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Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Elkafrawi, N and Refai, D (2022) Egyptian rural women entrepreneurs: Challenges, ambitions and opportunities. International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, 23 (3). pp. 203-214. ISSN: 1465-7503

https://doi.org/10.1177/14657503221086098

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Egyptian Rural Women Entrepreneurs: Challenges, ambitions and opportunities

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the main challenges and opportunities facing Egyptian rural women entrepreneurs (RWEs) in starting and growing their enterprises. The study narrates the story of one woman in rural Egypt and the challenges she has encountered in becoming an entrepreneur. A qualitative approach is applied to explore various social and economic aspects in Egyptian RWEs' life. The results suggest four main interrelated challenges and two main opportunities facing RWEs in rural Egypt. This is one of few studies responding to calls for more research addressing RWEs, particularly in developing countries, and for showing the role of context in shaping their entrepreneurial decisions. The case offers better understanding of RWEs, and sets the foundation for more research in areas of rural women empowerment, rural development and contextualisation of entrepreneurship.

Key words: Challenges; Egypt; Rural Development; Rural entrepreneurship; Women Entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Rural entrepreneurship is considered a vehicle for improving the livelihoods of rural people and achieving sustainable development. However, the mere acceptance of entrepreneurship alone as a key driving force cannot achieve the intended development; a supporting context for entrepreneurship is needed (Andrew, 2015). Hence, preparing an encouraging entrepreneurship environment requires a thorough analysis of the challenges, possible opportunities and real socio-economic context of rural entrepreneurs. This socio-economic context includes key factors that affect RWEs in initiating and operating their ventures, e.g. customs and traditions, availability of financial resources, cost of business and entrepreneurial motivation (Khan, 2014). The distinctive characteristics of most rural contexts (tightly constrained and complex environment, heterogeneous activities, remote location, poor infrastructure and lack of business networks) continue to stand as barriers to entrepreneurship in these areas, rendering activities of entrepreneurs more difficult and less attractive compared to urban areas (McElwee, 2006; Imedashvili et al., 2013); this is perhaps one reason for the more urban-centric nature to much entrepreneurship research (McElwee and Smith, 2014; Newbery et al., 2017).

One of the widely debated issues among many entrepreneurship researchers is the essence of rural entrepreneurship (Henry and McElwee, 2014; Jones et al., 2019). On the one hand, some scholars view that there is no difference between entrepreneurship conducted in rural and urban areas (McElwee,

2006; Henry and McElwee, 2014; Danson and Burnett, 2014) as the process is the same; it is only the external context that makes this process more challenging in the rural, as opposed to urban areas. Put simply, the rural context adds more challenges on rural entrepreneurs, but there are no noticed variations between the entrepreneurial mechanisms and structure in either rural or urban contexts (Henry and McElwee 2014). We agree with this view. On the other hand, some believe that rural areas are unique contexts that call for a particular type of research (Siemens, 2012; Korsgaard et al., 2015; Pato and Teixeira, 2016). Apart from this debate, many researchers believe that flourishing entrepreneurship in rural areas requires connected thinking and actions, which are community owned at the local level (Gorbuntsova et al., 2018; Ghouse et al. 2019).

One aspect that can render rural entrepreneurship more challenging is gender. In this regard, we coincide with Hovorka and Dietrich (2011) who argue that understanding the interactive relations between various contextual factors in a specific context can largely assist in understanding how entrepreneurship is formed in this context and how gender can influence its outcomes. In rural contexts, we argue that the role of women is important, but has thus far been neglected in rural entrepreneurship research. McElwee (2006, p.198) asserts that 'there is little in the way of literature that examines entrepreneurial activity by women'. Similarly, Pato (2015) argues that most rural studies focus on rural entrepreneurs generally, with a lack of focus on women entrepreneurs and Ghouse et al. (2019; 2021) highlight the paucity of research exploring women entrepreneurship in developing countries, and more particularly Arab countries.

Despite the paucity of evidence exploring RWE, their potential contribution to rural development is not to be under-estimated. Around 70% of the worlds' deprived communities live in rural areas in developing countries, where women represent on average more than 40% of the agricultural labour force (IFAD, 2011). Kabir et al. (2012) assert that neither rural development nor food security can be achieved without considering the contribution of women in the rural. Furthermore, Tabatabaei and Jafari (2013) state that the participation of rural women in work is considered a crucial step for reaching rural development targets, especially in the area of entrepreneurship. However, RWEs are still considered as an untapped resource for promoting economic growth in rural areas (FAO and ILO, 2010), especially in Arab contexts (Ghouse et al., 2019; 2021).

According to FAO (2011), if women had the same access as men to agricultural resources, agricultural production would rise from 2.5% to 4%, and about 100 to 150 million people in the world could be better fed. However, the scarce statistical evidence and restrictive customs and traditions that fail to appreciate rural women's contribution, has rendered their role under-represented (Mohamed and Dessouki, 2005). Moreover, most rural women's work is unpaid, and in many instances these women

experience clear gender inequality in assets, inputs and services, e.g. access to and control over land, financial services, productive resources and extension or marketing services (GIZ, 2013).

Eliminating the barriers that face most RWEs and promoting entrepreneurship among them can have several positive returns for both women themselves and rural areas as a whole (Khan et al., 2012; Habibi et al., 2014). Khan et al. (2012) argue that rural entrepreneurship enables rural women to work within their own social system, allowing them the opportunity to improve their lives whilst taking care of their families, farms or livestock-centred duties. Similarly, Sappleton and Lourenço (2016) relate the high tendency of women to be self-employed and to show higher satisfaction in their jobs despite the lower pay to the flexibility in working hours and adjustable working schedule. Habibi et al. (2014) assert that the spread of rural business to women can help to a large extent in reducing the prevailing unemployment rate and the money spent on creating jobs for rural people. Lourenço et al. (2014), in their study of Ugandan RWEs, suggest how focused enterprise training can alleviate such issues.

Based on the previous discussion, this research aims to explore the socio-economic conditions of Egyptian RWEs, and offer recommendations to policy makers around the implications of those conditions in order to support rural women's contribution to rural development. This is done through addressing the following two questions:

- What are the main challenges and opportunities facing Egyptian women entrepreneurs within their rural context?
- How does the Egyptian rural context affect entrepreneurship development among rural women?

The research contributes to the body of literature on RWE broadly, with particular focus on a less researched context, namely the Egyptian rural context, and the role of this context in encouraging/hindering entrepreneurship. This research is also timely considering the severe political, economic, social and cultural disturbances that Egypt has witnessed since the 2011 revolution, which has impacted on all aspects of life in Egypt, and caused more deterioration in RWEs' conditions (Ghanem and Shaikh, 2013).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review is presented to discuss the characteristics, challenges and opportunities around rural entrepreneurship as well as RWE both broadly and within the Egyptian rural context. The methodology is then explained, followed by an introduction of our case study of an Egyptian RWE. Then, an analysis of the findings is presented alongside a critical discussion. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the value, limitations and implications of this research.

Literature review

Rural areas: Challenges and Opportunities

The rural is defined from different perspectives in literature. Atchoarena and Gasperini (2003) use a multi-criteria approach specifying two main criteria to define the 'rural', the first is related to the place of residence and land settlement patterns, and the second to the type of work that residents engage in. Most rural areas are open areas with few constructions and comparatively low population density, where most of the land area is used for primary production; e.g. agriculture, livestock, forestry and fishing. The type of residents depends largely on those primary production types, leading to relative homogeneity across peoples' values, attitudes and behaviours in rural areas; such homogeneity is regarded as a characteristic of those areas (Sam, 2014). Other characteristics distinguish rural areas including the prevalence of higher than average levels of poverty (Wiggins and Proctor, 2001), where nearly 70% of the developing world's 1.4 billion extremely poor people exist in rural areas (IFAD, 2011). Ferguson et al. (2015) identify additional characteristics of rural areas including low population densities, distance from urban centres, remoteness, and dominance of agriculture and forestry land. In this research, we agree that whilst there is a common understanding of what rural is, no universal definition exists, and different criteria can be used to identify its unique features.

Promoting rural entrepreneurship requires accurate identification and analysis of basic challenges, conditions and opportunities facing rural areas and, hence, RWEs. We agree with Danson and Burnett (2014) that businesses in rural and remote areas face the same obstacles as those faced by small enterprises and early start-ups generally, yet, within more intense and different challenges. Imedashvili et al. (2013) list some barriers facing rural entrepreneurship, for example, a declining population, which is considered a barrier to achieving economies of scale; the low level of skilled workers due to the increasing rate of illiteracy; difficult access to financial resources; poor infrastructure and transport difficulties. Similarly, Dabson (2001), applying the categorization of Liechtenstein and Lyons (1996), identifies three main obstacles facing rural entrepreneurship, including the small size and low density of rural communities, the social and economic composition of rural societies, and the nature of internal and external linkages. He clarifies the internal links in rural communities as dependent on family relationships, which can help in selling family products or gaining business advice, yet similarly hinders business expansion as decisions become dependent on subjective and emotional considerations than on objective ones. External links, on the other hand, are those between rural areas and the outside world, including remoteness from airports and highways, which increase the difficulty of accessing urban markets. Sharma et al. (2013) consider the presence of a knowledge gap in rural areas, lack of

access to technology and difficulty in recruiting highly skilled workers as major barriers to entrepreneurship in the rural.

Despite these manifold barriers, rural areas still offer some opportunities to entrepreneurs. The accessibility of low-cost business premises compared to urban areas may be a major advantage encouraging entrepreneurs to establish themselves in rural markets. Rural areas can also benefit from entrepreneurship through introducing more job opportunities to rural people, especially the young, supporting and encouraging education, helping to narrow the gap in development between urban and rural areas, and achieving a general improvement in overall living standards (Saxena, 2012; Imedashvili et al., 2013; Newbery et al., 2017). The following section discusses the status of RWEs generally, followed by a third section exploring the Egyptian rural context and Egyptian RWEs.

Rural women entrepreneurs

RWEs frequently endure more challenges and severe working conditions than their male counterparts (Saxena, 2012; De vita et al., 2014). Not owning agricultural land is a basic barrier; less than 20% of agricultural landholding in developing countries is operated by women. Despite the various laws and policies that limit discriminations between men and women, restrictive social norms that dominate most rural areas still hinder RWEs' potential to develop (FAO and IL0, 2010; Goyal and Parkash, 2011). Illiteracy and lack of training are other challenges; women represent two-thirds of the world's 796 million people who are illiterate, the majority of them living in rural areas (UN, 2012). Other challenges are observed in the poor rural infrastructure (roads, electricity, transport, water supply, etc.) that places more burdens on women entrepreneurs (FAO and IL0, 2010), and the limited and complicated access to financial resources that requires many documents and complex procedures including co-signatures from a male family member (husband, father or brother) to grant loans, thus, rendering women reluctant to engage in entrepreneurship (Saxena, 2012; De vita et al., 2014). Hosseini and McElwee (2011) assert that analysing the barriers facing those women and identifying the missing skills they need is key step for helping them to be more entrepreneurial.

Identifying the entrepreneurial motivational factors that encourage women to become entrepreneurs can largely contribute to specifying the types of challenges they face (Tlaiss, 2015). This motivation is often made clearer through identifying push and pull factors (See McClelland et al., 2005; Segal et al., 2005; Schjoedt and Shaver, 2007 for an overeveiw about enterprneurial push and pull factors) Whilst the majority of scholars assert that push factors (e.g. redundancy, unemployment, dissatisfaction with the market) dominate women's entrepreneurial motivation (Clain, 2000; Orhan and Scott, 2001), some indicate that women are primarily pulled into entrepreneurship (e.g. to achieve

autonomy, self-satisfaction, or reject stereotypical feminine identities) (Amit and Muller, 1995; Shinnar and Young, 2008; Jyoti, et al., 2011). In this reagard, Al-dajani and Marlow (2010) highlight that the patriarchal context is a key player in shaping gender roles, and consequently motivations, in most Arab countries.

Egyptian rural context and Egyptian RWEs

For thousands of years, the Egyptian civilization has survived on agriculture, where a high density of Egyptians have and still live on the fertile banks of the river Nile, making the Nile Valley one of the world's most densely populated areas. Around 57% of Egyptians live in rural areas (World Bank report, 2019). The main activities in these areas are agriculture, animal production and off-farm employment rather than industrial or service activities (Ghanem, 2014). Agriculture is a main economic pillar that represents around 14% of GDP, directly employing around 30% of the labour force, and contributing to nearly 20% of total Egyptian exports (Shalaby et al., 2011; Ghanem, 2014). Yet, 42% of rural Egyptian households' income is driven from non-farm sources, with 25% directly from agriculture and 9% from livestock (IFAD, 2014). Casual wage labour income and livestock rearing are the main economic activities, specifically poultry and other small animals. Hence, agriculture policies should support these two main activities to help in poverty alleviation in rural areas (Croppenstedt, 2006).

Egyptian rural areas have changed both socially and economically as a consequence of many factors including internal migration, high poverty rates, poor infrastructure and severe political fluctuation (El-kholei, 2005; Elmenofi et al., 2014); a situation which requires substantial efforts from both government and interested organizations to make rural areas more appealing to entrepreneurs, and more particularly RWEs. The Egyptian revolution in 2011 made the situation harder as the afterward slow economic growth sharply affected rural people generally and made the poor poorer (Radwan and Changbin, 2015). Despite, the clear negative consequences of the revolution on the Egyptian society as a whole, it has had surprising positive result on women employment. It reduced the gender gap between Egyptians and raised women employment rates. This supports the notion that economic uncertainty can sometimes downplay rigidness and restricted social norms (El-Mellakh et al., 2018).

Whilst nearly 70% of Egyptians lived in rural areas in 1950, this percentage is expected to decrease to 46% by 2030 (El-kholei, 2005) due to increasing migration to urban areas (Khan et al., 2012). Elmenofi et al. (2014) identify poverty, pollution and unemployment as the three most hindering factors to Egyptian rural development, while fragmented agricultural lands and lack of marketing are less dominant ones. Similar reported factors include extreme land fragmentation (Ghanem, 2014), poor

infrastructure, low-skilled workers and low diversification of production activities (Egypt Network for Integrated Development, 2015). The Egyptian rural areas cannot be viewed apart from most rural areas around the world. Perhaps one of the fine differences that can be used to distinguish rurality in Egypt and other developing countries from rurality in developed contexts is the tendency of rural Youth (especially men) to migrate to more developed countries. A situation that leaves those areas suffering from decreasing population and poor skilled labour (Shalaby et al., 2011).

Egyptian RWEs suffer from similar challenges to those facing RWEs in most developing countries. Nevertheless, Javadian and Singh (2012, p.149) state that 'In studying women's entrepreneurship in a society we need to look at the specific factors related to that society that impact women's entrepreneurial activities'. Entrepreneurship can offer new opportunities for most women in many developing countries to generate their own income and to promote their personal and social conditions. De Vita et al. (2014) argue that fostering entrepreneurship among women in MENA countries can yield tremendous positive results to those women and their countries. However, the dominance of a male culture in these countries still means that women face many social barriers in starting their own businesses.

The gender distribution between males and females in Egyptian society is almost balanced, with women representing 49% of the total population (World Bank group, 2018). A wide social and economic gender gap exists, nevertheless, particularly in rural areas (Croppenstedt, 2006; IFAD-UNESCO, 2014), where the unemployment rate for men is 3.4% compared to 17.8% for women (Campas[1], 2009). According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report for 2012, Egypt ranks 126th out of 135 countries on the gender gap index, and 130th out of 135 in labour force participation. The female-to-male employment ratio is 0.3, since Egyptian women represent only 24% of the total employed labour force, as opposed to 79% for males.

Different barriers hinder the effective participation of Egyptian rural women in labour force (Shalaby et al., 2011; Ghanem, 2014), including a) high illiteracy rates ranging between 63% and 80%, b) poor nutrition and health due to poor medical services, c) less access to economic and social facilities, d) restrictive customs and traditions, such as early marriage, giving males priority in education, inheritance cultural practices that may deprive women from owning agricultural land, and 5) poor infrastructure, which affects both genders, but more so women who have to bear with fetching water and cleaning the house in situations when sanitation and electricity are lacking.

[1] Central agency for public mobilization and statistics

Our previous discussion highlights the nature of the rural context, including the various challenges and motivators involved, with particular focus on the Egyptian context. Next, we present the methodology applied in this study, followed by our main findings.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative approach to explore various social and economic aspects around the lives of Egyptian RWEs. The case study approach is appropriate since it is preferred when how or why questions are being posed, and when the focus is on a phenomenon within real-life context, a situation that aligns with our study (Yin, 1994). A single case study is applied; whilst this limits the research to consider a particular instance of interest, it offers convenience in cases when research does not aim to generalise findings, but rather develop initial understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2014), which is the case here. Additionally, the conservative nature dominating the Egyptian rural context and the high limitations imposed on women there, especially when communicating with strangers (here, researcher), makes it hard to find other insightful cases to explore in this area.

Data were collected through a multi method approach that included both face-to-face semi-structured interview and observations; both approaches helped in offering an opportunity to investigate the views, reactions, feelings and perceptions of our interviewee, Hoda (a pseudonym, as are all other names referred to in this case study), and to show how she was able to cope with different obstacles in her life. Additionally, the methods applied enabled a seamless flow of the conversation and a more comprehensive view on the research context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Hoda, our main unit of analysis entrepreneur, lives in a small village called Meet-Rabea near Bilbeis city, one of the main cities in Sharkia governorate, located on the eastern edge of the southern Nile delta. Bilbeis is the closest city to 10th of Ramdan city, one of the largest industrial cities in the country, which encourages its people to work in different industrial factories and leave their agricultural activities. The interview was conducted in Hoda's house (which is also her main business premise) by the first author due to physical proximity and familiarity with the Egyptian context. Hoda's house is characterised by its simplicity, and it barely accommodated the basic family needs as reflected in Figure 1 showing Hoda's house and business premise. Hoda's house is similar to most houses in Egyptian rural areas. A one floor house with three small bedrooms, one for Hoda and her husband and the other two for all the kids. A small hall is located between the rooms, and is used for dining and spending time together watching TV.

Conducting the interview in Hoda's house helped in melting the ice between the researcher and Hoda, and offered an opportunity for noting several observations that are relevant to this study. At the beginning, Hoda refused to audio record the interview, however, after going through the ethical considerations, which have been approved for this research and given to Hoda beforehand, she happily agreed. The interview lasted around 60 minutes and enabled in-depth understanding of Hoda's lifestyle. This interview was followed by two phone calls to allow Hoda and the researcher to clarify some points that were not clear in the recording.

Figure 1: Hoda's house and her main business premise

Case study

Hoda is a 40-year old Egyptian rural woman who has been married to her cousin Ali for 25 years. She has four adult children: two sons and two daughters. Sameh, her eldest son (23 years), graduated from a vocational learning institution that teaches sewing; he now works in a clothing factory in 10th of Ramdan city. Noha, 20 years old, also graduated from a vocational learning institution, but in a different department (ready-made clothes). Noha could not find a job that matches her education, so she works in a juice factory instead. Fatma is the second girl in Hoda's family and is still in her second year at the same vocational institution, in the textile department. The youngest son, Seif, is 11 years old and is in his 5th grade at school.

The fact that most of Hoda's children were educated in a vocational college suggests that rural families prefer their children to work as employees in factories or organizations, rather than in the farming sector. Hoda clarifies this point by saying:

> '*Most of the families in our village prefer to encourage their children to work in stable occupations to take the advantage of social insurance and pensions, the privileges that do not exist in the farming sector.'*

Hoda's husband, Ali, is a carpenter who had a secure job in one of the small furniture factories in Belbeis. After five years of working there, his family expenses increased so he started to think about travelling to the Gulf countries (Kuwait) to work there and improve his family's standards of living. During the first five years that Ali spent in Kuwait, Hoda did not think about working at all:

> *'The responsibility of taking care of four young children with the absence of their father was so huge; it did not give me any chance to even think about having a job or entering the business field. Especially, my husband was sending us money monthly (remittance) that covered all our essential expenses.'*

Four main turning points played a role in changing Hoda's life from being a mother and housewife to becoming an entrepreneur who defied many challenges.

The first turning point was at the end of Ali's fifth year in Kuwait, when he felt homesick and wanted to reunite with his family. When he attempted to return to Egypt, he experienced some financial problems with his employer, who refused to give him permission to return home, and ended up being jailed in Kuwait. All money transfers to Ali's family stopped. Hoda was left with the responsibility of providing for her family, and for the first time in her life she started thinking about working. Hoda clarifies this period by saying:

> *'I never thought that one day I might need to work to earn my living. After Ali was jailed I could not find any possible way to cover our daily expenses. I felt obliged to start thinking of a small business that does not require high skills as I can barely write my name.'*

Being part of a patriarchal rural community, the expectation was that Hoda would not start any economic activity before obtaining permission from her husband. She requested his permission to work part-time in harvesting seasonal crops in her village, in addition to selling some home-made bread. At first, Ali totally rejected the idea of his wife working and asked her to borrow money from their relatives. She expressed his first reaction:

'He became mad when he knew that I needed to work because this might be considered as shameful among people in the village; people might say that his wife is the one who worked and supported him and their children.'

Hoda complied with her husband's wishes at the start, but borrowing money from relatives did not last for long, and Ali finally had no other choice but to accept the idea of Hoda working.

The second turning point happened after Hoda's husband was released from jail, and returned home.

'It was a very hard period for all of us; he could not afford to pay for the taxi that brought him from the airport. He stayed one year looking for a job, but all his efforts were useless. The expenses increased every day and there was no hope of Ali soon finding a job.'

Hoda started to convince Ali of starting a small business, selling livestock (poultry, ducks, etc.). Eventually, he agreed to help his wife. Nevertheless, they faced huge financial hurdles due to lack of money and inability to secure any bank loan for start-up. Hoda states:

'The deficiency of financial resources was our main problem. We thought of taking out a bank loan, but we failed as the bank required assets as collateral to guarantee the loan and we did not have any.'

Here, family networks came into play when Ali's cousin (Hassan) offered to lend them money in return for sharing the profit equally with them later. They started to buy poultry and other livestock from vendors and sell them in different places around the village. One year later, Hoda felt that she needed a permanent fixed location and rented a small shop to start selling her livestock from:

'I started feeling tired from moving from one place to another to sell my products. Unfortunately, the selection of the shop's location was not successful. It was far from the market so the profits were not able even to cover the cost of the rent, so after a year I decided to close it.'

The third turning point in Hoda's story occurred after her failure to make a profit in her rented shop. She decided to go every week (Thursday) to the main market in her village and sell her products there. Initially, Ali did not welcome the idea of helping and accompanying her to the market, which was very crowded, and many people from their village visited it. Ali feared people might look down at him because he was jobless, and it was his wife who owned the business and was the breadwinner. Finally, Ali gave in and supported Hoda for three consecutive years until he encountered medical problems that rendered him unable to. At this point, the business became more challenging to Hoda, who alongside her business still had to take care of her household duties:

'After Ali's sickness, the weekly journey to the village market became difficult. Moving the livestock from the vendor to the market every Thursday and staying in the sun all day, then returning home with the remaining livestock, became an exhausting journey which I could not bear any more, especially as there was a lot of house work that had to be done every day.'

The last 'turning' point in Hoda's entrepreneurial journey happened when she started to think about using a room in her own house, and having a separate entrance to that room to become her business premise, so she could sell her products and at the same time keep an eye on her housework duties and children.

'Working from home was the most brilliant idea I finally reached; it gives me some relief from the guilty feeling that I am not taking good care of my family and children; now I can do both. No one can blame me now for avoiding my family responsibilities …'.

Her income increased and finally she was able to buy the house she was living in, which had previously been rented. She refused to sign the house contract in her own name despite Ali asking her to do so:

'No matter who gets the money, I cannot bear to see Ali feeling down because he did not have enough money to buy our house. Although at first he refused to have the house in his name, I insisted so as not to embarrass him among his friends and relatives.'

In time, Hoda became a well-known livestock merchant in her village and perhaps in the nearby villages. She initiated further value-adding activities to her business. For example, she bought a freezer and started to sell cleaned and packed frozen poultry, alongside frozen and grilled fish upon request. In 2017, a few years after the revolution, Hoda's business activities expanded even more, and she started to market her products in nearby villages as well.

Discussion and analysis

In response to debates around whether rurality should be considered an opportunity to exploit or a challenge to overcome (Newbery et al., 2017), this paper shows how the rural context can simultaneously act as a barrier and incubator for small rural ventures. The presented case highlights key changes in Egyptian rural areas in relation to a shift in the attractiveness of working in the agricultural sector, whether in or off-farm. This is reflected in Ali's leaving to Kuwait, and Hoda's children's education and her comment concerning their careers, where they were pushed to work in factories in nearby city. In keeping with the literature, the Egyptian rural conditions are no longer

appealing for rural people to work or even live in, urging them to travel to other places, in or outside the country to improve their standards of living (El-kholei, 2005; Elmenofi et al., 2014).

Findings from the presented case show four main interrelated challenges and two main opportunities concerning Egyptian RWEs. Challenges include restrictive customs and traditions, lack of entrepreneurial motivation, lack of proper education and management skills and lack of financial resources. Opportunities highlighted include low business costs and strong personal (kinship) bonds in rural areas. Through these challenges and opportunities, which we discuss in more depth next, we agree with Gaddefors and Anderson's (2019) that changes in, and outcomes from, entrepreneurial processes can be identified more easily in rural areas due to the simple and direct relations dominating rural contexts.

With regards to the first challenge, as emphasized in other studies (Habibi, et al., 2014), the prevalent customs and traditions in rural areas play a significant role in hindering rural women's entrepreneurial activities. Such customs are reflected in this case study through the patriarchal culture, where women's economic activities have to be approved by the man of the house, who is likely to refuse even when he is incapable of providing for the family (e.g. for imprisonment or health-related reasons). These customs and traditions not only restrict women's entrepreneurial behaviour, but also place burdens on men, who find themselves torn between supporting their wives to bring some income to the family, and pleasing their community who is likely to look down on them if they were not the breadwinners in the family.

This study contributes to discussions on the widespread restrictive norms and patriarchal traditions in rural areas (Al-dajani and Marlow, 2010; Tlaiss, 2015). Our findings indicate how our case of a RWE refused to register a house, bought with her own money, under her name, and insisted to have it registered under her husband's name instead despite his refusal. This indicates that norms and traditions in rural Egypt not only emerge from rules, procedures or the prevailing male-dominant culture, but also from internal beliefs that are deeply ingrained in rural women's morals, which entail that the man should be in control and ownership of any assets within the family; a finding that aligns with De Vita et al (2014) on women in MENA regions.

The second challenge relates to rural women's motivation to become entrepreneurs. Such motivation is necessary to be understood in order to promote farmers' entrepreneurial activities (Alsos et al., 2003). In line with Clain (2000) and Orhan and Scott (2001), our findings stress that RWEs are largely pushed into entrepreneurship, mainly due to dissatisfaction with economic or social conditions, which could result from a husband's inability to provide for the family (e.g. due to imprisonment or health

conditions), and lack of financial support from relatives and close family. Other authors (Amit and Muller, 1995; Shinnar and Young, 2008; Jyoti, et al., 2011; Tlaiss, 2015) argue about the role of pull factors (independence, autonomy, self-achievement, etc.) in motivating women entrepreneurs. However, these do not play a decisive role in the case study presented in this paper.

The long-lasting dilemma of balancing family and work duties clearly influences entrepreneurial decisions as shown in the presented case of a RWE, who found relief in working from home. A similar result was reached by Kirkwood (2009) who states that family considerations largely shape basic decisions in women entrepreneurs' lives. Al-dajani and Marlow (2010), in their study on Palestinian women entrepreneurs, conclude that home-based self- employment is the most convenient and practical choice for women working in patriarchal societies. Javadian and Singh (2012) show how the traditional Iranian culture creates a rigid stereotype that women should only join the labour force if their families suffer from financial shortage.

The third challenge is the lack of proper education and training given to rural women, which is noted among the most widely cited barriers to women running their own businesses (Al-dajani and Marlow, 2010; Hosseini and McElwee, 2011; Akhalwaya and Havenga, 2012). Our case study shows that a poor level of education alongside absence of appropriate training courses (marketing, financial, human resource skills, etc.) limit rural women's career choices, forcing them into low-skilled and consequently low-paid (e.g. seasonal harvesting or baking bread) employment. The lack of managerial and marketing skills also impacts women's ability to choose appropriate business locations, adding to the risk of failure of business. Nevertheless, our case study shows evidence of a learning curve, where pitfalls and accumulation of experience over time have led to more informed decisions to grow the business.

The fourth challenge is the difficulty of acquiring financial resources required for start-up, which is among the main constraints facing women entrepreneurs generally (Saadi and Movahedi, 2014). Such challenge is arguably more prevalent in the case of RWE considering that rural contexts bear greater challenges to entrepreneurship than other contexts (McElwee, 2008).

Despite the challenges, opportunities can still be identified in the rural. First is the relatively low cost of business premises and other expenses compared to urban areas, which allow for trialling with various economic activities (seasonal harvesting, selling home-baked bread, moving to the market with her livestock, renting a shop) at relatively low costs. Second are the strong bonds of kinship among rural people, also stressed by Smith and McElwee (2013), which allow for substituting loans from financial institutions and borrowing money from relatives instead. Such bonds may facilitate the

marketing of rural products with little effort, and can also be used to obtain business advice (Dabson, 2001). Alongside this social closeness, physical proximity in the rural context can support rural businesses' success by facilitating the transportation of goods without incurring much cost. This result coincides with findings from rural Pakistan implying that flourishing entrepreneurship in rural areas largely results from the interaction between various contexts (social, economic, religious) (Muhammad et al., 2017). This closeness also signifies the unique spatial context in the rural that has its own interwoven socio-economic perspectives (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018).

Our findings contribute to the debate in entrepreneurship research regarding whether the rural version of entrepreneurship is unique from that in urban areas, or simply the same entrepreneurial process is being shaped differently by the surrounding context (Henry and McElwee, 2014; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2019). Our findings support the latter view, and further elaborate how the interactive relationships between people in rural areas largely shape the nature of entrepreneurship in those areas, a conclusion also supported by Muhammad et al. (2017). We agree with Danson and Burnett (2014) that alongside the challenges faced by business start-ups generally, most businesses in rural and remote areas experience more intense challenges in terms of both quantity and quality, and more research is needed to explore how rural entrepreneurs can cope with those challenges (Burnett and Danson, 2017). Next, we present the conclusion and implications of our study.

Implications and conclusions

This study responds to calls for research on women entrepreneurs in Arab countries, and more particularly in the rural Middle Eastern region (Ghouse et al., 2019; 2021; Tlaiss, 2015). The paper offers better understanding of RWEs and sets a foundation for more research in areas such as rural women empowerment, rural development and contextualisation of entrepreneurship in developing countries. Through the presented case study, we shed light on various debates in relation to rural entrepreneurship, for example, whether rurality is a constraint or an opportunity for entrepreneurs (Newbrey et al., 2017), why the challenges facing entrepreneurs in rural areas are usually more constraining than in others, how rural entrepreneurs can overcome such challenges (Danson and Burnett, 2014; Smallbone et al., 2014; Burnett and Danson, 2017), and how the simple social relations dominating most rural areas can actually support understanding rural entrepreneurial changes and their outcomes (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2019).

As such the paper contributes to this Special Issue in recognition of the works of the founding editor of this journal by adding to McElwee (2006) and McElwee and Smith (2014) discussions on the unique characteristics of rural contexts, and McElwee (2006) and Henry and McElwee (2014) on the nature

of rurality and how it is defined. The paper further stresses the importance of supporting economic activities of women in the rural, understanding the challenges they face (McElwee, 2008; Hosseini and McElwee, 2011), and how these challenges can be overcome (Danson and Burnett, 2014). We recognise the often overlooked opportunities offered by rural contexts through the prevalent simple and strong relations that provide the advantage of physical and social proximity, low pay rates, low business costs...etc. (Smith and McElwee, 2013). If fully exploited, such advantages can yield fruitful returns for both entrepreneurs and rural communities. In this regard, we stress the potential contribution of women to the development of rural contexts (Lourenço et al., 2014) despite the many challenges they face (Muhammad et al., 2017); an area which has thus far been largely overlooked (McElwee; 2006; Ghouse et al., 2019; 2021).

Given the social, economic and legislative constraints facing RWEs, a comprehensive approach that takes into account rural women's specific needs is required to overcome the challenges they face. Whilst the case presented in this paper explores rural Egypt, the conditions facing Egyptian RWEs are arguably closely related to what other RWEs face, particularly in developing countries that share several social and economic conditions as those in Egypt. Our findings support Mathew (2010) that the numerous responsibilities falling upon women in Middle Eastern countries to satisfy their family needs, leave little time for them to focus on innovating or developing their careers. Having said that, our study indicates that the role of women in rural contexts is changing in ways that offer more opportunities for rural women to find employment/self-employment, and consequently improve the employability/self-employability rates generally, and for women more particularly.

Various policy implications can be suggested here. Both government and non-government organizations should play a bigger role in encouraging women's education and promoting managerial skills for rural people in general, and women in particular. Opening managerial training centres to introduce basic skills in marketing, finance and human resources would greatly help in avoiding business failure. Additionally, governments should take more serious steps to improve the rural infrastructure (roads, electricity, sanitation, etc.) to minimise youth migration to urban areas. Clear and simple financial procedures for granting loans to rural people are recommended, alongside specifically tailored programmes to support e.g. low interest rates and long-term loans. Such recommendations can be facilitated through Egyptian labour associations by promoting rural women's voice and their access to public.

This study presents with some limitations. First, the research is based on a single case study; whilst this limitation is minimised through our ethnographic multi-method approach, it still has implications on the scope for generalization of results. We thus call for wider range cross-sectional and longitudinal

research to add depth to our understanding of the lives and obstacles facing RWEs in developing economies. Secondly, depending on a single source of data, namely RWEs, calls for further research engaging different stakeholders, including local government authorities, agri-business people, non-governmental organizations and rural women's unions, to add to the validity of future research.

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