

**Reference:** Alkhaled, S. (forthcoming), “‘Doing’ gender to ‘undo’ culture: Entrepreneurs’ cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work in (neo)patriarchal societies”. In I. Sasaki, & S. Baba, (Eds.) *Cultural Marginalization in Communities and Organizations: Seeds for Peace. Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 103*, Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 63-87

**‘Doing’ gender to ‘undo’ culture: Entrepreneurs’ cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work in (neo)patriarchal societies**

**Abstract**

Organisational research has investigated the systemic and structural marginalisation of communities living in the periphery of the dominant culture. However, there remains a lack of theoretical understanding of ‘cultural marginalisation’ and the strategies used by different marginalised groups to cope with their marginalisation in work and society. In this longitudinal study, I take a postcolonial feminist approach to understand how Saudi women entrepreneurs experience cultural marginalisation and engage in legitimacy work in a neopatriarchal society that is grappling with maintaining tradition during rapid modernisation. Findings illustrate how women entrepreneurs’ legitimacy work involves repositioning their gender role in society through a process of ‘doing gender to undo culture’. This includes reinforcing, maintaining and deconstructing the ideology of the ‘*ideal Islamic woman*’, and reconstructing it to align with the country’s evolving socio-economic and political vision, which has shifted to describe women as ‘*nation builders*’. Thus, the women engage in a constant reconstruction of a culturally legitimate ‘moral space’ in society within which the identities of the ‘*ideal Islamic woman*’ and the ‘*Saudi woman entrepreneur*’ are not an oxymoron or mutually exclusive. Instead, they are co-dependent and legitimise one another under the arch of nation building, in an ever-changing neopatriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Cultural marginalisation, legitimacy work, doing gender, cultural lag, women’s entrepreneurship, (neo)patriarchal contexts

**Introduction**

Organisational theorists have dedicated much attention to the study of marginalisation and marginalised communities over the last two decades (Martí & Fernández, 2013). Sasaki and Baba’s (2024) insightful review of this literature found that whilst organisational research has been successful in investigating the systemic and structural marginalisation of different actors across this spectrum, it lacks a theoretical understanding of ‘cultural marginalisation’.

They define this form of marginalisation as “the exclusion of individuals, organizations or communities based on their unique shared values, beliefs, attitudes and practices, which diverge from the prevailing norms of the dominant culture in a society.” (Sasaki & Baba, 2024, p. 2). They argue that this inevitably leads to a lack of understanding of the array of strategies individuals mobilise to legitimise their marginalised cultural identity and cope with such challenges (Sasaki & Baba, 2024b).

Organisational research commonly refers to ‘legitimacy’ when discussing how communities experience and cope with their marginalisation, and more specifically, the marginalisation of their cultural identity. Organisational research focusing on the process of how actors engage in external and internal legitimacy work (Brown & Toyoki, 2013) reveals varied techniques used by actors to persuade others to re-evaluate their beliefs, attitudes or behaviours towards their cause (Suddaby, Bitekyine & Haack, 2017). Research taking a gendered approach to understanding entrepreneurship and legitimacy work argues that identity work and legitimacy work are interwoven, as women entrepreneurs continuously grapple with what Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio (2004) call the intertwined practices of ‘doing gender, doing entrepreneurship’, particularly in nascent contexts (Swail & Marlow, 2018; Dy, Marlow & Lee, 2017).

Critical entrepreneurship studies emphasise the importance of taking a gendered approach to researching entrepreneurship. A constructionist approach views entrepreneurial identities as gendered and performed in everyday interactions in specific socio-cultural environments which are not static but continuously ‘done’ and ‘re-done’ in situated and discursive practices (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Bruni et al., 2004; Heizmann & Liu, 2021). This means that gender, entrepreneurship and legitimacy are socially constructed, interdependent, dynamic and situated within a (patriarchal) context that is relative and varies over time, and therefore, they need to be studied simultaneously. This would provide a holistic picture of how women entrepreneurs experience cultural marginalisation, and how they navigate the challenges through legitimacy work to sustain their businesses within their communities and internationally (Swail & Marlow, 2018; Dy, Marlow & Lee, 2017).

This longitudinal study responds to Sasaki & Baba’s (2024b) call to extend our understanding of diverse forms of cultural marginalisation, and subsequently, to understand the array of strategies the marginalised mobilise to culturally survive, gain cultural autonomy, and

legitimate their cultural identity in the dominant culture. It does so by taking a feminist postcolonial approach (Ozkazan-Pan, 2012; Alkhaled, 2021) to investigating how women entrepreneurs experience cultural marginalisation and the strategies they mobilise to navigate it in the neopatriarchal context of Saudi Arabia. Living in a neopatriarchal state that is grappling with ‘the cultural lag’ (Ogburn, 1922; Al-Soliman, 1991) as a result of battling to maintain patriarchal-tribal traditions during rapid modernisation and change (Sharabi, 1988) means women endure a particular form of cultural marginalisation. Over the last five decades Saudi society has witnessed a dramatic shift in gender ideology, from the Saudi woman being identified as “the ideal Islamic woman” (Doumato, 1992), who maintains the traditional tribal family unit and political stability, to the “nation builder” (McGregor & Alghamdi, 2022), who is integral to national economic growth towards a post-oil era. The recent unprecedented gender reform policies outlined in Vision 2030 have received a mixed response of support, scepticism and backlash from the Saudi people, both men and women, and the international community. For over a decade, the women in this study have reflected on their journeys, which were embroiled in various forms of cultural marginalisation in all aspects of their lives – socially, economically, and politically. To that end, this paper asks *how do women entrepreneurs experience cultural marginalisation and engage in legitimacy work in (neo)patriarchal contexts?*

To deepen our understanding of the concept of cultural marginalisation, how women experience it, and the strategies they employ to navigate it, I draw on the concept of legitimacy work (Suchman, 1995) and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) theory of ‘doing gender’. The historical genealogical analysis and findings I present illustrate how the gender ideology has evolved over the last decades and, therefore, how the women simultaneously engage in both external legitimacy work and internal legitimacy work (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Lefsrud et al., 2020) in line with gender reform policies. To culturally survive as marginalised entrepreneurs, they engaged in legitimacy work, which followed a three-step process, of ‘*doing gender, doing invisibility*’, ‘*redoing gender, doing femininity*’ and ‘*undoing gender, doing neutrality*’, which reinforced, maintained and then deconstructed their cultural marginalisation. Cumulatively their evolving legitimacy work led to the slow but steady process of “doing gender to undo culture”. The ‘cultural lag’ perspective (Ogburn, 1922) helped shed a light on how, despite unprecedented gender policy reforms, women entrepreneurs continue to endure cultural marginalisation and delegitimisation based on their gender and ethnicity.

## Theoretical Grounding

### *Cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work*

Organisational theorists have dedicated much attention to the study of marginalisation and marginalised communities over the last two decades (Bastien, Coraiola & Foster, 2022, Bhatt, Qureshi, Shukla & Hota, 2004; Chrispal, Bapuji & Zietsma, 2021). The term ‘marginalised communities’ has been defined in diverse ways, which illustrates a spectrum of social, political and economic exclusion of marginalised groups - ranging from being positioned in the periphery to complete dehumanisation (Martí & Fernández, 2013). Sasaki and Baba’s (2024) insightful review of this literature found that organisational research still lacks a theoretical understanding of an aspect of marginalisation, which they depict as cultural marginalisation. These actors are termed as marginalised as they are placed in the periphery of the dominant ‘legitimate culture’ and lack power, status, or resources to effectively legitimise their cultural identity within more powerful and established institutions (Baba, Sasaki & Vaara, 2021). Research shows that the agency and power afforded to those who are marginalised to create counter-narratives and challenge the supremacy and legitimacy of the dominant culture varies significantly within communities across the world. The lack of substantial theoretical integration of the diverse forms of cultural marginalisation leads to a lack of understanding of their lived experience as they suffer with “significant distress” and, overtime, a “cultural loss” of both material and symbolic cultural resources (Sasaki & Baba, 2024, p. 8). It subsequently leads to less understanding of the array of strategies actors mobilise to legitimise their marginalised cultural identity and cope with such challenges.

Organisational research on marginalised groups varies in terms of its focus on a particular organisation or community. Yet, what unites these studies is their reference to ‘legitimacy’ when discussing how these groups face *and* cope with their marginalisation. ‘Legitimacy work’ is a concept originally coined by Suchman as a “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (1995, p. 574). Contemporary theorizing of legitimacy work is mostly underpinned by perceptions of how an organisation is deemed trustworthy, aligns with the local culture and values, and is based on a moral prosocial logic (Lefsrud, Graves & Philips, 2020). Some scholars conceptualise this form of legitimacy work as ‘external legitimacy work’ (Brown and Toyoki, 2013), which is a process

of legitimisation where the actor is a change agent, who seeks to implement social change by persuading others to re-evaluate their beliefs, attitudes or behaviours towards their cause (Suddaby, et al., 2017). For example, Lounsbury and Glynn illustrate how successful entrepreneurs become “skilled cultural operators” (2019, p.559) as they narrate entrepreneurial stories that are strategically crafted to conform to the local culture and societal expectations, and therefore, create a legitimate venture identity for entrepreneurs. Similarly, Anderson and Smith (2007) argue that entrepreneurs must hold “socially approved behaviour” (2007, p. 494), which resonates with the local socially approved ‘moral’ dimension. They dub the position at the interface between the individual and society as the ‘moral space’ of entrepreneurship, where employing local social values during the entrepreneurial process becomes a social legitimisation process, as it adds to the authenticity of the entrepreneur.

While studies focusing on ‘external legitimacy work’ focus on how organisations strive to achieve stability and effectiveness, especially during times of uncertainty, studies exploring ‘internal legitimacy work’ focus on the individual’s process of forming, maintaining and changing their social identity. For example, Brown and Toyoki’s study in prisons conceptualises internal legitimacy work as “identity-related discursive processes by which participants support and/or challenge the notional appropriateness of a regime” (2013, p. 877). Therefore, they argue that internal legitimacy work cannot be disentangled from identity work, as actors continuously engage in ‘legitimacy affirming’ and ‘legitimacy contesting’ narratives within the institutional constraints imposed on them. Research taking a gendered approach to understanding entrepreneurship and legitimacy work aligns with the argument that identity work and legitimacy work are interwoven, as women entrepreneurs continuously grapple with what Bruni et al. (2004) call the intertwined practices of ‘doing gender, doing entrepreneurship’, identity work and entrepreneurial legitimation, particularly in nascent contexts (Swail & Marlow, 2018; Dy et al., 2017). The next section elaborates on this and provides critical reflections on theorising cultural marginalisation and calls for a gendered approach to extending the concepts of cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work.

***‘Doing gender’, ‘doing entrepreneurship’, ‘doing legitimacy’: A gendered approach to theorising the cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work of entrepreneurs***

West and Zimmerman’s landmark article introduced the concept of ‘doing gender’ as “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast

particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures” (1987, p. 126). Institutions are responsive to these arrangements, and thus, legitimise these fundamental divisions in society. Therefore, West and Zimmerman argue that ‘if “we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate institutional arrangements...If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals – not the institutional arrangements – may be called to account” (1987, p. 147).

Butler (2004) builds on the concept of ‘doing gender’ by emphasising how the performative nature of gender is tightly linked to structural forces and systems of power and surveillance such as patriarchal institutions, laws and cultural norms, which constrain the individual’s ability to perform gender in diverse ways. Thus, Butler (2004) discusses the need for ‘*undoing gender*’, as in, destabilizing or challenging the norms that dictate how gender is performed. Some critiques of the ‘doing gender’ concept argue that it fails to acknowledge the ‘agency’ in how individuals undo gender and subvert gender expectations through resistance, transgression, and by actively engaging in the creation of a postgender society (Risman, 2008). Others argue for the notion of ‘*redoing gender*’ as “changing the norms to which one is accountable” (Walzer, 2008, p. 6), by recategorizing what constitutes appropriate actions for men and women, and “changing the subjective meaning of gendered norms” (Pruitt, 2018, p. 154). In response to the critiques and debates, West and Zimmerman (2009) argue that the accountability structures that maintain gender may shift to accommodate less oppressive ways of doing gender, but are never entirely eradicated, and therefore, maintain that “Gender is not *undone* so much as *redone*” (West & Zimmerman 2009, p. 118). It is essential to highlight that in and amongst these debates, there is a consistent call for incorporating an intersectional approach to understanding marginalisation experiences at the intersection of other social categories with gender, such as race, sexuality, class, ethnicity and religion, as a form of ‘post-colonial un-doing’ (Baines, 2010).

Critical entrepreneurship studies have built on such feminist work and argue that women entrepreneurs have been marginalised from these dominant masculine discourses in society, research and policy, and therefore, our knowledge of women entrepreneurs’ identity and legitimacy work continues to be limited (Marlow & Ahl, 2021). Furthermore, these practices need to be contextually examined through the concept of legitimacy work, to extend our theoretical understanding of the identity work that women entrepreneurs construct to gain legitimacy from society, customers and investors (Swail & Marlow, 2018; Dy et al., 2017).

Thus, a constructionist approach views entrepreneurial identities as gendered and performed in everyday interactions in specific socio-cultural environments which are not static but continuously ‘done’ and ‘re-done’ in situated and discursive practices (Bruni et al., 2004). This means that gender, entrepreneurship and legitimacy are socially constructed, interdependent, dynamic and situated within a (patriarchal) context, which is relative and varies over time, and therefore, need to be studied simultaneously. This emphasises the need for an overarching cultural marginalisation approach to theorise how women entrepreneurs experience cultural marginalisation, and subsequently how they engage in legitimacy work to be accepted as authentic and legitimate female entrepreneurs within their community. However, in doing so, it is essential to critically highlight three areas that require reflection and development within the cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work literatures, which is the intention and contribution of this research paper:

First, most studies on cultural marginalisation focus on two groups 1) indigenous communities fighting for legitimacy and free cultural expression, and 2) migrants, or forcibly displaced people engaging in cultural survival processes to affirm their legitimacy to exist and minimise “cultural loss” (Olabisi, Kwesiga, Juma & Tang, Z, 2017; Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022). The nature of the studies’ focus on these groups and their cultural legitimacy processes, means that it is inevitably conducted *in* the Global North, *on* migrants from the Global South or *on* indigenous people oppressed under western colonialism. Thus, there is a paucity of studies that investigate how cultural marginalisation manifests within one’s own communities, despite not being a ‘minority’ in the population.

Furthermore, apart from a few studies which focus on ‘locals’ (i.e. non-colonised indigenous groups) who are marginalised at the intersections of their social identities, such as gender, sexuality or caste (Leung, Zietsma & Peredo, 2014; Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Chrispal et al., 2021), there is a lack of understanding of how institutions- formal and informal- marginalise those who have never belonged to any ‘other’ community or nation. For example, women, making up 49.75% of the worlds’ population and accounting for 47.7% of the global workforce and 43% of total business owners globally, are the biggest culturally marginalised group in the world at all levels of society – socially, politically and economically – and yet they continue to be the most under-researched due to a prevailing dominant patriarchal culture that explicitly or implicitly legitimises their marginalisation (OECD/European Commission, 2023).

Second, while studies on marginalisation have referred to ‘legitimacy work’ and ‘identity work’ as a process which the marginalised engage in to cope with their marginalisation, there remains little in-depth understanding of the social construction of legitimacy work and how it is performed as a gendered and dynamic process, which evolves overtime depending on socio-cultural, political and economic developments within society. In addition, more research needs to purposefully link identity work and legitimacy work when it comes to unpacking marginalised people’s experiences of cultural marginalisation, and how they legitimise their identity when they are already part of the culture. For example, how women entrepreneurs who are of the same race, religion and ethnicity of the dominant culture engage in external and internal legitimacy work through identity work to be able to run their businesses.

Third, there is little research which illustrates the history of how cultural margins ‘are created, defined and enforced’ (Ferguson, 1990, as cited in Sasaki and Baba’s, 2024), how cultural marginalisation evolves over time, and the impact this has on the marginalised and their community. For example, while organisational theorists have been drawing upon theories of patriarchy to shed light on women’s socio-political and economic marginalisation at home, at work and in society for decades, there is little grounding in the history of how the oppressive patriarchal order constantly (re)creates cultural margins around women who are born and raised in the dominant culture, and therefore, are embedded within the local values and belief systems, and practice the same religion or have the same values.

This research addresses these three gaps in knowledge by studying the cultural marginalisation of women in the MENA region, specifically Saudi Arabia, a country whose formal and informal institutions are founded on a classic (neo)patriarchal system (Sharabi, 1988). Delving deeply into a specific context where women’s cultural marginalisation takes place and situating it historically within the region’s form of patriarchy will help understand how the women entrepreneurs experience cultural marginalisation in their everyday lives and how they ‘do gender’ and engage in legitimacy work within the cultural margins to cope with their marginalisation.

Following Suddaby et al.’s (2017) recommendations for a genealogical and historical analysis to unpack the constructs shaping legitimacy work, the next section sets the scene for the third point mentioned, as it casts a postcolonial feminist reading (Alkhaled, 2021) across

the history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and how cultural margins have been created, defined, reinforced (Ferguson, 1990), and evolved over approximately the last half a century.

### **The context: Cultural marginalisation and the cultural lag in neopatriarchal societies**

*The evolution of Saudi women's status from 'ideal Islamic woman' to 'nation builder'*

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's gender ideology is built on a legal framework which combines a classic patriarchal tribal system with Wahhabi interpretations of Islamic Sharia law. This provides men with "authority over everyone else in the family, including younger men, and women are subject to distinct forms of control and subordination" (Moghadam, 2004, p. 141). However, the emergence of oil and the subsequent 'over-night' globalisation and presence of Western influences shifted the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council<sup>1</sup> countries into 'neopatriarchal' states. Sharabi (1988) argues that neopatriarchy is the outcome of traditional tribal customs and colonial legacies merging with modern forms of political and economic authority which obstruct gender equality and privilege male authority, both at the family and state level. This has left Saudi women in a contentious position at the centre of a socio-political discourse that is struggling to position itself between modernity and cultural authenticity (Le Renard, 2008).

To maintain political stability and tribal customs, the traditionalist Wahhabi ideology of the "ideal Islamic woman" was created and institutionally reinforced by the state in all aspects of society. She is defined as "a wife and a mother. Her place is within the family, 'the basic unit of society', and men are her protectors. Women who remain at home are the educators of children and the reproducers of traditional values. As the mother of future generations, the idealised woman is in effect the partner of the Saudi state, which is dedicated to protecting the family and guarding traditional values and Islamic morality" (Doumato, 1992, p. 33). This was not confined to social structures but expressed in official government statements also, and state policy decisions. The Male-guardianship system '*mahram*', which women were under from birth until death, meant women relied on their guardian's consent to conduct many aspects of their lives, including the ability to travel, rent, work, open a bank account, marry or seek medical care. The late 1990s saw a slow but steady shift in Saudi's socio-economic and political ideology with its series of National Development Plans calling for the "Saudization" of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (AGCC), political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

workforce, to deal with high (youth) unemployment (Sadi & Ghazali, 2010). Whilst women were part of these development plans, King Salman's Vision 2030 mission statement (2016) emphasised a new state ideology which practiced "moderate Islam" and "Saudi First" nationalism, replacing the conservative Wahhabism-based religious nationalism. Within this unprecedented paradigm shift, Saudi women were described as "a great asset" and the main partners in building a new Saudi society (Eum, 2019, p. 115-116). Indeed, Vision 2030 explicitly targets an increase in women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30% and from 1.27% to 5% in senior-level leadership positions (Aldossari & Murphy, 2024); it encourages women's entrepreneurship and investment in the private sector. Yet, despite state-driven gender reform policies, such as appointing women to the Shura Council in 2013 (a government advisory body), allowing women to vote in 2015, lifting the ban on women's driving in 2018, and abolishing the male guardianship system in 2019, research has shown that the influence of tribal culture does not align with government initiatives, as it continues to have a significant impact, segregating and excluding women from the public domain (Alkhaled, 2021; Jamjoom & Mills, 2023).

Such societal backlash and resistance against modernisation and change illustrates an example of Ogburn's (1922) sociological theory of 'cultural lag', which explains how societies experience a period of social tensions and conflict during times of rapid change. For example, it has been used to understand societies' resistance following the influx of married women into the workforce during the post-Second World War period (Brinkman and Brinkman, 1997). Al-Soliman argues that the rapid social changes and technological architectural developments experienced by Saudi society, particularly since the 1970s, "are so incredible that they are thought to have constituted what amounts to a real cultural lag" (1991, p. 236). Whilst this theory has come under criticism for simplifying social change, illustrating it as linear and one-directional, being embedded within a Western-centric perspective of what constitutes progress, and neglecting power dynamics, like Al-Soliman (1991) I believe it is well suited as a 'situated' lens to analyse the pervasive and persistent cultural marginalisation of women in Saudi society, as it continues to grapple with the tensions between modernisation and maintaining tribal traditions in the neopatriarchal state.

## **Methodology**

### ***A feminist postcolonial approach to studying cultural marginalisation***

While research on marginalised groups is increasingly gaining attention in social and organisation research, this does not mean they are being heard. Lewis, Mehmet, Quinton & Reynolds (2023) argue that research can provide a voice for those who are underrepresented due to their marginalisation or vulnerability, but this requires the research design to factor in the individual's characteristics (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity or sexuality), which depart from the dominant majority or mainstream in their environment. The authors also observe that too often projects researching the marginalised are “designed and implemented by individuals who are outside the group they are researching – i.e., without lived experience of marginalisation/vulnerability, applying research approaches commonly used while studying mainstream samples” (Lewis, et al., 2023, p. 147-148). This leads to research being conducted ‘on’ marginalised people instead of ‘with’ them. Organisational scholars have suggested drawing upon feminist, decolonial and qualitative methodologies to rethink what it means to know as an organisation studies researcher and the purposes and consequences of such knowing (Bell & Sengupta, 2022). Thus, researchers should reflect on their bias, which can arise from the limited shared experience between the researchers and the researched. They should also engage in reflexivity and understand how it can be operationalised in terms of the personal, interpersonal, institutional, pragmatic, emotional, theoretical, epistemological and ontological influences on research and data analysis processes (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

Building on these perspectives, I take a postcolonial feminist interpretivist approach to illustrate a rich account of the lives and voices of women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia. This approach was taken from the inception of the research and throughout collecting and analysing the data of the longitudinal study. Unpacking complex concepts such as cultural marginalisation meant I was acutely aware of the western feminist epistemological assumptions that speak about the “Third World” woman (Mohanty, 1988) as an “undifferentiated object/subject” of Western academia (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p.574). Thus, as a “hybrid” European-Arab, female and Muslim scholar, who grew up in Saudi Arabia, and works in a western institution, I acknowledge my position of power and privilege, but equally my position as a marginalised researcher in the academy (Pearce, 2020). I do not claim to be “giving voice”, producing more “authentic” representations, or correcting “misrepresentations” of marginalised people, in this case, Saudi women (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; p. 574-757; Alkhaled, 2021). Rather, I attempt to let the women ‘speak for themselves’, in and on their own terms, by adopting a reflexive stance in contributing to the limited knowledge we have on Saudi

women's experiences of marginalisation as entrepreneurs, and thus, to the theories of cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work. Since the study began, I was transparent about my dual-heritage, my religious identity as a Muslim, the intention of my study, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. This ultimately allowed for a rapport to be built, and trust to be maintained over the last 14 years.

### *Data Collection*

The phenomenon of cultural marginalisation, and the cultural marginalisation of women within patriarchal systems, is one which has been in existence since time immemorial. Thus, I contend that in order to unpack the history of how cultural margins 'are created, defined and enforced' (Ferguson, 1990) and continue to evolve in Saudi Arabia, and to get to the heart of the many processes that shape, maintain and legitimise the cultural marginalisation of women, we need to take a longitudinal approach to situate, unpack and theorise it within its context. Longitudinal studies have been insightful in observing how entrepreneurship evolves overtime and patterns of change in different settings (Gil-López, Iszatt-White & San Román López, 2024). Furthermore, longitudinal studies are essential in investigating gendered processes as they reveal patterns that emerge in women's entrepreneurial experiences, relationships and networks (Shinnar, Husu & Powell, 2014). This provides a platform to observe women 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and legitimacy work (Dy et al., 2017) as entrepreneurs over time. Thus, I argue that in order to study the history and evolution of the cultural marginalisation of women within a neopatriarchal context, it is essential to take a longitudinal approach, especially when trying to understand agency, power, interactions, institutional conditions and their impact on gender interactions when it comes to their legitimacy work and identity work during periods of change (Brown & Toyoki, 2013).

Data collection began with contacting women entrepreneurs through my personal networks, which then snowballed into identifying information rich cases (Patton, 1990). The snowballing approach was used to overcome the difficulties of accessing data in the Middle Eastern region, and the reluctance of women, particularly from conservative households, to share their personal journeys (Jamjoom & Mills, 2023). Interviews and follow-ups were conducted face to face and online with 20 women between 2010-2024 (see Table 1). The reason for the follow ups was because Saudi Arabia, and Saudi women in particular, were experiencing the most significant social, economic and political changes since the Kingdom had been

founded (Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018, Alkhaled, 2021). That is, within a six-year period (2013-2019), Saudi women for the first time were legally unshackled from the guardianship system and were able to vote, travel, drive, rent property and manager their own businesses. It was important to regularly follow up on lived experiences of these seismic shifts in society to trace individuals' culturally marginalised journey and evolution, bearing in mind the 'cultural lag' effects on this journey (Al-Soliman, 1991), and the impact this had on their legitimacy work as entrepreneurs in a rapidly changing society. The interviews were conducted in both English and Arabic (depending on their personal preference) which I, as a bilingual researcher, was able to translate and analyse in a way to preserve the cultural integrity of the data, within the limitations of the situation (Temple, 2002).

### *Data Analysis*

To maintain the continuity of reflexivity in my feminist approach to studying the marginalisation and legitimacy work of the women entrepreneurs, I utilised Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) "Listening Guide". This is a "voice-centred relational method", which follows a thematic narrative approach to analysing women's life stories. It preserves "the voice" in each narrative, so that each case is analysed holistically in and on their own terms. This method, which was originally designed and developed through a Western feminist perspective has been adopted and adapted to analyse women's narratives in the Middle East (Mauthner & Alkhaled, 2021) in a more situated and authentic manner, that does not invertedly reinforce the 'West is best' or 'West vs Rest' model of the lived experience (Alkhaled, 2021).

The process involved four readings of each interview transcript which were: 1) reading for the plot, 2) reading for the voice 'I', 3) reading for relationships, and 4) placing the women's accounts and experiences within a broader social, political, cultural and structural context (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). Therefore, the Listening Guide was used to explore the women's narrative accounts in terms of their relationships with the people around them and their relationships with the broader social, structural, cultural and political contexts within which they live. The readings were essential in analysing the women's narratives, focusing on the implicit and explicit examples they used to describe the marginalisation they faced as women entrepreneurs and how they engaged in legitimacy work to overcome gender-based barriers. Therefore, the guide's readings helped steer away from the 'gender-neutral' constructs of cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work and focused on their lived experiences within their context.

I began the analysis process with a list of themes based on my first reading for the plot. Further themes were identified based on the theoretical understanding of cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work. The second reading for the ‘I’ enabled analytical depth of each transcript, revealing unique aspects around “doing gender” within each woman’s marginalisation story and how she engaged in legitimacy work to navigate it. The third stage of reading for relationships illustrated how cultural marginalisation was created, recreated, maintained and evolved within a complex socio-economic and political web, by the government, men and women in society, and in the patriarchal household. The fourth reading illustrated women entrepreneurs’ active engagement in legitimacy work through the process of ‘doing gender’, ‘redoing gender’ and then ‘undoing gender’, which allowed them to amalgamate the imposed cultural and political identity of ‘the ideal Islamic woman’ (Doumato, 1992) with the more recently state-supported identity of ‘nation builder’ (McGregor & Alghamdi, 2022). For triangulation purposes, I undertook a continuous iteration between interviews and policy developments to look for the impact of the policy changes and the (in)consistent patterns of change in societal attitudes towards women’s visibility as entrepreneurs.

Themes were created from the literature and the data, which illustrated society’s de-legitimisation of Saudi women entrepreneurs, and the practices the women engaged in to legitimise their identities as entrepreneurs and nation builders. Given that all the enterprises were set up between 1985 and 2012 and the longitudinal nature of the study, the women’s narratives were organised according to three temporal periods: (1) 1985-2008: the formalisation of the ‘ideal Islamic woman’, (2) 2009-2015: Saudisation policy and limited inclusion of women in the National Development Plans, and (3) 2016-2024: women and youths at the core of the nation builders’ narrative in Vision 2030. That is not to say that the change was instant between each period but indeed incorporated a cultural lag over the course of these time periods. This allowed me to understand ‘how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time’ (Langley, et al., 2013, p.1). These were then theorised into a three-step legitimisation process of ‘doing gender to undo culture’ aligning with these periods and the time lag in-between the rapidly evolving socio-economic and political changes that were taking place within the neopatriarchal society.

## **Findings**

In this section, I will outline the insights from the interviews over the longitudinal study. The women's stories illustrate the cultural marginalisation they face in their everyday public lives as entrepreneurs and their gendered-power struggles as they negotiate their (in)visibility and legitimacy. These findings are exemplified using quotes over the period of the study, illustrating a three-step legitimacy work process, which evolved in response to the gender reform policies, from 'doing', 'redoing' to 'undoing' gender, which reinforced, maintained and deconstructed legitimacy while experiencing cultural marginalisation. The overarching process of 'doing gender to undo culture' involved a constant reconstruction of a culturally legitimate 'moral space' in society within which the identities of the '*ideal Islamic woman*' and the '*Saudi woman entrepreneur*' were not clashing or opposing. Instead, they were co-dependent, legitimising one another under the discourse of nation building, in an evolving neopatriarchal society.

***“Doing gender, doing invisibility”, legitimacy work that reinforces cultural marginalisation***

During the longitudinal study, the women reflected on the beginnings of their entrepreneurial journey between 1985-2012. Discussions about the role of their male guardian (i.e. husband, father, uncle or even son) were constant, as they held the key to their access to education, resources, various business and travel-related permits and mobility. Interestingly, some women's narratives illustrated how their guardian's support was unwavering and integral to their business' success, while others illustrated powerful stories of how oppressive, and in some cases, detrimental they were to the women's businesses, as discussed in previous studies (e.g., Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018; Alkhaled, 2021). The women's narratives described multiple, sometimes daily, incidents of facing cultural marginalisation in society (e.g. by colleagues, clients and other businesses) by those who believed in the ideology of '*the ideal Islamic woman*' and confining women in the private sphere. The power of this dominant cultural expectation of women's invisibility in society impacted not only the women's ability to work, but the male guardians' and family's ability to support them with their enterprises.

Amina, who started out in a family business in construction in the early 1990s after graduating from university explains "*My brother would not admit to clients that 'my sister is the one managing one of the construction projects'. If I called him in a meeting, he would address me with a male pronoun or use my son's name... so while I was more than capable of doing the job... I remained invisible working behind the scenes*" (March 2010). Noura recalls

similar experiences when she joined the family business working alongside her brothers after completing her Master's in business administration in the early 2000s, as she states *“As a board member, I suggested I would wear the niqab [face covering] to join the board meetings, but the board refused the presence of my body and my smell in the room. I would have to dial in from an adjacent room. Even then, some were comfortable hearing my voice which they call awrah<sup>2</sup>”* (March 2010). Amina and Noura draw the same picture of two qualified women, who had their fathers' and brothers' support in joining the family business but were not supported by others in society, i.e. employees working in their organisation or other business clients. They both mentioned the tension this was causing their family as Amina recalls her brother's confrontation with a client who asked, *“what man allows his sister to sit with labourers?”* or what Noura's brother was told in a board meeting, *“Where's her husband? She should be at home with her children”*. Due to society's refusal to work with women, and the potential cost their visibility could impose on the business, they negotiated their marginalisation, and potential ostracisation from the business with family members to slightly shift from being invisible to operating under the radar on the periphery.

Riham, who set up an IT consultancy with her non-Saudi husband in 2008, explains how she was forced to register him as the manager, even though she was the owner, as legally women were not permitted to manage or engage with men in a mixed workplace, apart from in hospitals. Riham reflects on the impact the dominant cultural ideology had on running her business as she states *“I studied electrical engineering in Egypt, I am capable of installing these IT systems in my customer's businesses, but they won't accept my presence, or my body [gestures a female body shape], in their departments. So, my husband must do the installations and frustratingly I have to employ and pay other men to do them as well”* (March 2010). In a later interview she recalls, *“When I first started, I used to pitch my business to clients over the phone, and many would say, politely and impolitely, where is the manager? Then my husband started doing the phone pitches and after being invited I would turn up and they would ask me to leave, so I have stopped going and send my husband”* (April 2011). In a later interview Riham reflects on why several prejudices led her to becoming marginalised and delegitimised as an entrepreneur, as she states, *“Yes being a woman, but also being a woman in IT. Also, I think it was made worse by them knowing from my last name that I was a naturalised Saudi,*

---

<sup>2</sup> Awrah in Islam is a term that refer to intimate parts oof the body that should be covered. Categorising women's voices as 'awrah' and should only be heard by male relatives was, and continues to be, salient in Saudi society.

*not “an original” Saudi of tribal origin. They ask if I got the nationality from my husband. When I say he is not Saudi they seem even more doubtful of the businesses’ legitimacy and sometimes I would not hear back from them”* (July 2013).

All the women were qualified to do to the requirements of the job and supported by their male guardians, but were culturally marginalised due to the society, and thus, organisations’ commitment to the ideology of the “*ideal Islamic woman*”. Riham’s story illustrates a case of double and even triple cultural marginalisation at the intersections of gender and ethnicity. That is, Riham believes she was marginalised, and her business was delegitimised, because she was a female owner of a business in a ‘masculine’ industry, a ‘non-original’ Saudi and was married to a non-Saudi man. Their experiences of cultural marginalisation ultimately linked to their lack of legitimacy as entrepreneurs (and managers, board members, or IT engineer) in the neopatriarchal society, which during this period was bolstered legally by the state’s policies on the male-guardianship system. Thus, their means of coping with their cultural marginalisation was to actively remain out of sight and in the periphery of the everyday running of the business. That is, in ‘doing gender and doing invisibility’, the women were conforming to the socio-structural gender ideology and expectations of the “*ideal Islamic woman*”. Therefore, the women, perhaps inadvertently, reinforced the traditional patriarchal order by rendering themselves invisible, whilst continuing to work in the shadows of male relatives/colleagues.

**“Redoing gender, doing femininity”, legitimacy work that *maintains* cultural marginalisation**

Secondly, the women reflected on the start-up and growth of their businesses between 2009-2015. In the early 2000s, as the government pushed forward women’s investment in the private sector and visibility in the workplace in its National Development Plans, their legitimacy as economic contributors began to increase in business and society. Following a cultural lag of a few years, the Kingdom saw a gradual but persistent rise in women’s labour force participation and many left family businesses or employment to set up their own enterprises.

Jawhara graduated with a degree in business and started a business in textiles, which involved lots of travel to India and the Far East. However, she explains “*eventually my husband*

*stopped giving me permission to travel because his family kept telling him that my travel, independence and interaction with men was haram and bringing shame on the family's reputation. They were questioning my husband's masculinity and lack of authority over me as my guardian*" (March, 2010). Jawhara's business was forced to close; however, she continued to pursue her ambition to have her own business. She decided to train in alternative medicine and set up a business which focused on women's health and wellbeing, as she explains *"I told my husband you cannot stop me this time. Tell your parents I am working with women, and it is permissible for me to be an entrepreneur. The Prophet Mohammad's wife was an entrepreneur, and he even worked for her!"* (September 2012).

Similarly, Sara used to work in a hospital until she got married and her husband and family forced her to stop working in the mixed environment to protect the family's honour, as she states *"It was frustrating because my parents did not mind but his family are more conservative and belong to a prominent tribe in the region."* (March 2014). She later explains how she navigated this barrier by setting herself up as a freelance illustrator in 2010 after receiving funding from an initiative the King was supporting *"His family were reluctant for him to have a wife who works but when they saw I was illustrating children's books they felt that was better suited to "a woman's nature"... Also, they tell their community that I got funding from 'The King' to setup my business, which seems to outweigh their desire for me to be a traditional homemaker"* (July 2015). Jawhara and Sara's entrepreneurial journeys illustrate how extended family continue to be subjected to societal pressures of having working women in the family breaking away from the *'ideal Islamic woman'*. However, it seemed the patriarchal families and communities were able to accept the legitimacy of the women entrepreneurs when they engaged in traditional feminised industries and either worked from home or in a gender-segregated environment. Furthermore, several women made the argument for their legitimacy as female entrepreneurs by referring to the King's support or the Prophet's wife (Khadija Bint Khuwaylid) who was an entrepreneur. Therefore, they succeeded in guiding family to reevaluate their tribal culture ideologies that are not based on Islamic scripture.

Hala studied business management in North America and worked in a consultancy firm for approximately ten years. She was encouraged to return "home" after seeing the 10<sup>th</sup> National Development Plan (2005-2008), which continued to call for women's economic participation as employees and employers. Upon her return to Saudi, she set up her own consultancy firm in 2012, she explains *"No organisations would contract me in to their*

*business either because they only employed men or they required me to travel, and they cannot take the risk that my husband may decide on a whim that I cannot travel". She continues, "As part of the National Development Plan to diversify the private sector economy and include women I was invited to give a lecture at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce's female section to women entrepreneurs... I am now known as the consultant specialised to support women's start-ups" (May, 2014). Zahra, qualified in child education and of Palestinian descent, explains how she decided to create her own business in childcare in 1985, as she explains "Mothers would come up to me and say "we love this school and your pedagogical approach, you would be perfect, if only you would wear the niqab and cover your face", I would say face covering is part of culture, not Islam...my refusal led many to choose not to enter their daughters in my school" (June, 2018).*

This period saw some gender reform in the government's policies towards women's entrepreneurship accompanied by a cultural lag in society's acceptance of this change as male and female attitudes towards working women in society struggled to catch up. Unlike the women in the first period, who engaged in 'doing gender' and conforming to society's desire for their invisibility, the women during this period were visible as they affirmed their legitimacy as female entrepreneurs by 'redoing gender'. This entailed setting up businesses in feminised industries directed towards women and children while questioning the cultural and Islamic reasoning behind maintaining women's invisibility as entrepreneurs. Therefore, the women maintained the traditional patriarchal gender order by remaining segregated in a female-only space, while partaking in the economic development needs of the country. Their negotiation capacity was indeed bolstered by the National Development Plans that were supporting women's entrepreneurship, through education in colleges and entrepreneurship training programmes in the Chamber of Commerce. Yet, the state's policies on the male-guardianship system continued, which impacted women's ability to grow their business nationally and internationally, if their guardians (sometimes arbitrarily) limited their mobility or ability to rent property for their business. Therefore, 'redoing' gender did indeed maintain the gender order, but was conducted in a "less oppressive way[s] of doing gender" (West & Zimmerman 2009, p. 118).

***"Undoing gender, doing neutrality", legitimacy work that deconstructs cultural marginalisation***

Finally, the women reflected on the growth of their businesses between 2016-2024. In 2016, the government announced its next National Development Plan, Vision 2030. This most recent plan carries the strongest national message yet, as it is underpinned by a new state ideology which practices “moderate Islam”, calls for “Saudi First” nationalism, and describes women as “a great asset” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p.37). The last eight years have seen significant gender reform policies in terms of removing the guardship system, allowing women to drive, vote, rent and travel independently, unlike previous National Development Plans which only focused on their economic contribution. This period also saw the biggest rise of women joining the labour force and setting up their own businesses (Roomi et al., 2024).

Layla, an events manager who has been self-employed since 2008 explains, *“Everything has changed in the last six years. It is like a whole new world. It was gradual but also fast somehow. Women are working everywhere...Legal obligations for segregated offices have relaxed so mixing in normal.”* She later explains *“of course at first there was shock and push back after seeing women driving, walking the streets without abayas on and mixing with men at work but the reality is 63% of the Saudi population is under 30 and want to work and contribute to society. The elders are forced to accept it in a way”* (January, 2023). In my first interview with Layla in 2010 she explained that she organised women-only events, and that the most popular event requested was a women’s driving day. She would hire a private space in the desert and rent cars for women to have driving lessons. However, for the last three years, Layla has organised mixed corporate events. She explains *“It is far more lucrative for me to do mixed events. We still respect the traditions, like I wear loose clothing or an open colourful abaya, and provide segregated spaces if people wish to use them, but no one talks about it anymore”* (September, 2024). When asked if she faced marginalisation from male clients, Layla states *“of course I am marginalised, and I face discrimination and harassment but a lot less. What has not changed is the way they treat me as a second-class Saudi because despite my dad being here 70+ years and me being here my whole life, I am not an “original” Saudi”* (September, 2024).

Tala, who has also been running an events management business, organising mainly home-based parties since 2009, explains *“the opening up of the country and acceptance of seeing Saudi women on social media has been a game changer for my business. Before, I had no marketing means other than word of mouth. Now, I rely 100% on social media to share and promote my events”* (July, 2021). When discussing facing marginalisation from male clients,

she states *“I am still struggling to transition to organise corporate events with male clients. They don’t take me seriously. I don’t think that is because I am a woman. I think it is because of my experience organising home-based parties mainly”*. She later explains *“They don’t see me as a ‘daughter of the country’, even though my mother is Saudi, and my father is Saudi, but through my paternal grandfather who was naturalised in the 1950s. This limits your social circles, networks and opportunities.”* (January, 2022). Both Layla and Tala’s narratives illustrate a desire to shift their business services from being female dominated. Furthermore, when it came to reflecting on their cultural marginalisation and the impact this had on the perceptions of their legitimacy as entrepreneurs in the field of events management, they shift from focusing their narratives on marginalisation due to their gender, to taking a more gender-neutral reflection on their situation, and instead focus on their ethnic origin that is not tribal-Saudi.

Riham, who we met previously, illustrated perhaps the biggest impact of the Vision 2030 changes, not only on her business, but her private life, as she states *“In 2011, the Ministry of Commerce’s requirement for a male manager was overturned by the government. I wanted to remove my husband’s name and register myself as the manager. He refused and felt it would emasculate him, and that the locals would look down on him even more as a non-Saudi, but I did it.”* (December, 2012). She later recalls *“When the guardianship rule was removed, I was shocked at how much me gaining freedom impacted him... Ultimately, it all led to the end of our marriage, and he returned to live in the Levant”* (October, 2023). When it comes to running her business today, Riham states *“Sixteen years ago a woman entrepreneur running a business in IT was almost unheard of. Now I give pitches to potential clients wearing a suit and scarf. Occasionally I get turned away and asked if there is a male manager to talk to, but I say there is not, and legally that is fine so they cannot do anything about it.”* (October, 2023). She concludes, *“It will take another generation to fully accept our visibility and that is ok. Women in Europe and the US are still struggling for equality at home and work, after decades of campaigns and policies”* (September, 2024).

This period witnessed a clear intent for gender reform in the government’s Vision 2030 as it subtly shifts away from imposing the ideology of the *‘ideal Islamic woman’* and moves towards a more gender-neutral discourse describing women and youths as *‘nation builders’*. Like the other periods, society’s acceptance of women’s visibility in the nation building narrative was accompanied with a cultural lag, albeit shorter. This could be attributed to a large

younger generation flooding the work force, as well as a rise in the use of technology and social media. When it came to their legitimacy as entrepreneurs, the women continued to grapple with various forms of cultural marginalisation. Yet, unlike the women in the first and second periods, who engaged in practices of ‘doing’ and ‘redoing gender’ which conformed to society’s desire for their invisibility or visibility in female-only segregated spaces/industries, the women during this period felt empowered by the gender reforms in Vision 2030. That is, during this period the women negotiated their cultural marginalisation and affirmed their legitimacy as female entrepreneurs by ‘undoing gender’ and running their businesses in a more ‘gender-neutral’ manner, where they were actively shifting away from a female-only client-base in feminised industries. They also ‘normalised’ their gendered struggle by indirectly referring to the cultural lag that comes with social change and equated it to the slow journey to equality that is continuous in the western world. Therefore, they engaged in a form of ‘undoing gender by doing gender-neutrality’. Furthermore, their legitimacy work involved *deconstructing* their marginalisation by *decentring* gender and focusing on other causes of their marginalisation, such as their ethnic origins or exogenous ‘gender-neutral’ bureaucratic processes and the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not to claim that the pervasive patriarchal order has changed significantly, but it is a clear indication of progress in women’s power, agency, and ability to negotiate cultural marginalisation. There were several examples, like Riham, where the women even dabbled in performing a more ‘masculine’ form of entrepreneurship, in the way they dressed, presented themselves on social media, and dealt with clients, employees and government officials to gain the legitimacy they desired. Taking on a feminised, gender-neutral or masculine persona/identity are techniques women entrepreneurs use universally to tackle marginalisation and gain legitimacy, particularly in male dominated industries (Lewis, 2006; Swail & Marlow, 2018); however, they are important perspectives to consider in theorising cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work.

## Discussion

### **‘Doing’ gender to ‘undo’ culture: Women entrepreneurs navigating cultural marginalisation through legitimacy work**

Building on Sasaki & Baba’s (2024) concept of cultural marginalisation, this longitudinal study investigates how women entrepreneurs experience cultural marginalisation and the strategies they mobilise to navigate the neopatriarchal context of Saudi Arabia. Living in a neopatriarchal state grappling with maintaining patriarchal-tribal traditions during rapid modernisation and

change (Sharabi, 1988) has seen women endure a particular form of cultural marginalisation. Thus, to ‘culturally survive’ they engage in various forms of doing, redoing and undoing gender, which cumulatively led to the protracted process of “undoing culture”. This process is key in their legitimacy work, as they navigate the evolving status of their cultural marginalisation. Based on these findings, this paper contributes to three key areas of research:

First, this research contributes to the theory of cultural marginalisation by taking a feminist postcolonial approach, which extends it to include women as the biggest marginalised community within any nation, and the most under researched. Previous research on cultural marginalisation has largely focused on two communities: indigenous communities oppressed under western colonialism, and migrant or forcibly displaced communities who have migrated from the Global South to the North (Bastien et al., 2022; Bhatt et al., 2024). An analysis of the history of how cultural margins were created, defined and enforced (Ferguson, 1990) in the rapidly changing neopatriarchal context of Saudi Arabia (Sharabi, 1988; Al-Soliman, 1991) illustrates how the cultural marginalisation of Saudi women is part of a larger political agenda built on tribal customs and patriarchal systems of oppression that are evolving over time to suit different socio-economic and geo-political needs (Doumato, 1992; Alkhaled, 2021). Taking a feminist postcolonial approach to unpacking the Saudi women entrepreneurs’ experiences of cultural marginalisation illustrates how they have endured invisibilisation and being positioned at the periphery of society. Furthermore, they have been held accountable for not ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1978; 2009) in the manner deemed acceptable for the larger socio-economic and political national agenda. It is essential to highlight that despite all the women being Saudi nationals, many faced further cultural marginalisation due to their ethnicity, which did not fit in with the ‘dominant tribal culture’ still prominent in Saudi, and the wider MENA region. Thus, this study emphasises the importance of taking an intersectional approach (Baines, 2010) in studying women who are demographically part of the majority population (i.e. not a colonised indigenous group nor a migrant) but are culturally marginalised due to their gender and social identities that do not fit in with the dominant culture, such as their sexuality, age, religion, class or caste (Creed et al., 2010; Chrispal et al., 2021).

One point to reflect on is Sasaki & Baba’s (2024) description of the long-term consequences of cultural marginalisation, such as “significant distress” and “cultural loss” of both material and symbolic resources in the face of colonisation. This study illustrates how the women did not face cultural marginalisation due to colonisation, but due to the neopatriarchal

state's political strategy to reinforce the image of the idyllic tribal family and nation during a period of rapid modernisation and instability. Therefore, the women did not express experiencing 'cultural loss' when globalisation and (western) political influence led to the state's slow but constant revision of its gender reform policies. In fact, the women welcomed the cultural shift and pushed for their identity and role in society to evolve along with the gender reform policies. However, on the other hand, one could argue that the men, and some women in society who felt protected under the male-guardianship system and patriarchal order, experienced 'significant distress' and 'cultural loss', as their resistance to gender reform was demonstrated in their refusal to accept the visibility and legitimacy of a Saudi female entrepreneur, despite the state's gender ideology changes. Therefore, future research could delve deeper into studying communities that are culturally marginalised as well as those part of the dominant culture, and unpack how 'cultural loss' manifests differently across social groups in a society.

Second, this research contributes to the growing body of work on legitimacy (Suddaby et al., 2017) and legitimacy work (Suchman, 1995). Specifically, the longitudinal perspective contributes to our theorising of the process of how women entrepreneurs engage in legitimacy work (Swail & Marlow, 2018; Dy et al., 2017) and become "skilled cultural operators" (Loundsbury & Glynn, 2019, p. 559) as they continuously respond to the external evolving gender reforms and engage in a multilevel process of external and internal legitimacy work (Lefsrud et al., 2020; Brown & Toyoki, 2013). In this study, the women negotiated their cultural marginalisation and engaged in legitimacy work and identity work through the processes of '*doing gender, doing invisibility*', '*redoing gender, doing femininity*' and '*undoing gender, doing neutrality*'. These practices which took place, in some cases over decades, reinforced, maintained and then eventually attempted to deconstruct their cultural marginalisation and delegitimise the reasons behind its persistence in light of Vision 2030.

Feminist research continues to question the possibility of undoing gender, and the creation of a 'postgender society' where sex category matters, and economic and familial roles are equally available to all (West & Zimmerman, 2009). Whilst this study cannot directly answer such an existential question, it does illustrate women's active engagement in the quest to undo gender, rather than view them as passive victims of oppressive systems, even in the neopatriarchal society. That is, through the doing, redoing and undoing process, the women were able to 'undo culture' and develop a legitimate and 'moral space' where they engaged in

“socially approved behaviour” (Anderson and & Smith, 2007, p. 494) as female entrepreneurs. As the state’s narrative of Saudi women’s identity and role in society transitioned from the “ideal Islamic woman” and “nation builders”, they continuously re-create a moral space between themselves as individual female entrepreneurs and society. This allows them to seamlessly transition between external legitimacy work, where they (implicitly) persuaded others to re-evaluate their beliefs of their organisation’s legitimacy (Lefsrud et al., 2020), and internal legitimacy work, where they either contested or affirmed their current societal perceptions of gender identity (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). Thus, this research contributes to the legitimacy work literature, particularly research on women entrepreneurs’ legitimacy work, by illustrating their need to co-construct a ‘moral space’ between the organisation, the female entrepreneurs and society, where she can operate ‘legitimately’ and in line with the current socio-political discourse on women’s economic role in society. The research also affirms the limitations of disentangling internal legitimacy work from identity work on entrepreneurs, but also from their organisation’s external legitimacy work, especially when taking a gendered approach (Bruni, et al., 2004).

Thirdly, this study contributes to the study of cultural marginalisation and legitimacy work by emphasising the need to take a longitudinal approach to the study of (women’s) entrepreneurship, particularly when examining processes and patterns of change embedded within historical and current socio-economic and political contexts (Gil-López et al., 2024). This paper responded to calls for a genealogical and historical analysis of how legitimacy work unfolds (Suddaby et al., 2017) to unpack the origins and structures of cultural margins constraining the (female) entrepreneur (Ferguson, 1990; Sasaki & Baba, 2024). Taking a postcolonial feminist epistemological approach and utilising the Listening Guide’s voice-centred relational method (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) to synthesise the women’s narratives provided a rich description of the history of the evolution of women’s cultural marginalisation in the neopatriarchal Saudi state (Sharabi, 1988). This was integral to situating the women’s experiences and narratives of cultural marginalisation within the rapidly changing economic and political agenda of the nation (Le Renard, 2008). It also allowed the research to rediscover the merits of the theory of the ‘cultural lag’ (Ogburn, 1922; Brinkman & Brinkman, 1997; Al-Soliman, 1991), which provided an additional enriching lens to reflexively consider how any form of radical social change, regardless of context, will come with resistance and a time lag before it is accepted and normalised. This has been witnessed in western societies and the developed world, and therefore, is inevitable in developing countries and more conservative

Middle Eastern societies. This is not to minimise the slow process of achieving gender equality in neopatriarchal societies, but to bracket the assumption of ‘west is best’ and to view this lag as a universal challenge rather than a Saudi or MENA region problem. To that end, this study suggests that organisational theorists reconsider the critiques of the ‘cultural lag’ theory, and instead develop the concepts of ‘cultural lag’ and ‘organisational lag’ (Damanpour & Eva, 1984) when studying cultural marginalisation during change and instability.

### **Conclusions and future research agenda**

Sasaki & Baba’s (2004) concept of cultural marginalisation was an enlightening lens through which to view the women’s experiences and strategies for surviving in the ever-evolving neopatriarchal culture. The debate around ‘cultural loss’ is interesting and requires deeper contemplation and nuance. It would be fascinating to question whether ‘cultural loss’ is always a negative consequence of globalisation and western influence, and whether it only impacts minority communities. For example, Saudi, and other AGCC countries, have never been colonised by a western country. Yet, one could argue that the overall impact of globalisation and western presence in neopatriarchal states, and other rapidly developing economies in the Middle East and beyond, has left them subjected to western culture domination and in danger of ‘cultural loss’ as a nation, rather than a particular community within it. This would require a macro geopolitical perspective to unpack.

A limitation of the study stems from the sampling methodology. That is, the nature of snowball sampling meant that all women interviewees were of a particular class, education and wealth status. While all the women were Saudi nationals, there was a degree of variance in their experience of marginalisation based on their ethnic origin. Thus, perhaps there are experiences of cultural marginalisation of women from lower classes that have not been represented in this study. Furthermore, research focusing on the impact of tribalism and ethnicity on women’s (and men’s) experiences of cultural marginalisation would help to understand its impact on entrepreneurship in a more nuanced manner.

Saudi women are patriotic and ambitious for their country’s development. They are grateful for current gender reform policies and are hopeful that further change towards achieving equality is imminent. However, the cultural marginalisation perspective has shown that change cannot truly take place toward equality through policies alone. What is required is a socio-cultural shift in perceptions and mentalities towards gender norms and expectations.

However, as always, I contend there is a need for this shift to take place globally across all societies, not just in the Arab world.

## References

- Al-Dajani, H. and Alsahli, M., 2021. Can women entrepreneurs thrive in Saudi Arabia?. *Entrepreneur & innovator*, (2), pp.100-109. Al-Rashid, XXX
- Al-Soliman, T.M., 1991. Societal values and their effect on the built environment in Saudi Arabia: a recent account. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, pp.235-254.
- Aldossari, M. and Murphy, S.E., 2024. Inclusion is in the eye of the beholder: a relational analysis of the role of gendered moral rationalities in Saudi Arabia. *Work, Employment and Society*, 38(5), pp.1244-1266.
- Alkhaled, S. and Berglund, K., 2018. 'And now I'm free': Women's empowerment and emancipation through entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia and Sweden. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 30(7-8), pp.877-900.
- Alkhaled, S. and Sasaki, I., 2022. Syrian women refugees: Coping with indeterminate liminality during forcible displacement. *Organization Studies*, 43(10), pp.1583-1605.
- Alkhaled, S., 2021. Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: Feminist solidarity and political activism in disguise?. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(3), pp.950-972.
- Anderson, A.R. and Smith, R., 2007. The moral space in entrepreneurship: an exploration of ethical imperatives and the moral legitimacy of being enterprising. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 19(6), pp.479-497.
- Baba, S., Sasaki, I. and Vaara, E., 2021. Increasing dispositional legitimacy: Progressive legitimation dynamics in a trajectory of settlements. *Academy of Management Journal*, 64(6), pp.1927-1968.
- Baines, D., 2010. Gender mainstreaming in a development project: intersectionality in a post-colonial un-doing?. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 17(2), pp.119-149.
- Bastien, F., Coraiola, D.M. and Foster, W.M., 2023. Indigenous peoples and organization studies. *Organization Studies*, 44(4), pp.659-675
- Bell, E & Sengupta, S. S. 2022. Empowering Methodologies in Organisational and Social Research. In: Bell, Emma and Sengupta, Sunita Singh eds. Empowering Methodologies in Organisational and Social Research. New Delhi, India: Routledge, pp. 1–18.
- Bhatt, B., Qureshi, I., Shukla, D.M. and Hota, P.K., 2024. Prefiguring alternative organizing: Confronting marginalization through projective cultural adjustment and tempered autonomy. *Organization Studies*, 45(1), pp.59-84.
- Brinkman, R.L. and Brinkman, J.E., 1997. Cultural lag: Conception and theory. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 24(6), pp.609-627.
- Brown, A.D. and Toyoki, S., 2013. Identity work and legitimacy. *Organization Studies*, 34(7), pp.875-896.
- Bruni, A., Gherardi, S. and Poggio, B., 2004. Entrepreneur-mentality, gender and the study of women entrepreneurs. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 17(3), pp.256-268.
- Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York, Routledge
- Choukas, M., 1936. The concept of cultural lag re-examined. *American Sociological Review*, 1(5), pp.752-760.
- Chrispal, S., Bapuji, H. and Zietsma, C., 2021. Caste and organization studies: Our silence makes us complicit. *Organization Studies*, 42(9), pp.1501-1515.
- Creed, W.D., DeJordy, R. and Lok, J., 2010. Being the change: Resolving institutional contradiction through identity work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53(6), pp.1336-1364.

- Damanpour, F. and Evan, W.M., 1984. Organizational innovation and performance: the problem of "organizational lag". *Administrative Science Quarterly*, pp.392-409.
- Doumato, E. A., 1992. Gender, monarchy, and national identity in Saudi Arabia. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 19(1), 31-47.
- Dy, A.M., Marlow, S. and Martin, L., 2017. A Web of opportunity or the same old story? Women digital entrepreneurs and intersectionality theory. *Human Relations*, 70(3), pp.286-311.
- Eum, I., 2019. New women for a New Saudi Arabia? Gendered analysis of Saudi Vision 2030 and women's reform policies. *Asian Women*, 35(3), pp.115-133.
- Ferguson, R. 1990. Introduction: Invisible Center. In R. Ferguson, M. Gever, T. T. Minh-Ha, & C. West (Eds.) *Out there: Marginalization and contemporary culture* (pp.9-14). MIT Press.
- Gil-López, Á., Iszatt-White, M., & San Román López, E. (2024). The role of networks in shaping entrepreneurial leadership: A longitudinal case study. *Management Learning*, 13505076241299108.
- Jamjoom, L.A. and Mills, A.J., 2023. Narratives of workplace resistance: Reframing Saudi women in leadership. *Human Relations*, 76(7), pp.955-989.
- Roomi, M.Z, Kelley, D., Coduras, A. 2024. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. National Report 2023-2024.
- Langley, A.N.N., Smallman, C., Tsoukas, H. and Van de Ven, A.H., 2013. Process studies of change in organization and management: Unveiling temporality, activity, and flow. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(1), pp.1-13.
- Le Renard, A., 2008. "Only for women:" Women, the state, and reform in Saudi Arabia. *The Middle East Journal*, 62(4), pp.610-629.
- Lefsrud, L., Graves, H. and Phillips, N., 2020. "Giant toxic lakes you can see from space": A theory of multimodal messages and emotion in legitimacy work. *Organization Studies*, 41(8), pp.1055-1078.
- Leung, A., Zietsma, C. and Peredo, A.M., 2014. Emergent identity work and institutional change: The 'quiet' revolution of Japanese middle-class housewives. *Organization studies*, 35(3), pp.423-450.
- Lewis, P., 2006. The quest for invisibility: Female entrepreneurs and the masculine norm of entrepreneurship. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 13(5), pp.453-469.
- Lewis, C., Mehmet, M., Quinton, S. and Reynolds, N., 2023. Methodologies for researching marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups. *International Journal of Market Research*, 65(2-3), pp.147-154.
- Lounsbury, M. and Glynn, M.A., 2019. *Cultural entrepreneurship: A new agenda for the study of entrepreneurial processes and possibilities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ahl, H. and Marlow, S., 2021. Exploring the false promise of entrepreneurship through a postfeminist critique of the enterprise policy discourse in Sweden and the UK. *Human Relations*, 74(1), pp.41-68.
- Martí, I. and Fernández, P., 2013. The institutional work of oppression and resistance: Learning from the Holocaust. *Organization Studies*, 34(8), pp.1195-1223.
- Mauthner, N.S. & Doucet, A. 1998. Reflections on a voice-centred relational method In *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research* (119-146). Sage.
- Mauthner, N.S. and Alkhaled, S., 2021. Using the listening guide to analyse stories of female entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: A diffractive methodology. In *Handbook of Research Methods on Gender and Management* (pp. 295-311). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- McGregor, S.L. and Hamdan Alghamdi, A.K., 2022. Women's role in nation building: socialising Saudi female preservice teachers into leadership roles. *School Leadership & Management*, 42(5), pp.520-542.

- Moghadam, V.M., 2004. Patriarchy in transition: Women and the changing family in the Middle East. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 35(2), pp.137-162.
- Mohanty, C., 1988. Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30(1), pp.61-88.
- OECD/European Commission (2023), *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023: Policies for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/230efc78-en>. (Accessed December 2024.)
- Ogburn, William F. *Social Change: with Respect to Cultural and Original Nature*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., [1922] 1966.
- Olabisi, J., Kwesiga, E., Juma, N. and Tang, Z., 2019. Stakeholder transformation process: The journey of an indigenous community. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 159, pp.1-21.
- Ozkazanc-Pan, B., 2012. Postcolonial feminist research: Challenges and complexities. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 31(5/6), pp.573-591.
- Patton, M.Q., 1990. Qualitative evaluation and research methods.
- Pearce, R., 2020. A methodology for the marginalised: Surviving oppression and traumatic fieldwork in the neoliberal academy. *Sociology*, 54(4), pp.806-824.
- Pruitt, A.S., 2018. Redoing gender: How women in the funeral industry use essentialism for equality. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(2), pp.144-158.
- Risman, Barbara J. 2008. From doing to undoing: Gender as we know it. *Gender & Society* 23:81-84.
- Sadi, M.A. and Al-Ghazali, B.M., 2010. Doing business with impudence: A focus on women entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia. *African Journal of Business Management*, 4(1), p.1.
- Sasaki, I. and Baba, S., 2024a. Shades of Cultural Marginalization: Cultural Survival and Autonomy Processes. *Organization Theory*, 5(1), p.26317877231221552.
- Sasaki & Baba, (2024b) Call for Papers. In the Shadows: Tales of Cultural Marginalization in Modern Society. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*. Edited by Michael Lounsbury.
- Sharabi, H., 1988. *Neopatriarchy: A theory of distorted change in Arab society*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Shinnar, R.S., Hsu, D.K. and Powell, B.C., 2014. Self-efficacy, entrepreneurial intentions, and gender: Assessing the impact of entrepreneurship education longitudinally. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 12(3), pp.561-570.
- Suchman, M.C., 1995. Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), pp.571-610.
- Suddaby, R., Bitektine, A. and Haack, P., 2017. Legitimacy. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11(1), pp.451-478.
- Swail, J. & Marlow, S., 2018. 'Embrace the masculine; attenuate the feminine'—gender, identity work and entrepreneurial legitimation in the nascent context. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 30(1-2), pp.256-282.
- Temple, B., 2002. Crossed wires: Interpreters, translators, and bilingual workers in cross-language research. *Qualitative health research*, 12(6), pp.844-854.
- Walzer, S., 2008. Redoing gender through divorce. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 25(1), pp.5-21.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D.H., 1987. Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), pp.125-151.
- West, C. and Zimmerman, D.H., 2009. Accounting for doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 23(1), pp.112-122.

**Table 1 – Sample of Saudi Women Entrepreneurs**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Nationality/Ethnic origin</b>	<b>Business Type</b>	<b>Founded</b>
Ahd	Saudi	Consultancy	2005
Amina	Saudi	Retail	1990
Bushra	Saudi	Health Care	2006
Hala	Saudi	Consultancy	2012
Jawhara	Saudi	Alternative medicine	2012
Karma	Saudi	Beauty	2009
Khulood	Saudi	Retail	2009
Layla	Saudi/Syrian	Events Planning	2008
Luma	Saudi	Fashion	2000
Maya	Saudi	Retail	2007
Muna	Saudi	Consultancy	2001
Noura	Saudi	Consultancy	2004
Randa	Saudi	Marketing	2008
Reem	Saudi	Accountancy Firm	2009
Riham	Saudi/Lebanese	IT Business	2008
Sara	Saudi/Lebanese	Illustration	2010
Tala	Saudi/Syrian	Events Planning	2009
Wafaa	Saudi/Tunisian	Interior Design	2009
Zahra	Saudi/Palestinian	Child Care	1985
Zeina	Saudi	Publishing	2006