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EMPOWERING WOMEN: HOW SHOULD THE OMANI STATE CONTINUE SUPPORTING WOMEN WORKING IN ITS HANDICRAFTS INDUSTRIES?

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Abstract

Improving the economic status of women around the world has positive effects on social, economic, and political development. One inequality that women in the MENA have and continue to face is economic inequality, manifested mainly through various barriers from participating in the formal labor force and discrimination at work and public spaces. Women's empowerment is a frequently cited goal of most countries' development policies and key to addressing gender inequalities. The field research sought to contextualize women's empowerment in the handicrafts sector in Oman by soliciting the participants' reactions on factors that are often used to measure empowerment through work. The paper assesses potential pathways that position employment, and the development of entrepreneurial know-how, within an empowerment approach. Using a qualitative approach, it applies the sustainable livelihood framework to identify several constraints to women's work and provides a micro-level perspective of Oman's handicrafts sector.

Keywords

Women's Empowerment, Oman, Crafts Sector, Capabilities, Enabling Environment

1. Introduction

Improving the economic status of women around the world has positive effects on social, economic, and political development. The ‘gendered’ basis for development, notably that women play a crucial role in their country’s advancement, highlights the importance of empowering women (Coleman, 2004). Do women play a key role in the development of the Arab world? Research suggests that Arab women who engage in income-generating work contribute significantly to the economic advancement of their nations and reducing poverty, despite the many limitations these women face. In Morocco for instance, within five years after economic liberalization and the following high entry rate of women into the formal labor force, the poverty rate declined from 26 percent to 13 percent (Richards & Gelleny, 2007). Gender disparities however forcefully persist throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Such disparities, likely to have socio-cultural roots, are recognized as impediments to the development of MENA countries, and a major contributor to the region’s slow economic growth (Coleman, 2004). Gender inequality—the situation where women’s rights, achievements, and/or access to opportunities in the social, economic, and/or political scenes is less than men’s—is one of the most significant impediments to national socioeconomic progress.

One such inequality that women in the MENA have and continue to face is economic inequality, manifested mainly through various barriers from participating in the formal labor force and discrimination at work and public spaces. The challenge many Arab states still confront is to eliminate economic inequality women face by accepting women’s roles as legitimate economic actors, recognizing the value of women’s work, and facilitating women’s economic participation in the labor force. Most of these societies have historically been deeply embedded with traditional patriarchal practices that discouraged most types of public engagement between unrelated men and women. Female participation in the labor force not only crossed certain traditional boundaries but, through economically-empowered and financially-independent women, also threatened the patriarchal dominance upon which men assumed their authority over women (Coleman 2004). Increased globalization and the creation of more modern nation-states partly explain why since the 1980s, most MENA states began allowing, and some even partially sponsored and launched, programs for women’s entrepreneurial development as part of the countries’ national development strategies (Metcalfé, 2008). Egypt’s National Council for Women, the Jordan River Foundation, and the Omani Women’s Association are just a few examples of national-level initiatives seeking to

strengthen and promote women's economic and entrepreneurial capacities. Throughout the MENA, non-governmental and governmental entities have collaborated to increase female participation in the labor force during recent decades (Bahrami & Zeidan, 2011). Despite having a very small and restrained civil society, Oman stands out from most MENA states in its open acceptance of and support for women's economic participation in all sectors. Like working women all over the world however, Omani women face certain constraints that affect their participation in the labor force and thereby their empowerment.

1.1 Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a frequently cited goal of most countries' development policies. It is based on the idea that poverty reduction requires the inclusion of all persons in development initiatives, especially the central actors—poor people themselves—who are likely most committed to moving out of poverty. 'Empowerment' does not simply mean labor force participation or acquiring higher education. Empowerment is intrinsically about the ability to make wise use of one's resources and capabilities in decision-making. It is also about giving others a voice in the decisions that impact their lives so they can have "more of what they want and need [in order to] demand and control more of the benefits of development" (Chambers, 1983: 147).

Research increasingly indicates links between development effectiveness and empowerment. Empowerment approaches promote economic growth that includes poor and/or marginalized people through investments, such as education, that build and improve people's capabilities and access to opportunities (Narayan-Parker, 2005). Women are especially targeted for economic empowerment programs because of their general reliability, persistence, trustworthiness, and willingness to strengthen and invest in collective welfare rather than just their personal gains. Education has long been promoted as a foremost tool for economic development, especially through its creation of personal assets that influence women's contributions in the labor force. World Bank data shows that female tertiary school enrollment in Oman went from 7 percent in 1995 to 59.69 percent in 2016. Female labor force participation during the same period went up less significantly, from 21 percent in 1995 to 30 percent in 2016. Of concern for a country like Oman is that the increase in female participation rates in the labor force, which includes women with varying levels of education, is not commensurate with the growth rate in women's tertiary school enrolment. Some suggest that this gap between educational attainment and labor force participation, which is also evident throughout the MENA region, indicate that women are less likely than men to be employed (Jalbout, 2015).

1.2 Historical Overview

The Arabian Gulf region is often perceived as, and to some extent is, home to some of the most conservative and patriarchal Muslim societies in the world. The region has experienced significant growth in GDP per capita over the past fifty years from its abundant oil and natural gas reserves, albeit with disparities among countries. With each country in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—which includes Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Yemen, and Oman—at different oil production levels, revenue streams from natural reserves varied in both their amounts and uses by the states. The Sultanate of Oman differed from the rest of the region in the growth trajectory it pursued, although it was financially dependent on state revenue, over 70 percent of which was from oil exports. Being a non-OPEC oil producing country, Oman has endeavored to reduce its reliance on the oil sector while also increasing the private sector’s role, diversifying the economy, and reducing its need for foreign workers by increasing Omani men’s and women’s ability and opportunity to participate in the labor force¹.

Historically, Oman’s role as a seafaring nation has exposed it to many foreign cultures that, combined with its more tolerant Ibadhiya sect of Islam (the dominant sect in Oman), has likely been conducive to women’s greater presence in the public space, including work (Al Barwani, 2011: 219).² From a political perspective, modern Oman since the 1970s has opened even more doors for women to be active citizens and participate in the labor force especially through legislation and political will that make gender equality a priority of broader human development. Through PACI’s mandate, Oman’s quest to preserve its history through the handicrafts industries is also a significant reflection of how the state legislatively combines the country’s development goals with its desire for cultural preservation. The incorporation of women into this quest as the principle crafts producers, promoters, and subtle agents of the state’s development agenda was perhaps an unplanned yet valuable bridge to the former’s empowerment.

Oman’s Sultan Qaboos bin Said ascended to the throne in 1970 following a coup that ousted his father Sultan Taimur bin Said and inherited a highly underdeveloped country. Promising to undo the detrimental effects of antiquated and isolationist policies, Qaboos set Oman on the road to a

¹ This is also known as the policy of ‘Omanization’, which seeks to reduce Oman’s dependence on foreign workers that the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated to represent almost half of the Omani labor force (excluding the public sector) in 2010.

² One should note however that Muslim women’s participation in the public space is not new, nor exclusive to the Ibadhiya sect, but has existed since the beginning of Islamic history from the time of the Middle Ages. Al-Barwani (2011) explains that Muslim women since then were “empowered” when they acted “within the parameters of their religion and social norms” (218).

development path unprecedented in the Gulf. After militarily consolidating the state's power, Qaboos focused on addressing the conditions—such as poverty, illiteracy, and poor infrastructure—that underpinned the country's dire economic situation using its mounting oil wealth. Oman's rise as a social welfare state was accompanied by Qaboos's efforts in building a patriotic relationship between Omanis and their country. His call in his first annual State of the Sultanate address to his people in 1971 stressed this patriotic mission which he urged all Omanis, men *and* women, to pursue by helping develop their country (Kéchichian, 2008: 1).

1.3 Oman's Development Trajectory

The government has undertaken most of Oman's socioeconomic development projects with oil-revenue financing, without foreign assistance and conditionality. The main national strategic development plan, Vision 2020, was introduced in 1996 and has since characterized Oman's development.³ Vision 2020 presents a twenty-five year agenda whose objectives lay in four key dimensions: sustainable development within a stable macroeconomic framework; human resources development; economic diversification; and private-sector development. PACI directly addresses two of those dimensions, first by situating itself within Vision 2020's economic diversification dimension, and also as key strategy for promoting human resource development especially among Omanis.⁴ Human resource development has been at the core of Qaboos's development agenda that sees the individual as “the instrument and the ultimate aim of national development” (Kéchichian, 2008: 2). He urged Omanis to share the responsibility for building their country through the achievement of economic, material, and social gains without neglecting their history and traditions. Qaboos recognized the fragility of oil dependence as the sole driver for development and directed his efforts toward diversifying Oman's economy and building an educated class who will work together to shape their country's growth. “Work”, as Qaboos iterated in one of his speeches, “is noble, and it makes life positive and useful. Moreover, it is a sacred duty of the citizen towards the motherland” (Kéchichian, 2008: 13).

This view of work as both a personal—“positive and useful”—and national—“duty of the citizen”—goal also underscores the human security imperative for including all Omani citizens, men and women, in the country's development agenda. Upon undoing the antiquated and xenophobic policies of his predecessor, Qaboos's decision to mobilize Omani individuals as the main drivers,

³ The country's development path can be separated into two stages: the first stage lasted from 1970 to 1996; and the second stage from 1996 to the present.

⁴ Omanization is a key component of Vision 2020's human resource development dimension (Al-Lamki, 2000).

independently and collectively, of Oman's growth was a definitive aspect of the country's development trajectory since the beginning of his rule. The explicit linkages made between the needs of the individual and the country, and their interdependence, would in retrospect appear to be one of the most holistic approaches to development pursued by a Gulf country.⁵ While the welfare state is dominant in the GCC, Oman in particular also focused on a more people-centered bottom-up approach. The approach ties human security, a term not propagated in development parlance till the 1990s, to state security.

Human security does not de-emphasize state or military security but rather works in tandem with the latter to address the difficulties that people face at the individual and societal level in leading better lives. It is a "people-centered approach" that places people's security as a complement to sustainable development (Dorn, 2001). While the exact term of 'human security' was not used, one may intuitively presume that the objectives that Oman's development agenda has sought to achieve by addressing individual and societal challenges such as illiteracy, access to healthcare, and clean water are all concerns relating to human security. Further distinguishing Oman's development approach from other GCC states was the recognition of, and appeal to, women as economic contributors in Qaboos's speeches and policies. One particular sector that highlights what may be called this Omani 'exceptionalism' is the crafts industries.

1.4 Case Study – PACI

The Public Authority for Crafts Industries (PACI) is the government body charged with promoting Oman's crafts industries. It also oversees all marketing, administrative, and financial responsibilities of the crafts training and production centers under its purview. Established in 2003, its goals have been to organize and develop a sector that was slowly disappearing as modernization expanded and produced other sectors in the economy. PACI's objectives, and motivation for pursuing its goals, align with various Vision 2020 goals, notably: the preservation of Omani culture, traditions, and history through crafts; economic diversification and development through the creation of jobs in the crafts sector; and the promotion of human resource development through the training of women crafts producers. The under-secretary for PACI, Dr. Issam Al-Rawas, maintained that one of the main goals of the entity is to assist poor women in raising their incomes by providing them with training

⁵ Some scholars have argued for the integration of the human security framework in the MENA, a tool that policy-makers are increasingly using to press for more humane governance that emancipates and empowers both men and women (Chourou 2005; Wheeler 2011).

and experience in producing Omani handicrafts, the ultimate aim being that these women will gradually become self-employed and develop their own enterprises (I. Al-Rawas, personal communication, May 27, 2013). PACI's mandate and ideal trajectory is therefore two-fold—first, it is a practical livelihoods intervention that creates state-sponsored work opportunities for interested rural and low-income women to learn and produce Omani handicrafts. Second, through the training and work experience it provides to its crafts producers, it strategically endeavors to foster enterprise development among women in the crafts sector. While facilitating women's access and ability to work has positively impacted women's labor force participation and fulfilled the first part of PACI's mandate, the second part is yet incomplete. The data collected, further detailed in the discussion section, indicates a lack of clarity in the strategic approach to achieving the second aspect of the mandate as few women were willing and able to leave their PACI jobs and become independent enterprisers.

PACI's training and production centers constitute some of the channels through which the state is creating employment that mainly, though not exclusively, target women.⁶ There were between 300 to 400 women affiliated with and/or working as handicrafts makers for PACI at the time of fieldwork in 2013, while the total number of women who have gone through PACI programs since its inception in 2003 could not be gathered. PACI employs mostly women, who first receive paid training for in their first month. The women claimed to receive a set monthly salary of 300 Omani Riyals (about \$700). Most of those who dropped out of the program did so during the training period.⁷ While there may be many more non-PACI women handicrafts producers, especially among Bedouin communities, there is currently insufficient data to adequately estimate their numbers. PACI's total estimated profits from handicrafts sales from all its production centers in 2010 was about 63,000 Omani Riyals (or \$163,800), and this is added to the state-funded budget for the organization to meet all its expenses (PACI, 2010).

1.4.1 Paper Overview and Research Objectives

First, this paper briefly examines Oman's history and development trajectory to set the context for assessing the benefits from PACI's further engagement with women in the crafts sector. Second, the paper uses primary data to present PACI as a case study of women working in Oman's

⁶ Similar programs include Sanad and the Fund for the Development of Youth Projects, which are offshoot programs of Vision 2020 that assist both men and women in gaining employment in all sectors and/or starting and growing their own enterprises.

⁷ Exact dropout and completion rates were not available at the time of research.

handicrafts centers to situate and analyze the work-related constraints these women face. It argues that revising PACI's current approach would reform, complement, and expand the scope of the entity's work with women in the crafts industries. Finally, it frames the constraints as an empowerment issue and assesses PACI's options for maintaining its work support for women in the crafts sector, specifically through three policy options: (1) maintain the status quo; (2) make all PACI production centers quasi-autonomous; (3) or a refocus on empowerment through a tailored participatory approach (TPA).

In attempting to answer how PACI should continue its support for women in the handicrafts industries, the research objective was to gather information on the participants' perceptions of their own empowerment through their work experiences. Interviews were conducted in Oman throughout a three-month period, April to June 2013, at six rural crafts production centers fully-managed by PACI and one semi-independent crafts center called Nissa Sidab.⁸ A total of 70 women were interviewed and these solicited the participants' reactions on factors that are often used to measure empowerment through work. By contextualizing women's empowerment in the handicrafts sector in Oman, the paper assesses Oman's prospects and objectives for having and maintaining its state-sponsored training and production centers in the handicrafts industries, which are operated and/or overseen by PACI. The paper assesses potential pathways that position paid-work and the development of entrepreneurial know-how within a more holistic empowerment approach, and provides a micro-level perspective of the handicrafts sector to identify several constraints to women's empowerment through work.

2. Empowerment

There are two main empowerment dimensions that this paper identifies from women's engagement in the workforce in the crafts industries, and these are capabilities and an enabling environment. Both dimensions help organize the analysis by highlighting specific factors that build women's ability to have sustainable livelihoods that ultimately 'empower' them. Within these dimensions, 'empowerment' does not simply mean participation in the workforce but is essentially

⁸ The centers were located in the villages of Sidab (semi-independent group; crafts included various textile products, Bakhoor (frankincense), henna, photography of traditional costumes and crafts.), Smail (textiles), Nizwa (copper), Wadi Bani Khalid (frond), Thahboun (animal bones), Rakhyut (coconut shells), and Thumrait (leather). There were twelve operating centers at the time of the interviews. None of the interviewees had achieved higher than a secondary education. Most had a secondary-level education, but a few had completed only primary schooling and therefore had to attend adult literacy classes in order to be employed by PACI.

about building the capabilities and enabling environment that women need in order to thrive at work and contribute to economic development.

2.1 Capabilities

‘Capabilities’ is the first dimension used to analyze PACI’s challenges in meeting the second part of its mandate, that of fostering enterprise development among women. Capabilities look on women’s ability and willingness to work in the handicraft industries given the opportunities and constraints they face. First proposed by economist Amartya Sen in the 1980s, the capabilities theory was developed to improve assessments on people’s quality of life across different cultures with the aim of assessing development’s impacts (Sen 1987; 2009). *Capability* refers to what a person is *able* to do or pursue, given what he/she values. While the capabilities theory aims to consider a set of possibilities and circumstances that help or deter an individual from performing a certain function, this paper uses the concept mainly as a descriptive tool to identify the women crafts workers’ constraints and options for empowerment through their work. The research found that women working in PACI crafts centers were not opening their own enterprises due to several capability deficits that related both to their individual powers or abilities, and the inhibiting circumstances of their surrounding environment.

2.1.1 Know-How

PACI programs were not successful in building and supporting broader and stronger collections of personal capabilities that would have been helpful for the women’s overall livelihood strategies, particularly in starting and running their own enterprises. Women from all interview sites disclosed three major skills in which they were deficient, and these were the inability to: communicate in English and sometimes proper Arabic (as various tribes have their own dialects) with customers and suppliers if they had to start their own businesses; market their products in different arenas; and improve the designs used on their handiworks. Rather than addressing these skill deficiencies however, PACI’s management strategy seemed to perpetuate a dependency relationship that almost resisted personal asset development that would facilitate individual enterprise growth among the women. For instance, there was little incentive for the women to develop these skills because at PACI they were not responsible for marketing their own products. They mostly followed generic designs either selected by officials at PACI headquarters or the trainers who were responsible for teaching and monitoring the women on crafts production at the local centers. Furthermore, the regularity of a fixed monthly salary from PACI, which was not dependent on the number of

handicrafts each center's worker produced, possibly contributed to some of their apathy toward self-employment and its unpredictable financial remuneration.⁹ The latter point indicates two issues. First, even if the women acquired the necessary skills, some may still choose the financial stability of a fixed monthly salary from PACI rather than venture into independent businesses. Second, this behavioral pattern could also suggest a motivation and agency issue because women's role as employees, as only factors in the production process without any effective say in the actual workings, further diminished the need for them to individually seek raw materials and markets for their goods.

The women's remarks however display their recognition of personal and organizational efforts needed in order to build their know-how. For example, they posited that with the provision of English and marketing courses, and training in craft-specific designing to improve the motifs used, they would be more receptive to becoming independent workers. Several women did in fact participate in some government-funded courses at nearby universities and centers in subjects such as computer literacy and marketing. The courses however were very basic, teaching simple things like creating an email and searching the web to novices, and only ran for a few days to a week at most. Without extended and continued exposure and instruction, the women did not utilize what they learned from those courses in their work.

2.1.2 Informal Networks

For most of the women interviewed, it was difficult to start their own businesses because their informal networks did not extend beyond their most immediate relatives, close friends, or neighbors. The women had found their jobs at PACI either from listings in local newspapers and flyers or by word-of-mouth. The women relied on their family members to look after their children when they were at work, and without this limited support many women would not be working at the crafts centers. Many also cited help from a relative to sometimes clean the house or run errands. Beyond childcare and simple house chores or errands however, their use of informal networks were not extensive. If the same women were to become independent entrepreneurs, it would require a support mechanism that extends beyond their immediate relatives and friends. There was no network system of other crafts makers that they regularly communicated with or relied on beyond the group of women they directly worked with at the centers, and this limitedness was also responsible for why they felt unable to work outside the PACI centers.

⁹ Unlike the PACI centers, Nissa Sidab's women were paid a piece-rate depending on the type and number of products they made.

2.1.3 Self-Confidence and Perceptions

Most women displayed and expressed a lack of self-confidence needed to manage independent enterprises. In some cases, women at the centers refused to entertain the idea of starting their own businesses even after assuming they would have all the training they needed or requested to build their human and financial assets, including financial and marketing support to help kick-start their projects. Their lack of confidence in their own capabilities as handicrafts makers was often coupled with dismissive traditional perceptions of certain jobs or crafts, and low faith in the profitability of certain crafts industries. For example, women working in the bone crafts center in Thahboun, a village in Oman's southern Dhofar region, were vehemently opposed to the suggested idea that they start their own businesses aside from their jobs with PACI. The notion of sourcing the raw materials individually and manipulating them while they are still in crude form repulsed the women as they described such activities as tiresome and challenging. Women in Thumrait producing leather products expressed a similar dislike for acquiring and working with crude leather using machines, which they described as hard and often dangerous. However, for Thumrait women it was mostly an expression of dislike for an aspect of their overall job that they were already performing but did not discredit or reject. Conversely, Thahboun women's aversion to handling bone in its crude form stems from their unfamiliarity with and personal distaste of the process. The bones that the crafts women used to make various products were those already cleaned and cut through time-consuming, noisy, and somewhat unpleasant (smelly) procedures which were usually carried out by Bedouin women.¹⁰

Differences in the types of crafts produced and methods of production also indicated the likely paths women would choose if they were to pursue their own businesses in this sector. Thumrait women were the most enthusiastic about starting their own businesses provided they had acquired the necessary training, funding, and skills needed to run a successful enterprise. This marked enthusiasm underscored the differing social preferences and public perceptions regarding the leather and bone craft industries. While bone products were not common nor highly regarded in modern Oman—bone even being associated with ghosts and bad luck in local traditions—leather goods had been quite in demand and profitable. The demand for and popularity of leather handicrafts has been cited by Thumrait women as one of their main motivators for wanting to start their own enterprises. Demand

¹⁰ None of the interviewed women were Bedouin. Bedouin women have historically been involved in producing traditional handicrafts but they usually do not work in PACI centers. Some of them however use PACI as a marketing and selling platform to expose and supply their products to various customers.

and popularity are also why many Thahboun women, if given the chance, would readily shift industries from bone to leather, potentially undermining one of PACI's goals of preserving certain rare yet undervalued craft traditions like bone carving.

2.1.4 Remoteness, Mobility, and Finances

Beyond their risk aversion that can arguably be linked to their lack of know-how and self-confidence, limited networks, perceptions, and the differing relative demands of various crafts industries however, the women's feelings of incapacity were also rooted in a lack of physical and financial assets. Most of the women lived in rural areas that they seldom, or never, left, and this limited physical mobility hampered their desire to be independent enterprisers. Physical assets such as the number and condition of roads, the extreme remoteness of many villages, and the unavailability of affordable public transportation discouraged many women from opening their own businesses. Women in Thahboun for example argued that their village, about a forty-five minute ride through daunting mountainous road from Salalah, the main city of Dhofar in the south of Oman, was far from the closest market and major touristic sites where they could sell their products. Thahboun's remoteness also explained why the women there did not have access to various professional development courses that women from some other centers had limited access to, and felt incapable of communicating effectively about their products to the outside world. Most rural women do not feel financially independent enough afford their own car or personal transport, often forcing them to rely on family members to drive them to their workspaces at PACI centers.

2.2 An Enabling Environment

Formal and informal institutions shape the work atmosphere, or governance environment, and affect the extent to which it is an enabling or disabling environment for women to work. Formal institutions are officially recognized and sanctioned channels through which women may directly or indirectly receive support to work or be discouraged from working. Supportive formal institutions can include official women's organizations, national laws mandating gender equality, women's NGOs with official status, government ministries pursuing gender mainstreaming in their projects, and contractual agreements that view women as equal to men. Informal institutions are usually not officially sanctioned but may be recognized by the state. They can include social norms that define what jobs are deemed inappropriate for women or codes of conduct that limit male-female public interactions.

2.2.1 Professional Support Networks

Support networks, both formal and informal, can affect how enabling an environment is for women to work in. These networks rely on interconnectedness and professional relationships. They are also institutions, and when they are widely recognized and accepted bodies, these networks can formally and/or informally sanction certain behaviors of their members. The interconnectedness that can arise from such networks in turn can facilitate cooperation and participation, often leading to the creation of civic associations or working groups. For example, despite the cultural barriers they may face, many Omani women in professional occupations participate in some kind of support network. Women's participation in organizations such as the Omani Women's Association (OWA), the only formal women's network organization in Oman, as well as smaller informal work and civic groups stems from their wider access to individuals and groups in different industries, and a greater sense of professional independence and self-confidence. Conversely, most women from the craft centers did not have support networks beyond their informal networks. Their interactions with other groups of women, even crafts women from production centers in other towns, usually occurred sporadically and at occasional crafts festivals and exhibitions organized by PACI.

A positive level of social capital emerging from participation in professional support networks can not only be expected but also be self-replicating, cross formal and informal barriers, and create new institutions that promote empowerment. Nissa Sidab, the semi-independent women's organization showed some positive signs of what it could be like to use support networks effectively. In regards to selling and marketing their products, Nissa Sidab craftswomen often collaborated with various entities such as PACI and the Ministry of Tourism to make regular appearances at public events. The work done by women at Nissa Sidab was more independent in nature because, unlike PACI women, they worked mostly from their homes in surrounding villages around the organization and on a piece-rate basis according to the demand from orders received. They would come to the organization, a converted family house in the seaside village of Sidab, to acquire the raw materials, deliver their finished products, collect their salaries based on products they supplied, and to socialize with other women and the many foreign visitors who come to view and purchase their products. The manager—a woman from Sidab who was appointed by the center's founder, Badriya Al-Siyabi—handled the administrative aspects of the center, coordinated the women's works, and acted as a liaison between the center, its customers, and various stakeholders. Nissa Sidab women also exuded greater self-reliance and confidence, and they had found a way to work according to their individual

needs while leveraging the benefits of exploiting the support networks that the organization could afford them and their products.

2.2.2 Social Norms

There also seems to be a socially-rooted disinclination for more open participation in the workforce. As the *souqs* of Salalah, Nizwa, Al-Hamra and throughout Oman show, many women go to the markets to sell their products but the perception of the interviewees was that these women could do so because they were Bedouin or low-class and needed to financially support their families. Women who were in more professionalized occupations—like doctors, office clerks, teachers—were viewed differently by virtue of their higher education and the nobility of their jobs. Hence their labor participation, even when driven by financial necessity, was largely respected and praised by Omani society. The crafts industries however are perceived as less professionalized and only for women who cannot get ‘better’ jobs. The women in this study too often rejected the idea of becoming independent crafts makers and assuming all the work of a private business, like negotiating for raw materials, saying “we are women” and “it is not easy.” Their *refusal* to do something because they were women indicated an implicit adherence to some informal norms that influenced how they felt others would perceive them in their communities. Therefore, even though the women openly admitted that they did not perceive being ‘female’ as a dominant constraint, they chose to follow these informal norms that socially characterized certain jobs as not to be performed by women.

2.2.3 Gendered Experiences

Women did not report facing overt gender-related discrimination or social approbation to work as craft producers. They have travelled with their families’ support to government-sponsored national exhibitions and events where they stayed for days or weeks to showcase their handicrafts, some having travelled even as far as China and Turkey. Gender-related barriers reported by the women were physical and technical, citing the necessity of bodily strength and power as some of the main challenges they faced as women in the crafts industries. The use of certain machines in the production process was one of the main reasons why many women left during initial training as the machines used to manipulate raw materials such as bones, leather, and coconut shells often required “strong hands” and high focus from users in order to limit risks of injury. Many viewed such work as quite risky for a woman. Aside from the physical challenge of engaging in this type of labor and in some cases the reluctance to engage with male suppliers, the women considered their jobs as acceptable for women.

Women from the copper-producing crafts center in Nizwa were the only group interviewed that reported facing family opposition to their work. Most of the women in the Nizwa center were working with little to no moral encouragement from their families because their work was regarded as too “manly” and harsh. However, their personal lack of motivation mainly stemmed from the limited scope and success of women’s copper crafts industry in Oman. They spent many hours working on few items that often could not compete with the lower-priced machine- or male-produced products. As the women throughout all centers recognized, the price was most customers’ main determinant for choosing a product, and the quality and value of the women’s handicrafts were often lost next to the cheaper machine-made options. The opportunity to work in the public space however propelled the women in the copper and other crafts industries to persevere in their efforts despite the odds many faced.

Their perseverance might indicate that working for PACI granted them greater financial and economic independence, and this work perhaps acted as a channel through which they expressed their creativity in the products they made. It is also possible that their work allowed them a wordless voice through which they were proving to themselves and those around them that they were making their own choices by choosing where and what to work in. Through this latter choice, they were helping build the culture of work that Qaboos called for and recognized as key to Oman’s development since he came to power.¹¹ Their initiative demonstrates that they did not let their lack of higher education impede their economic participation and contribution to national development. It also shows how a similar ‘sense of work’ may be catalyzing women’s gradual economic participation in more sectors of the economy.

2.2.4 Belief in the State

Despite their limited capabilities and often limiting environments, the women nevertheless strongly believed in the significance of their work as crafts producers contributing to the economy and preserving Omani traditions, and the state has played a major role in creating and sustaining that belief. Belief in their work’s contribution to Oman’s national development agenda contributed to positive personal appreciation of their work. Chatty (2000) articulated that women symbolize “the cultural integrity of the dominant culture in the country,” but while she viewed the government’s hand as a manipulation of women to represent certain state-supported values, the female interviewees

¹¹ It is unclear if they initially saw this as part of the nationalist cause or mainly as a conduit to greater economic prosperity individually and for their households.

suggested a more contractual relationship. Rather than manipulation, the government seems to have built an implicit agreement between its PACI programs and the women's goals. PACI, like other employment programs such as Sanad and the Fund for the Development of Youth Programs, is one of the deals forged through Vision 2020 and Qaboos's development agenda between the state and society to create livelihood programs. Such livelihood programs aim to not only build the economy but some, like PACI, also preserve Omani culture while giving women access to the labor force and financial autonomy, albeit limited. As Belwal's and Singh's (2008) study showed, the government's role becomes more apparent when there is a clear connection between its policies to encourage women's work and their implementation through work support programs.

One of the clear effects that working in the government-managed crafts centers has had on women was the belief that the government was critical to their success. Women in PACI's crafts centers were aware that the training and work-related support they received from the government accompanied the expectation that they would become independent producers, although not all of them welcomed the idea of working privately. They nonetheless agreed that their work, which preserved ancient crafts and promoted Oman's rich historical traditions both nationally and internationally, was a form of service to their country. The women argued that their work as handicrafts producers was key to Oman's development as their works also contributed to the economy. They further recognized the benefit of their works on Oman's tourism industry and in building the country's image, asserting that the government ought to be committed to their success by providing them with, and protecting, jobs. The case illustrates that national policies and the state's expectations affect women's work experience and expectations as the women recognized the critical role they played in the economy as well as the government's centrality in their success. The state now needs to ensure that all women are empowered to be its partners for change. Then will it build an enterprising nation.

3. Problem Statement, Policy Options, and Recommendations for PACI

A major challenge to sending these women in the crafts industries to start their own projects was the lack of leverage they would need to compete effectively in the market. Women at some of the centers had been notified at the time the interviews were conducted of the forthcoming termination of their training. PACI's expectation was that they would begin working independently as was included in the contract they signed when they began training. Women who welcomed the idea of working

independently expressed a desire to do so in groups, with mostly the same colleagues they had at the center, to start their own projects. They were afraid of the risks involved however, especially since PACI had been acting as the intermediary between the women's products and the market so far. As one PACI craftswoman from Rakhyut put it, "would you give someone a huge sum of money, let's say thousands of riyals and then push him in the marketplace when she has no experience or knowledge of how to behave in that arena? That's a big failure to the authority." Indeed, that may be a fault in the design of PACI's programs to meet the national mandate for human resource development as envisioned by Vision 2020. In particular, without the development of their human capital, the women will continue to find it difficult to stand independently as enterprisers.

3.4 Options for Participation

- 1. Maintain the Status Quo:** As the default option, this requires no change to the current approach by PACI. If the goal is merely to give interested women jobs in the handicrafts sector, then this option may be working. However, it inhibits PACI's vision of success that aspires to create the next generation of independent and capable crafts producers. It is also likely not sustainable for PACI in the long-run if the women are not graduating from the programs to undertake independent work in the crafts sector. One risk is that it does not address the identified challenges and weaknesses in the women's professional capabilities. It also perpetuates the dependence of many women on PACI salaries, discouraging entrepreneurial initiatives. As a country, Oman could lose the opportunity to demonstrate national support for women's empowerment in the handicrafts sector if this approach continues.
- 2. Make all PACI Production Centers Quasi-Autonomous:** A good example of this option is Nisaa Sidab, the self-help organization that is only marginally supervised by PACI. The center is run and managed by its own staff, primarily the local craftswomen themselves. Its manager manages most of the marketing and selling, and individual crafts producers are paid by the number of products they produce rather than a predetermined salary. PACI's role is as an intermediary between the producers and the market, and PACI acts as a marketing agent and supplier of raw materials. The benefit of this approach is that it encourages women to lead their own projects, and control how much they each produce depending on individual needs and capacities. However, finding a capable, local manager can be difficult, especially in remote villages. Relinquishing a set monthly salary may also be very difficult for some women to accept. Using this approach to establish new centers may not be ideal if one assumes that new

craftswomen will be under-skilled and require training to build their capabilities. This approach may be best suited in the long-term when a critical mass of women have acquired and built the necessary skills and capabilities to be effective producers and more comfortable working with limited supervision. If this approach is pursued, it will also be imperative to assess the women's level of support through mechanisms such as evaluative opinion surveys.

- 3. Refocus on Empowerment through a Tailored Participatory Approach (TPA):** Another policy option is to install a participatory system that is tailored to each center and/or type of craft. This approach will avoid the negative political and economic effects associated with doing nothing and/or simply making the centers quasi-autonomous. The TPA will consider the ideas, needs, and aspirations of the craftswomen in each segment and incorporate these considerations into existing and new PACI programs and project designs. It will also position PACI as an instrument for craftswomen's empowerment and professional development, building their skill-sets and confidence while enabling women to transition into their own entrepreneurial pursuits if they aim to do so. In this case, PACI has the option to differentiate among its centers and make some of them quasi-autonomous upon receiving feedback from its crafts producers and local managers. If the goal is to empower women through their agency and an opportunity structure, then the TPA should be considered. It has the appeal of both continuity and change.

4. Recommendation

The third option, which is to refocus on empowerment through a tailored participatory approach, is the to be the best option currently available. It addresses the women's capability needs and promotes a positive environment for their professional development. It also supports their workforce participation and incorporates their views in order to build their assets and help them become more confident crafts producers. It provides for a methodical administration and management of PACI centers, and the broader development of the handicrafts industries. It also affords PACI the opportunity to support Oman's national development objectives for economic growth and women's inclusion in the labor force. It is not charity that these women want, but the economic opportunity and capabilities to have a decent livelihood, make informed business decisions, and be effective participants in Oman's national development.

Developing the women's skills and confidence will require consistent support from PACI. A tailored approach should be accompanied by consultations and dialogues with and among the women

producers in each of the three identified segments of the handicrafts sector (see section on the variety of players in this sector); with relevant actors in the PACI administration and management; and with external experts. There will be costs involved in designing the new process, adapting and merging new and old methods, and incorporating the needs and voices of the women producers. This approach however is expected to offset the costs with positive impacts on the long-term professional development of the women producers and on PACI's institutional role and reputation as a facilitator of women's empowerment and national development.

Periodic impact assessments will be critical for assessing the potential and actual contributions of PACI programs to women's empowerment, which will include following-up with women who have graduated from the programs. There is no comparative and systematic study of the contextual and programmatic factors that affect the contribution of state-led interventions on women's empowerment in Oman. There is therefore a need to construct (or adapt) an analytical framework on women's empowerment to guide state-led reforms and initiatives. Insights on Oman's handicrafts sector can play a critical role in constructing such a framework.

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