### *The role of alliance*

The alliances that the women built and engaged with emerged at different levels; within the family and kinship network, within and across the family business, and with strategic partners in society including the Royal Family. The significance of family and the practice of arranged marriages in this context (Abd al-Ati, 1977; Barakat, 1993) underscores the importance of an individual's choice of spouse. As illustrated and explained by Sana's biography, being married to someone from the extended family such as a cousin is socially acceptable and common to further strengthen the blood-ties and maintain the wealth and power within the kinship. Alternatively, marrying someone from the same class can further strengthen the alliance and reinforce broader access to power and resources.

Starting with the founder who married someone from another elite business family in Bahrain, we notice from Ahmed's biography published in *Who's Who in the Arab World*, that in addition to holding many important leadership roles, he was appointed as the managing director of one of the subsidiaries related to his wife's family business. We uncovered in a recorded press interview that Munira married her cousin where his mother is AlTayyar but his father is from another elite and prestigious family business conglomerate in Bahrain. As explained by Munira in a TV interview, three out of four of their children now work in their father's family business.

The alliances on a business level can result in resource sharing and support for each other during difficult times even though each subsidiary is managed by different family members.

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What is most interesting in this form of alliance, is how it can assist family members to secure important and prestigious political positions in formal institutions where they can be actively engaged in influencing policies and privy to important information that can assist them in capitalizing on future business opportunities. This is illustrated best in the following quote where Munira shared in one of the media coverages how the family members from the family business group voted for her to become the first and only women elected as a member of an important government authority.

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My family came together and voted for me to be the first and only woman elected [for this government authority that plays an important role for businesses]. This had a huge impact and received wide media attention. It was my family who helped secure this position especially from our family business, they all voted for me to secure this seat out of 18 seats available. All of them were occupied by men and we used to go and visit the King, the Prime Minister and the Crown Prince, I was the only women amongst them.

Arguably, this is a form of alliance where the mediation of family, “Wasta” seems to not only contribute to the women’s group feeling within the family business, and improve the reputation of the family business, but also reinforces the strategy, the vision of the country and international reputation of the country in terms of women’s empowerment, which may explain the wide media attention this appointment received. However, this form of alliance seems to be reciprocal in nature where the Royal Family were also actively contributing to and reinforcing the alliance. For instance, Hind received an entrepreneurship award by the Crown Prince mid-2010, for her entrepreneurial activity in the family business and was invited to meet and represent Bahraini Women’s progress and empowerment during the Duchess of Cornwall’s visit to Bahrain in the same year. Her father also received the “Lifetime Achievement Award” by the Crown Prince in late 2010s and was appointed by the King for an important government position as one of the few women in such position:

One of the most prestigious accomplishments in my life is when I was appointed by the King. This is a huge honour for me since there are only 40 seats out of which 6 are occupied by women and I am one of them. We deal with different social issues that I am interested in and help to develop policies.

Munira’s Instagram account clearly reflects her strong engagement in influencing different policies in relation to business such as improving the conditions of migrant workers, proposing and supporting the change of language use from Arabic to English for legal business issues and recommending initiatives to support businesses in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to business policies, Munira seems to be also actively engaged in influencing policies in relation to social and environmental issues such as women’s active role in policy making, children’s rights, policies in relation to fishery, the extraction and selling of sea sand and protection of endangered species. Consequently, by taking on such a role, Munira was taking an important mediating role in shaping and influencing different policies. In other words, she becomes the “Wasta” and important mediator at the highest national level. More importantly, this form of relationship seems to be dependent on what we refer to as Mutual Exchange Loyalty.

### *The role of clientship*

Similar to the family business literature (Peake and Marshall, 2017; Mariani *et al.*, 2023), we observe from the family business publicity and social media accounts, the active role that four of the five women take in representing the family business group through the family’s charity fund in supporting different social issues. The charity fund is not limited to social issues but also includes supporting various government initiatives such as expansion and renovation of governmental health centres, donation of medical equipment, renovation of houses and enterprises. These forms of activities not only reinforce the family business’s reputation and prestige but also generate an interesting client-patronage relationship between the royal family and the family business where

Royal Family members and government officials provide their patronage and attend the official opening of the different initiatives that were funded by the family business. We observe a similar pattern between the women entrepreneurs with their international business partners. Here we notice for instance from the various media coverage and Instagram accounts how the women entrepreneurs receive recognitions and awards from their international partners celebrating excellence and strong partnership.

We distinguish a reversed client-patronage relationship between the women entrepreneurs and their employees by recognizing their long-term commitment to the family business. This was exemplified in many of the social media posts where the women entrepreneurs recognized their staff for academic achievements, retirement, and appreciation for their contribution to the growth of the family business. While these images contained both Bahraini and non-Bahraini employees, it is important to mention that in this context, non-Bahraini employees usually have work visas that are “sponsored” by their employer. Thus, there is a legal dimension to this client-patronage relationship, but we also observe how the family mobilize and bring these non-family members, and in most cases non-Bahraini to be part of the inner circle of the family. The effect of such relationship is best articulated by Abeer in the following quote:

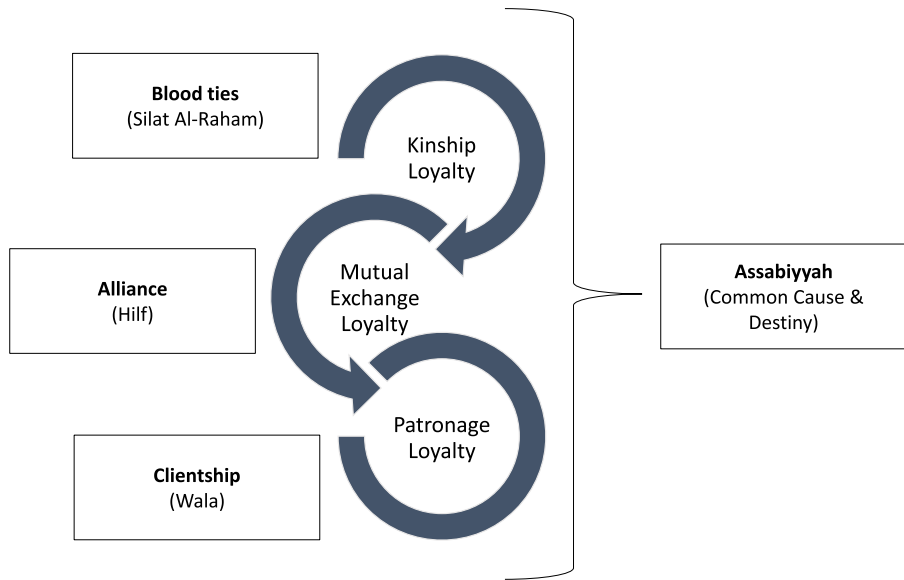
When I started leading [the family business subsidiary], I noticed a lot of people working with me are going through stress, or that they or their dependents have illnesses such as cancer or kidney failures. I felt my duty . . . I'm making profit from this organization, so I have put a certain amount with the acceptance of the board, that I paid back into my team before the society outside, to the people that I work with. It did wonders for me, because these people who are with me, they don't work like an employee, they work like that's their own company . . . you treat them like a family, you treat them with care and love and affection, they will always work for you from their heart, and I feel this is one thing that honestly is one of the main things of success. (Abeer)

Thus, the client–patron relationship seems to foster a third form of loyalty, what we refer to as Patronage Loyalty. Taken together, our findings connect three different forms of relationships discussed separately in family business literature, blood-ties, alliances and clientship under one theoretical concept, Assabiyah and the active role and the agency that the women enact in strengthening the Assabiyah (common cause and destiny) in the family business by building different forms of loyalty (see [Figure 4](#)).

## Discussion

Our single case of a Bahraini family business allows us to explore how women entrepreneurs in family business in the Gulf States use their agency and identify the underlying enablers in supporting and facilitating the exercise of this agency. Our findings show how the women entrepreneurs take two different paths to enter and become involved in the family business, the barriers they are subjected to, and the active role they play in dismantling the challenges to the extent that they become the main mediators between the family business and central institutions in society.

Extant research on women entrepreneurs in family business has been deficient in terms of contextualizing the research beyond the Western world ([Kubiček and Machek, 2019](#); [Maseda et al., 2021](#)). Ibn Khaldun's indigenous theory was adopted in this study to better understand the complexity of individuals, behaviours and actions in the context of Bahrain ([Bruton et al., 2021](#)). The extant literature has been instrumental in documenting the different roles that women play in family business where some women have played hidden and/or more supportive roles ([Cater and Young, 2019](#); [Frishkoff and Brown, 1993](#); [McAdam et al., 2021](#); [Xin and Pearce, 1996](#)), emotional roles both in relation to resolving family conflicts ([Dumas, 1989](#)), senior advisory roles ([Poza and Messer, 2001](#)), and roles related to the passing on the family values for future generations ([Dugan et al., 2016](#)). Preserving family unity and ensuring family business continuity



**Figure 4.** Illustration of the cyclical process of how women entrepreneurs interact with the three forms of relationships to strengthen the Assabiyyah in the family business

**Source(s):** Author's own creation

relies heavily on these roles (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). However, studies have shown that some of the numerous roles held by women may conflict with each other (Salganicoff, 1990).

Our study draws attention to another important role that women entrepreneurs play in strengthening *Assabiyyah* (common cause and destiny) in a family business in Bahrain. We show the cyclical process of how the women play an active role in relying upon and building different forms of loyalty both within and beyond the family business (see Figure 4). These findings hold significant relevance in a patriarchal setting where women may face barriers and be restricted from participating in business activities, regardless of their qualifications or abilities. In particular, we found that blood-ties plays an important role in enabling the women to take an active role in the family business. The support from *blood-ties* that draws on *kinship loyalty* also enabled the women entrepreneurs to secure important governmental positions in Bahrain. These positions meant that the family business had more influence and power for instance regarding business policies. We also observed how the *alliances* between different family business elites were strengthened through marriage. These alliances resulted in family business members being invited to be Board members of other family businesses. We also noticed how the offspring of the women entrepreneurs gained access to other roles in the husband's family business. Alliances were formed with royal family members who sponsored family events. The family alliances also enabled the family members including the women to secure important roles in government entities and authorities. These important positions provided the family business with important resources and influence. The alliances also drew upon what we refer to as *mutual exchange loyalty*.

The *clientship* relationship was more linked to mobilizing people to be part of the inner circle. This was interesting as it takes different configuration depending on who the women were dealing with. For instance, when the women were dealing with their employees, the women entrepreneurs took on the role of the patron and the employees the client. When the interactions were with other international partners, the relationship assumed a more client-client relationship. When the interaction was with the Bahraini Royal Family members, the

women entrepreneurs assumed a reversed role where they became the clients and the Royal Family the patron. At the heart of this social interaction is what we identified as *patronage loyalty*. This finding reflects an important characteristic of this context that has been largely ignored in the literature and stresses the role of agency as an activity undertaken by the women to achieve common cause and destiny.

We were also able to identify two different paths in which the women entrepreneurs exercised their agency to attain and secure the role(s) in the family business which we define as “entrepreneurial merits independent of the family business”, an important activity that signals the women’s acumen and expertise to obtain the respect they need in the family business setting (Maseda *et al.*, 2022). The path of “entrepreneurial merits within the family business” reflects a path where the women entrepreneurs are groomed to assume leadership roles within the family business (Maseda *et al.*, 2022). In so doing, we build on other scholarly works that recognize women as active agents of their lives (Nulleshi and Kalonaityte, 2022; Ogbor, 2000; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021).

While the first path “Entrepreneurial merits independent of the family business” appeared to break barriers into the business domain, it did not guarantee automatic legitimacy within the family business. Instead, we observe similar to previous studies that the women entrepreneurs had to build up their entrepreneurial merits within the family business (Maseda *et al.*, 2022; Vera and Dean, 2005). However, unique to our study is that once the women are recognized and successful in the family business, they are then in a position to break institutional barriers, not just in business but also on a political level. Specifically, our findings show how the women entrepreneurs can break down the various barriers and the roles they played in their interaction with blood-ties where they built and developed kinship loyalty, alliances based on mutual exchange loyalty and clientship in the context of their family business. To sum up, we show how women entrepreneurs use their agency in family to achieve common cause and destiny and identify the underlying enablers namely Kinship Loyalty, Mutual Exchange Loyalty and alliances and Patronage Loyalty.

## Conclusion

Our study makes two significant contributions to the family business literature. First, our findings contribute to the literature on women’s entry into and involvement in the family business by extending the literature in relation to family dynamics’ influence on women’s entrepreneurial activities (Maseda *et al.*, 2022). These studies have documented the pivotal role that social capital plays in the context of family business in general (Arregle *et al.*, 2007) and women entrepreneurs in family business more specifically (Maseda *et al.*, 2022; Venugopal, 2016; Welsh and Kaciak, 2018, 2019). For instance, some studies have indicated that these benefits are offered with certain costs and risks (Adler and Kwon, 2002), which may help explain the scholarly interest in better understanding the mobilization of social capital within a social network (Gudmunson and Danes, 2013; Salvato and Melin, 2008). We add to this stream of literature by identifying two different paths in which the women entrepreneurs exercised their agency to attain and secure the role(s) in the family business and by highlighting three key enablers adopted by the women entrepreneurs in mobilizing social capital, which are peculiar to the cultural environment of Bahrain and the Gulf States.

Second, we contribute to contextualizing family business literature and broadening the debate beyond the Western-centric biases (Marlow, 2020) by using and further developing indigenous theory (Bruton *et al.*, 2021) with a particular focus on connecting the theoretical concept of “Asabiyyah” with family business literature in relation to blood-ties, alliances and clientship. While the concept of loyalty has been often used in family business literature, it has described and studied using different theoretical lens without problematization (Connor, 2007). We add to this literature by identifying three different forms of loyalty (Kinship

Loyalty – blood ties, Mutual Exchange Loyalty – alliances and Patronage Loyalty – clientship) that women use as “the glue” in upholding (cohesion) both within and outside their family businesses. Women entrepreneurs by “doing context” play an important role in strengthening Asabiyyah, that is, a sense of common cause and destiny, within their family business settings. Consequently, this study provides novel insights into the important and unique contributions women entrepreneurs facilitate within the family business, an area that has received limited attention in the literature (Maseda *et al.*, 2022). Related but different, we contribute to Ibn Khaldun’s theory by extending the concept of Assabiyyah and bring attention to the cyclical process that the women entrepreneurs engage in simultaneously to establish strong connection and build loyalty with different forms of relationships. This in turn, enables the women to assume an important mediator role between the business and the country’s highest national authority.

This research has limitations which we now posit as avenues for future research. First, in this study we focused on one of the key theoretical concepts introduced by Ibn Khaldun, namely Assabiyyah. However, Ibn Khaldun discussed other important elements that have not received similar attention such as his distinction between nomads and Urban. The mainstream family business and entrepreneurship literature have focused on rural and urban, however, to date there is gap in our knowledge with regards to nomad society, something that would warrant investigation. Ibn Khaldun also underscored important elements such as well-being, class, value creations and risk amongst many other topics. It is important to remember that his ideas were developed in the 14th century long before Adam Smith, Karl Marks and Pierre Bordieu to name a few. Consequently, future research could identify and develop novel perspectives inspired by Ibn Khaldun’s work. For instance, Ibn Khaldun alludes to the difference in well-being between different generations. Despite well-being being an emerging field, there is a scarcity of research exploring the difference and similarities of well-being amongst different generations in the family business context (Arijs and Michiels, 2021; Stephan, 2018). Furthermore, while a single case methodology was appropriate for us to unpack the specifics of the different forms of relationships and the types of loyalty that women drew in the group feeling process, future research could include other cases located in the Arab Middle East to facilitate in-group comparison and cross case comparison. Finally, given that our focus was on one family business in Bahrain, we concur that study research cannot be generalized to populations but rather, to theory: thus, constituting analytical generalization (Yin, 2009). However, by drawing upon Ibn Khaldun theory and in particular notions of Asabiyyah, we found that theorizing this concept has specific and distinctive articulations within the Gulf States.

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