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# Breaking Barriers: Scaffolding Social-Symbolic Work for Women's Economic Empowerment

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ABSTRACT This study advances the understanding of Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in non-Western contexts by theorizing how social-symbolic work facilitates empowerment despite entrenched institutional and cultural constraints. Drawing on a qualitative study into the establishment of Kuwait's first women's business incubator, we explore how female intrapreneurs engaged in three interrelated forms of social-symbolic work – on selves, organizations, and institutions – to foster women's entrepreneurship. These scaffolded efforts culminated in the creation of a new social-symbolic object: the Al Salam business incubator. This incubator functioned not only as a physical space for women to launch and grow businesses, but also as a potent symbol of institutional transformation within a culturally traditional environment. We propose a process model of scaffolding social-symbolic work, demonstrating how catalytic partnerships and dynamic interdependencies across multiple levels of social life can collectively dismantle systemic barriers to female entrepreneurship. By conceptualizing scaffolding as a temporal and integrative process, this study contributes to WEE scholarship and deepens theoretical insights into social-symbolic work by revealing how diverse forms of work interlock to shape new identities, practices, and institutional arrangements.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, institutional change, non-Western context, social-symbolic work, women's economic empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

How can Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) be promoted in culturally traditional societies? Women's empowerment is a 'multidimensional and interlinked process of change' (Mayoux, 2000, p. 21) that enhances women's capacity to improve various aspects of their own and their families' lives (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013). Entrepreneurship has

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been widely examined as a promising pathway for economic empowerment, enabling women to emancipate themselves from 'conventional structures of authority and income generation' (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 479). However, in emerging economies characterized by patriarchal norms and weak institutional infrastructures, pursuing entrepreneurship presents significant challenges – particularly for women, who must navigate entrenched institutional and socio-cultural barriers (Ennis, 2019; Mair et al., 2012).

Although existing research has illuminated the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship in enabling women to overcome constraints, it often overemphasizes individual efforts to achieve empowerment (e.g., Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; McAdam et al., 2019). This perspective tends to understate the collective efforts required to address deeply rooted institutional and societal obstacles. Institutional theorists argue that meaningful change rarely stems from individual actions alone, but rather emerges from intentional, collaborative efforts by diverse actors who mobilize cooperation across individual, organizational, and institutional levels (Maguire et al., 2004; Wijen and Ansari, 2007). While the WEE literature has advanced our understanding of identity transformation as central to empowerment (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; McAdam et al., 2020), less attention has been paid to the process of 'designing arrangements that support the change-creating intent of the entrepreneuring individuals' (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 484). This process often entails reshaping cultural norms, institutional arrangements, organizational practices, values, and identities (Hashim, 2023; Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2024).

To explore this multifaceted process, we adopt the social-symbolic work perspective, which highlights the purposeful and reflexive efforts by individuals and organizations to construct social reality (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Unlike more narrowly focused frameworks such as identity work or institutional work, the social-symbolic work perspective offers a comprehensive lens to examine how material, discursive, and relational dimensions of work are performed (Geiger and Stendahl, 2024) on selves, organizations, and institutions to address complex social issues such as gender inequality (Karakulak and Lawrence, 2023). However, in emerging and culturally traditional economies, the potential for such work is often constrained by the absence of supportive institutions and entrenched social norms that limit entrepreneurial pathways for women. In these contexts, integrating purposeful efforts across selves, organizations, and institutions may be especially critical for advancing WEE. We thus ask: How do actors combine different forms of social-symbolic work to promote women's economic empowerment in adverse settings?

To address this question, we conducted an in-depth qualitative study of the creation of Kuwait's first business incubator for women. Kuwait offers a revealing context, as it presents persistent socio-cultural and institutional barriers to WEE despite its economic wealth. Although Kuwaiti women have gained access to education and secured political and economic rights since the early 20th century, they continue to face significant social and symbolic barriers to entrepreneurial participation due to patriarchal norms and restrictive cultural practices.

Drawing on 30 interviews with key actors – including female bureaucrats, collaborators, and aspiring women entrepreneurs – alongside extensive documentation from 2007 to 2018, this study examines how actors leveraged a catalytic partnership to perform social-symbolic work and overcome systemic barriers. The structured,

phased intertwining of work culminated in the Al Salam women's business incubator which provided both material and symbolic resources to foster women's entrepreneurial selves. We develop a model of social-symbolic work for WEE that explains how diverse forms of work across dimensions of social life – self, organizational, and institutional – are strategically combined through scaffolding. Scaffolding represents a structured, temporal process through which distinct forms of social-symbolic work – across self, organizational, and institutional domains – are combined and sequenced to construct new social-symbolic objects.

Our study makes two key contributions. First, we advance the literature on entrepreneurship and WEE (Ennis, 2019; Rindova et al., 2009) by emphasizing the importance of collective, multi-level interventions to create supportive entrepreneurial arrangements in contexts where systemic barriers hinder individual efforts. Second, we contribute to the social-symbolic work literature by examining how various types of work interact dynamically to shape successive social-symbolic objects. Specifically, we identify scaffolding as an integrative process that underpins the phased transformation of these objects in mutually reinforcing ways.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

WEE extends beyond legislative reforms and economic policies. It entails reshaping cultural and gender norms, institutional arrangements, organizational relationships, beliefs, values, social boundaries, and identities. For this reason, the social-symbolic work perspective offers a holistic theoretical lens to understand how social actors engage with the interwoven symbolic and structural dimensions of WEE.

### Women's Economic Empowerment

Empowerment refers to the 'means for people to develop capacities through which they can act successfully within the existing system' (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018, p. 878). It is typically understood as a dynamic process of collaboration and transformation that challenges and reshapes inequality-sustaining structures. Women's empowerment is a transformative process that enables women to make choices influencing the economic, social, and educational aspects of their lives (Mayoux, 2000). Its economic dimension through entrepreneurship has been widely examined across both developed (Jennings et al., 2016) and developing economies (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; McAdam et al., 2019). Rindova et al. (2009, p. 478) suggest viewing 'entrepreneurial projects as emancipatory efforts', enabling women to seek independence from conventional structures of authority and income generation (Jennings et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant in contexts not traditionally associated with WEE, as it highlights both the transformative potential of entrepreneurship in reshaping societal norms and the challenges involved.

Recent studies examine WEE through entrepreneurship in non-Western, emerging economy contexts, where entrepreneurship is seen as a vehicle for social and structural change. In Saudi Arabia, women have used entrepreneurship to challenge gendered subordination (Alkhaled, 2021). By hiring women and creating women-only workspaces,

female entrepreneurs have emancipated others from patriarchal constraints. Among forcibly displaced Palestinian women in Jordan, home-based enterprises have served as means to counter socio-economic exclusion (Al-Dajani et al., 2019). Here, entrepreneurship can improve personal and communal welfare, elevate women's status and value and inspire other women (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013).

However, personal circumstances and broader institutional contexts both enable and constrain women's choices to adopt entrepreneurial selves (Barragan et al., 2018). In Bangladesh, micro-entrepreneurship programs aimed at empowering women often overlook entrenched kinship dynamics prevalent in patriarchal societies, which impede the economic inclusion of poor women (Mair et al., 2012). In Barragan et al.'s (2018) study, Emirati women entrepreneurs employed 'strategic obedience' to navigate cultural patriarchy, where access to resources is controlled by male family members. This involved micro-emancipatory acts that pushed the boundaries of patriarchal norms. Ennis (2019) highlights the heterogeneity of female entrepreneurs in the Gulf states with respect to subordination and privilege, showing how entrepreneurship can both empower women and perpetuate gender norms, even introducing new forms of dependency.

Driven by the pursuit of economic diversification, entrepreneurship in the emerging economies of the Gulf states is relatively new, with female entrepreneurs lagging behind men (Hashim, 2023). Despite gains in political and economic rights, social-symbolic structures – including restrictive cultural practices and weak institutional support – remain at the root of entrenched patterns of women's disempowerment. In this context, 'institutional change is not the result of individual entrepreneurial action, but rather, the efforts of multiple individuals and organizations that purposefully spearhead change' (Ferraro et al., 2015, p. 368). Studying women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia, Alkhaled (2021, p. 954) emphasizes that 'generating collective agency' is 'necessary for empowerment'. Similarly, in Kuwait, Abumuamar and Campbell (2024, pp. 127–8) argue that 'entrepreneurial change in emerging fields requires multiple forces from within and outside the field'.

## Social-Symbolic Work and WEE

Social-symbolic work refers to the 'purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors to shape social-symbolic objects' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 31). These objects are combinations of discursive, relational, and material elements that carry socially constructed meanings within social systems, such as strategies or institutions that support entrepreneurship (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Although not physically tangible, they are brought into being through the ongoing ideas, discourse, and actions of individuals and groups (Phillips et al., 2025; Wright et al., 2024) and thus influence the social construction of problems (Karakulak and Lawrence, 2023) and their solutions (Geiger and Stendahl, 2024).

The social-symbolic work perspective offers valuable insights into how social structures, cultural meanings, and norms shape WEE. Challenging restrictive gender norms is central to WEE, and social-symbolic work emphasizes that these norms are not fixed but actively constructed and reshaped through societal interactions. Efforts to shape complex

facets of social life involve layered forms of meaning-making across self, organizational, and institutional domains (Tracey and Stott, 2025), and therefore span multiple forms of self-work, organizational work, and institutional work.

First, institutions (e.g., markets and legal systems) are imbued with symbolic meanings that reflect and reinforce power structures and cultural expectations. Efforts to empower women economically often involve transforming institutional structures, norms, and practices to make them culturally resonant. In Mair et al.'s (2012) study of building 'inclusive' markets in Bangladesh as a form of poverty alleviation, women were excluded from market-based activities because they lacked the property rights and autonomy that are taken-for-granted pillars of Western markets. When BRAC, an NGO providing microfinance programs, sought to empower impoverished women, it worked collaboratively with both the marginalized (poor women) and those who marginalize (elites), along with governmental actors, to break institutional barriers. Karakulak and Lawrence (2023) studied gender inequality as a social-symbolic object and found that social-symbolic work addressing problems embedded in broad social structures, systems, and cultural contexts led to more holistic outcomes, albeit on a limited scale.

Second, organizations can play a critical role in either maintaining patriarchal norms or transforming them to create inclusive spaces for women. Social-symbolic work on organizations may involve women forming professional networks to reshape symbolic and material resources that challenge exclusionary practices. Meliou and Ozbilgin (2024) show that women entrepreneurs develop their careers by leveraging social and economic capital to navigate male-dominated organizational cultures, gendered divisions of labour, and professional networks. Third, WEE also involves social-symbolic work on selves, relating to how women view themselves and their roles in society. Women's purposeful efforts to transform their (and others') embodied selves and identities are critical for challenging internalized norms that constrain women's roles and aspirations (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022). Essers and Benschop (2009) show how migrant Muslim female entrepreneurs developed new entrepreneurial selves that aligned their ethnic and religious identities with their economic agency.

These studies illustrate the complex, multidimensional challenges of advancing WEE. In other contexts, scholars have begun to explore how different forms of social-symbolic work can be combined to achieve complex outcomes. In their study of patient activists challenging type 1 diabetes care standards, Geiger and Stendahl (2024) demonstrated how synergies between discursive, relational, and material dimensions of social-symbolic work were generated through 'temporal stacking, integrating, and aligning' (p. 2530). Similarly, Ruebottom et al. (2025) show that participation work, as a form of social-symbolic work, simultaneously reshapes organizations and communities to enable inclusive forms of participation.

In sum, the literature on WEE emphasizes shaping women's selves to emancipate from prevailing institutional constraints. Institutional change occurs when these constraints 'gradually lose significance' (McAdam et al., 2019, p. 920). However, because WEE challenges entrenched gender norms and practices, it typically requires purposeful action across multiple dimensions of change. The social-symbolic work perspective offers a suitable framework to explore how efforts to advance WEE are interwoven and interdependent, requiring the shaping of different social-symbolic

objects. What remains to be explored is the 'recognition of how these forms of action interact' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 4) in tackling social issues (Tracey and Stott, 2025). This is particularly pertinent in contexts where organizational practices and institutional arrangements that support market participation are lacking (Mair et al., 2012). Thus, how do actors combine types of social-symbolic work when institutions and organizations that support entrepreneurship for WEE are absent in emerging, culturally traditional economies?

## METHODS AND DATA

### Case Selection

This qualitative study investigates the social-symbolic work undertaken to promote WEE in Kuwait, a high-income emerging economy characterized by weak institutional support and conflicting gender norms. The study focuses on developing the institutional capacity of Kuwait's Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (hereafter, 'Social Ministry') to empower women receiving social benefits to start businesses and access markets. Kuwait's Social Ministry offers a compelling research site for examining WEE in a region historically lacking in women's development (Khosravi et al., 2023). While formal barriers to women's political and economic participation have been largely lifted, persistent social and symbolic barriers continue to impede female entrepreneurship. This study explores the purposeful efforts of key (primarily female) actors to create the country's first business incubator supporting unemployed Kuwaiti women receiving social welfare in launching their own enterprises.

### Research Setting: The State of Female Entrepreneurship in Kuwait

Kuwait's economic development is closely tied to its monarchical political structure. The state directs economic growth, with ruling families collaborating with business elites to sponsor progress (Martínez-García et al., 2021). Kuwait holds the world's sixth-largest oil reserve, generating nearly 90% of government revenue (Olver-Ellis, 2019). Between 1946 and 1982, Kuwait experienced a 'Golden Era' and was the most developed Gulf state during the 1970s (Lambert et al., 2019). The economy remains heavily reliant on natural resource exploitation and rentier capitalism fostering dependence on government welfare and well-remunerated, tax-free jobs (Hashim, 2023). Despite its exceptional wealth, Kuwait has faced socio-economic stagnation and is now considered one of the least dynamic economies in the Middle East (Olver-Ellis, 2019). Dependence on state provision is viewed as a weak foundation for building a highly globalized market economy, particularly amid oil market instability, population growth, and high unemployment (Ennis, 2019).

### Social-Symbolic Barriers to Female Entrepreneurship in Kuwait

Comprising 51% of the population (UNDP, 2020b), Kuwaiti women have experienced significant progress since the early 20th century, gaining access to education, political and economic rights, and financial independence. In May 2005, they were granted full

political rights to vote and hold office. By 2008, Kuwaiti women had the highest literacy rate in the Gulf (92%) and higher tertiary enrollment (26%) than men (11%). By 2024, tertiary enrollment rose to 46% for women and 76% for men, highlighting a shift in higher education gender dynamics (WEF, 2024). Kuwaiti women are primarily employed in public sector tertiary industry positions, accounting for 55% of public sector employees in 2013 and 60% in 2024 (CSB, 2013, 2024). Yet, significant gender gaps remain in political representation, with women holding 2% of parliamentary seats in 2008 and 3.1% in 2024 (WEF, 2024). Labour force participation remains unequal: 51% of women compared to 86% of men participated in 2008, with similar figures in 2024 (WEF, 2008, 2024). Female unemployment stood at 3.6%, compared to 1.1% for men (The World Bank, 2024).

Societal and institutional barriers have restricted women's participation in the private sector, particularly in entrepreneurship. Low levels of female entrepreneurship reflect persistent gender inequalities. Kuwait ranked 101st out of 130 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index, the highest among Gulf states (WEF, 2008). Gender-exclusive regulations and prevailing cultural norms that view women's income as supplementary continue to limit market participation (Alzuabi, 2016). Women entrepreneurs navigate a terrain intricately shaped by patriarchal norms and legal structures. Unequal access to credit and financial products constrains available resources and opportunities (Langworthy and Warnecke, 2021). Cultural biases reinforce the male breadwinner norm, creating a complex web of expectations and limitations for aspiring female entrepreneurs. Non-citizen women, including expatriates, are often excluded from state-sponsored schemes, including the business incubator examined in this study, further entrenching inequality.

## The Al Salam Business Incubator

The Al Salam Business Incubator for women entrepreneurs leveraged ongoing reform efforts. A predominantly women-led team within Kuwait's Social Ministry partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and aligned their efforts with Kuwait Vision 2035, or 'New Kuwait' (Olver-Ellis, 2020). Envisaged by the Emir, the vision aspires to 'transform Kuwait into a financial and commercial hub, attractive to investors, where the private sector leads the economy' (New-Kuwait, 2020). A prominent pillar of the vision is promoting entrepreneurship to drive private sector development, employment, and diversification strategies (Ennis, 2019). Oil-dependent economies seeking to diversify growth, such as Kuwait, tend to be resource-rich but constrained by government bureaucracy and a weak entrepreneurial culture (McAdam et al., 2019). To realize the vision, Kuwait's Supreme Council introduced a reform package aimed at improving the performance of public agencies and ministries (UNDP, 2020a). Institutional changes within the Social Ministry aligned with the national reform agenda and served both as a driver and a reflection of broader changes in Kuwait.

In April 2009, the government and its key development partner signed the UNDP Country Program Action Plan 2009–2013, which focused on four areas: Gender and Social Development, Governance and Development Planning, Economics and the

Private Sector, and Environmental Sustainability (UNDP, 2020a). This agreement mandated the UNDP to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Social Ministry to address women's unemployment (UNDP, 2020b).

## Data Collection

The data cover the period from 2007 to 2018, spanning both before and after the introduction of new entrepreneurial arrangements for women's empowerment. Interviews serve as the primary data source, while documents provide important supplementary insights.

*Access and positionality*. This study was conducted in Kuwait, a culturally conservative context with hierarchical public institutions. Access to officials, particularly for research purposes, was tightly controlled. The lead author's cultural familiarity, fluency in Arabic, and personal relationship with the main gatekeeper, Sahar, were instrumental in securing access. This proximity enabled a depth of engagement rarely afforded to external researchers, especially on culturally sensitive topics such as women's empowerment. We recognize that this closeness may have shaped the narrative presented – interviewees expressed pride in the incubator and welcomed the research: 'The incubator was our dream. We need you to document our story to the world'. Such accounts reflect both a sincere sense of accomplishment and a strategic desire to legitimize their work to external audiences, including us as researchers. We acknowledge that our data collection was shaped by these relational dynamics. And yet, the accounts of pioneering women – Sahar, a single divorced mother; Fayza and Awatef, passionate female intrapreneurs; and the aspiring entrepreneurs who dared to step outside restrictive cultural norms provide rare insights into hard-to-access contexts. To mitigate risks of over-identification, we triangulated interview data with internal documents, media reports, and observational data, and engaged in interpretive dialogue with co-authors removed from the field to surface alternative readings and maintain critical reflexivity.

*Interviews*. The lead author conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with Kuwaiti women involved in developing the business incubator, their collaborators, and women entrepreneurs. Table I provides an overview of the interview participants.

Interviews were conducted in English and Arabic, depending on the interviewee's preference. An initial meeting with Sahar, Head of the Gender and Social Development Program at UNDP Kuwait, directed the lead author to key actors involved in developing the business incubator (15 interviews). Another set of interviews with female entrepreneurs (8 interviews) and other collaborators (7 interviews) was arranged by Dalal, Deputy Manager at the Social Ministry. Snowball sampling continued until no new actors emerged.

The lead author visited the business incubator, which featured a large hall named '33 Boutique'. Resembling a shopping mall, it was open to the public, and incubatees sold their products in booths. The lead author spoke with several women entrepreneurs nearing the end of their three-year incubation. Dalal also invited the lead author to two

Table I. Overview of the interviews and informants

| *Name of informant* | *Gender* | *Role* | *Number of interviews* | *Dates of interview(s)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sahar | Female | Head of Gender and Social Development Programme – UNDP | 3 | 2019, 2020, 2024 |
| Fayza | Female | Head of Training and Production Awareness Division & Fruit of My Labor Manager, Incubator Manager | 3 | 2019, 2020, 2024 |
| Awatef | Female | Assistant Undersecretary for Planning and Development, Economic Empowerment of Kuwaiti Women National Project Manager. And Assistant Undersecretary for Finance | 3 | 2019, 2020, 2024 |
| Turki | Male | Economic Empowerment of Kuwaiti Women Project Manager | 2 | 2019, 2020 |
| Dalal | Female | Fruit of My Labor Deputy Manager, Head of Division of Follow-up and Enterprise Development | 2 | 2019, 2020 |
| Munira | Female | Assistant Undersecretary for Community Development | 1 | 2019 |
| Muna | Female | Managerial Development Manager | 1 | 2019 |
| Khaled | Male | The Secretary-General Supreme Council for Planning and Development | 1 | 2019 |
| Nargas | Female | The International Cooperation Department Supervisor at the Supreme Council for Planning and Development | 1 | 2019 |
| Munther | Male | Manager of Shuwaikh Vocational Incubator | 1 | 2019 |
| Participant 1 | Female | Engineer at Shuwaikh Vocational Incubator | 1 | 2019 |
| 3 Participants | Female | Civil servant at the Ministry of social Affairs and Labor | 3 | 2019 |
| 8 Participants | Female | Woman entrepreneur at the incubator | 8 | 2019 |
| Number of interviews | | | 30 | |

exhibitions where 46 current and former affiliates showcased their products. Establishing enterprises outside the home, obtaining licenses, and paying booth fees are important indicators of entrepreneurial outcomes (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013).

The first set of interviews, lasting between 45 and 120 minutes, took place in Kuwait between April and May 2019. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed unless participants preferred otherwise. Follow-up interviews with key actors were conducted online between January and February 2020, and again in 2024 for clarification and

updates. Interviews conducted in Arabic were translated into English, with care taken to preserve the cultural integrity of the data. Anonymity was ensured unless participants consented to being identified.

*Documents*. To facilitate interviews and corroborate accounts, we examined 80 internal documents, including project plans, presentations, letters, progress reports, terms of reference, organizational charts, and booklets. Given the incubator's high profile, we searched for media coverage using the term '(Al Salam) Business Incubator Kuwait' in both English and Arabic (2007–2018), yielding 47 relevant news articles that were included in the analysis. Together, these documents provided vital contextual insight. We systematically cross-validated interview data with this documentary evidence. For example, we compared interview narratives with UNDP project documents and monthly reports detailing project activities. This triangulation enhanced the reliability of our phase construction and the actions attributed to each.

## Data Analysis

Our inductive data analysis (Saunders et al., 2016; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) consisted of four interrelated stages. The first stage involved developing a narrative account of the business incubator's establishment, validated by four respondents – Sahar, Fayza, Awatef, and Turki –who played central roles and were familiar with its operational and institutional context. The second stage involved open coding, identifying concepts and organizing them into first-order categories. Data sources – interviews, documents, and press coverage – were analysed to identify similarities and differences. While creating entrepreneurial arrangements may appear straightforward from a Western perspective, our female change actors faced several barriers including redefining the Ministry's role – from a welfare distributor to an active agent of empowerment. Direct interview quotes informed our first-order categories, such as '*the project resonates with our plans to empower women' or 'the project already received an approved budget'*. These quotes are reflected in the first-order category 'Demonstrate the benefits of embracing the Ministry's new role', pointing to how female actors sought to redefine the Social Ministry's mandate.

In the third stage, we iterated between the data and literature on social-symbolic work to better capture the purposeful, reflexive efforts observed. By cataloguing the multipronged activities of the change actors, we identified six types of social-symbolic work targeting three social-symbolic objects: individual, organizational, and institutional. Drawing on Lawrence and Phillips (2019), we abstracted second-order themes into aggregate dimensions to differentiate the types of social-symbolic work performed. For example, one second-order theme that emerged was 'Mandate enlargement', reflecting how female actors worked internally to broaden the Social Ministry's scope. We abstracted 'Mandate enlargement' into the aggregate dimension of 'Internal Legitimacy Work', highlighting internal efforts to legitimize the incubator within the Ministry's mandate. Similarly, we classified the purposeful, reflexive efforts to shape future female entrepreneurs' selves as 'self-work', efforts to reshape the Social Ministry as 'organization work', and, following Maguire et al. (2004, p. 657), efforts aimed at leveraging 'resources

to create new institutions or to transform existing ones', such as Kuwaiti welfare norms and rules, as 'institutional work'.

In the fourth stage, our analysis focused on how actors combined different types of social-symbolic work. Using a temporal bracketing strategy (Langley, 1999), we identified three distinct phases, each marking key developments in transforming self, organizational, and institutional social-symbolic objects (or the failure to do so in phase one). We identified these phases by examining when specific types of work emerged and tracing the interactions and sequences in which they unfolded. We noted that earlier forms of work created enabling conditions for subsequent types to emerge. By mapping these patterns, we developed a structured, phased process. Temporal ordering helped identify the successive layering of social-symbolic work. We observed that this process resembled 'scaffolding' – a process that 'shapes the transformation of durable local orders that entrench patterns of behavior and interaction' (Mair et al., 2016, p. 2032). We found that the successive scaffolding of work types, in ways that motivate and enable one another, was crucial for shaping social-symbolic objects. We observed the UNDP as a catalyst, whose partnership with intrapreneurs enabled subsequent types of work. Our process model (Figure 4) illustrates this three-phase scaffolding process and the role of catalytic partnership. Figure 1 displays the resulting data structure.

To ensure trustworthiness, the second author critically reviewed the lead author's interpretations, participated in follow-up interviews, and joint discussions on transitioning from raw data to themes. This approach aimed to 'avoid or strongly a priori privilege a single, favored angle and vocabulary' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 25).

## FINDINGS

Our findings document the social-symbolic work that facilitated the creation of the 'Al Salam Business Incubator' – the Gulf's first business incubator for women, launched in 2013. The incubator was widely celebrated as a groundbreaking project that introduced entrepreneurship as a vehicle for women's empowerment at a time when 'enterprises were not common in Kuwait' and lacked governmental and institutional support (Awatef-f, Social Ministry). It provided both social-symbolic and physical infrastructure to support business start-ups and the development of entrepreneurial selves among unemployed, predominantly single (divorced or widowed) women. Entrepreneurial paths were diverse, ranging from traditional crafts to catering and tech ventures. Fayza (Fruit of My Labor Project) explained: '*One woman trained in cooking and later opened a restaurant. One became a jewelry designer, another a perfumer*'. Zahra's journey from trainee to award-winning perfumer exemplified the incubator's transformative role:

> Zahra was a trainee who started with us. Now she's an international perfumer. She was divorced and on social benefits. She learnt about perfume design. We brought in trainers across several entrepreneurial areas and provided materials. She received several courses on perfume design. Now she's a trainer. She won the Princess Sabeeka Bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa Award on women's empowerment in Bahrain. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2024)

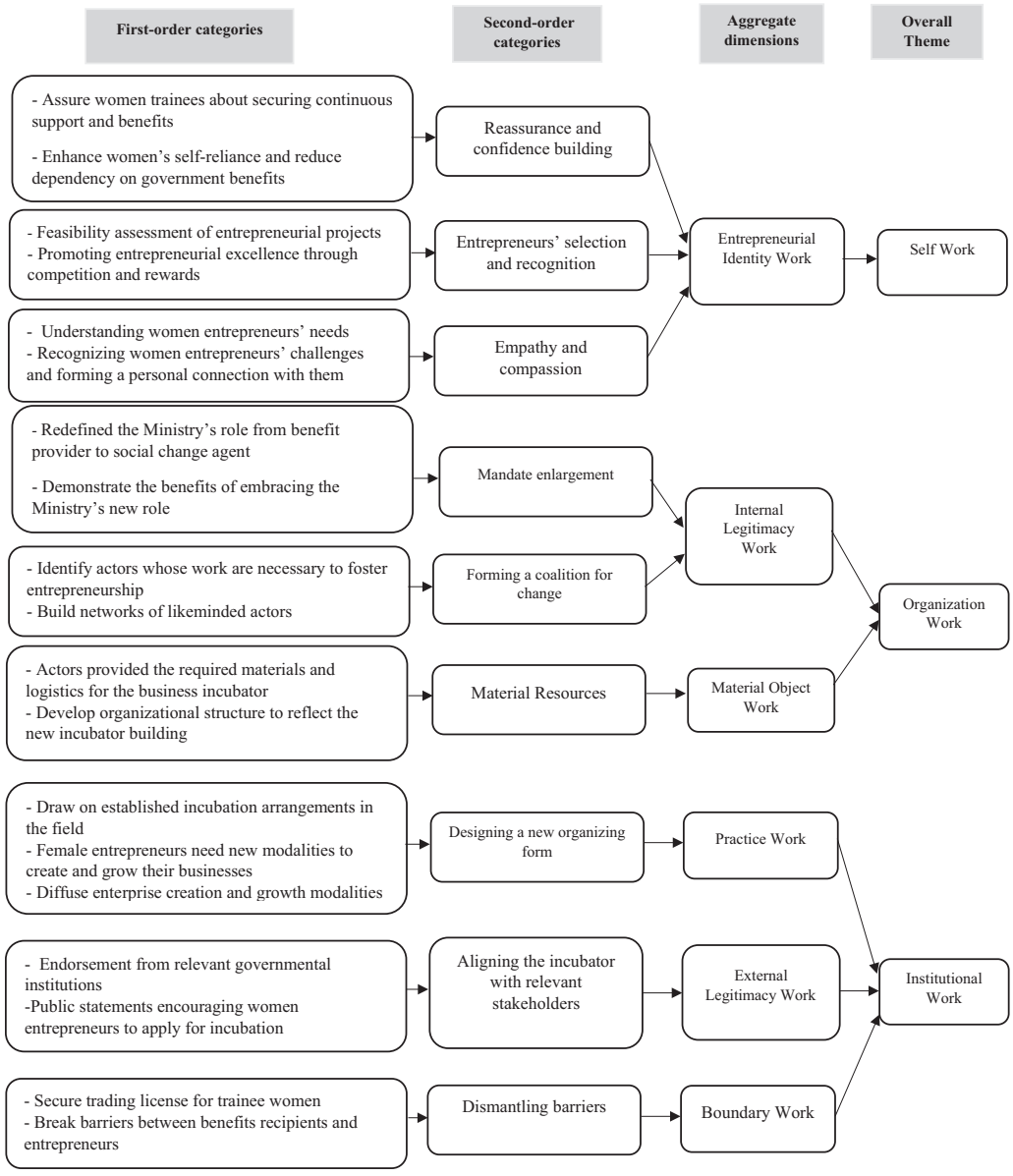


Figure 1. Data structure

The incubator was publicly recognized as a novel institutional arrangement tackling female unemployment. Kuwait's state-run television station presented it as a flagship empowerment initiative (KuwaitTV, 2017), and national media celebrated its achievements:

> The business incubator project started a few years ago and achieved great accomplishments. Due to the training and assistance it provided, women presented their projects outside Kuwait, and others started their own businesses, tackling unemployment. (Business Women Magazine, Abualmajd, 2017)

Interviewees expressed pride in the incubator's achievements. While their affirmative narratives signal the incubator's symbolic and practical success, we also treat them as situated performances crafted within a constrained institutional and gendered context, where narrating empowerment was itself a form of political and symbolic work. We acknowledge the deep emotional investment of actors like Sahar, Fayza, and Awatef – Kuwaiti women who defied bureaucratic inertia and social norms to drive internal change. Their accounts reflect both personal and institutional commitment, as well as strategic efforts to legitimize the incubator as a symbol of institutional reform in a conservative context.

## Combining Forms of Social-Symbolic Work

Our account traces how key actors – predominantly Kuwaiti women, notably Awatef and Fayza from Kuwait's Social Ministry and Sahar from UNDP – mobilized six interrelated types of social-symbolic work across three social-symbolic domains to WEE. The most pivotal efforts centred on self-work, which cultivated entrepreneurial selves among women trainees. Yet, entrenched social-symbolic barriers at organizational and institutional levels constrained aspirations and necessitated wider organizational and institutional work. The former involved both internal legitimacy work to broaden the Social Ministry's mandate from simply administering unemployment benefits to actively enabling WEE and material object work to ground the incubator in a physical space. Institutional work challenged the regulatory and symbolic boundary between unemployment and entrepreneurship and established new practices to embed the incubator within Kuwait's socio-political landscape. Unfolding in a non-linear fashion, these forms of work were scaffolded to create the business incubator for WEE. We interpret its creation as a new social-symbolic object: a material achievement and a strategic curation of meaning in a context where WEE must be carefully negotiated.

## Phase One: Conceiving a Social-Symbolic Object – The Women's Business Incubator

*Attempted Self-Work*. This initial phase illustrates the unsuccessful attempts by female officers at the Social Ministry to empower women trainees in 2007. In their respective roles – Fayza as Manager of the Fruit of My Labor project and Awatef as Assistant Undersecretary for Planning and Development – they engaged in 'purposeful, reflexive efforts… to construct and shape specific selves, both their own and others' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 10). In this context, 'others' refers to prospective women entrepreneurs.

The incubator emerged from the *Fruit of My Labor* project, a partnership with the Kuwait Awqaf Public Foundation – a local NGO dedicated to empowering divorced or widowed women receiving social benefits to realize their entrepreneurial potential. Fayza shared her motivation for supporting these women:

> When I started, I met the trainees and listened to their problems. Most came from broken families… receiving benefits. I immersed myself into the project [Fruit of My Labor], I wanted to do something beneficial for them …until they have their own businesses in the marketplace. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2019)

The incubator aligned with Fayza's Islamic faith. She cited a Hadith [authentic prophetic saying] that encourages both men and women to preserve their dignity by earning their own livelihood rather than depending on others:

> My motivation was based on the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him: "It is certainly better for anyone of you to gather a bundle of wood over his back (and sell it) than to ask someone, who either gives it to him or does not". (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2024)

Fayza skillfully framed the incubator in culturally resonant terms, aligning women's entrepreneurship with established religious values to position both herself and her team as legitimate reformers within a gendered bureaucracy.

*Organizational barriers*. Fayza and Awatef found that the women trainees lacked essential organizational support to enter the market. The *Fruit of My Labor* project lacked resources –for example, to produce handicrafts – and the capacity to support trainees until, as Fayza put it, 'they have their own businesses in the marketplace'. One trainee described how the lack of support thwarted her ambitions:

> I joined Fruit of My Labor to become a ceramicist. They did not have a wheel to learn throwing. Limited shapes and colors were available for glazing. I wanted to have my own ceramic shop, but I did not know how. (Participant 5-f, Entrepreneur, 2019)

Resource gaps undermined early self-work efforts aimed at shaping entrepreneurial identities. Despite repeated attempts, Fayza's appeals to senior management were rebuffed. She recalled being both literally and symbolically dismissed by her superiors:

> I wrote to the senior management explaining the issues at Fruit of My Labor. We needed a building for training workshops, but they refused. From 2007-2008, I met them four times. On the last occasion, they asked me to leave the office. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2019)

This humiliating moment – being asked to leave – captures not only the institutional indifference toward WEE, but also the personal cost borne by those pursuing change from within.

*Institutional barriers*. A significant institutional barrier discouraged women from embracing entrepreneurial identities. Kuwaiti regulations prohibited social benefit recipients from

simultaneously holding a trading licence. This constraint reinforced a sharp divide between 'benefit recipient' and 'entrepreneur'. Awatef described it as an impermeable barrier to adopting entrepreneurial identities:

> They [women trainees] were not convinced they would enter the marketplace. They did not believe in the matter. Persuading them was difficult, especially since their benefits would stop. They weren't excited and quite uncertain. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

The policy strongly disincentivized women from taking entrepreneurial risks. Ministry staff efforts to cultivate entrepreneurial identities faltered in the face of legal and cultural structures that perpetuated dependency.

*Catalysing social-symbolic work*. The breakthrough occurred when Sahar – Head of Gender and Social Development at UNDP – met Fayza, who recalled:

> I did not know about the incubator concept, but I wanted something professional to help these women. … I listed a few things that I needed for the women. Then Sahar said, 'this is a business incubator'. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2024)

Sahar was moved by Fayza's passion: 'She said it's my dream to get these women out, to have their own businesses.… She was so passionate about it. I was so touched!' As a single mother herself, Fayza's vision deeply resonated with Sahar.

> I'm a single mother and I've been divorced for 21 years. If it wasn't for my education and investing in myself more, I wouldn't have been able to stand alone … They [trainee women] are the same. They're divorced and widowed. You feel for them… This makes me feel very strongly about women's empowerment in all fields, specifically economic. She wouldn't need anyone; she could stand on her own. (Sahar-f, UNDP, 2024)

Driven by mutual passion, this initial meeting served as a catalyst, merging their individual efforts at self-work into a collective initiative aimed at influencing organizational and institutional structures. Sahar saw Fayza as a strong internal advocate, while Fayza recognized that UNDP could legitimize her efforts. Together, they devised a solution – the business incubator:

> The UNDP proposed to develop Fruit of My Labor into an incubator…supporting trainees for six months to three years… with machines, marketing training, selling booths and other essential business training. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2019)

Subsequently, Sahar developed the *Economic Empowerment of Kuwaiti Women* project, which targeted unemployment among Kuwaiti women and established an institutional framework for developing the incubator within the Social Ministry.

### Phase Two: Securing Legitimacy for the Social-Symbolic Object and Reassuring Potential Women Entrepreneurs

Phase two focused on establishing both internal and external legitimacy for the business incubator as a social-symbolic object of Kuwaiti WEE, and on constructing women's entrepreneurial selves independent of state dependency. This was achieved through the scaffolding of various forms of work associated with organizational work, institutional work, and self-work.

*Internal legitimacy work for mandate enlargement*. The first type of organization work focused on broadening the Social Ministry's mandate. It involved mobilizing allies to generate internal buy-in for the new direction. Convincing the Social Ministry to support the business incubator required a transformative shift within the organization itself – that is, redefining the Ministry's mandate from simply administering social benefits to actively fostering female entrepreneurship, expanding women's economic opportunities, and promoting gender equality within a traditionally male-dominated economy.

Being a female-led team fostered internal cohesion. Sahar (UNDP) recalled: 'Being around women, all of us were women [developing] the women-run incubator. Dr. Turki was the only man, and they accepted him because he was nice'. However, the team struggled to persuade male decision-makers, including the Ministry's Head and Undersecretary. Fayza, Awatef, Dalal, and their assistants from the Social Ministry repeatedly approached senior management without success – until the UNDP intervened. To secure Ministry endorsement for the incubator, the women project leaders leveraged UNDP's international reputation, credibility, and role as a trusted government partner. Sahar explained that this was crucial for internal buy-in:

> The UNDP came to Kuwait 50 years ago and agreed with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help the government. UNDP is very credible. When you present a UNDP funded project to government ministries, it is well-received. (Sahar-f, UNDP, 2020)

As Assistant Undersecretary, Awatef (Social Ministry, 2019) recalled that UNDP's involvement marked a turning point that lent credibility to her argument: '*The [incubator] project resonates with our plans to empower women. It encourages those on benefits to become self-dependent, reducing government welfare spending*'. Senior management accepted the business incubator as a viable mechanism for the Ministry to transition from a traditional welfare model to one focused on sustainable, long-term economic development aligned with national priorities. Moreover, '*the project was part of the government program [country program for the UNDP] that had its own funding*' (Munira-f, Social Ministry, 2019). The '*project was 100% funded*' (Sahar, UNDP, 2019). Inclusion in the government budget enabled the project to proceed without additional Ministry approval.

In sum, UNDP's involvement provided a dual benefit: it secured resources and conferred internal legitimacy by aligning the Ministry's expanded mandate with nationally recognized development goals.

*External legitimacy work to align the incubator with relevant stakeholders*. With the Social Ministry's expanded mandate, the female intrapreneurs now needed to secure external acceptance and legitimacy for the incubator as a credible vehicle for WEE, ensuring its institutionalization within Kuwait's socio-economic landscape. They had to obtain Cabinet approval, embed the incubator into the national development plan, and cultivate broader societal support.

To confer legitimacy on the business incubator, the project team – Sahar, Fayza, and their colleagues – convinced the Supreme Council for Planning and Development to integrate the incubator into the Social Ministry's development plan. The Council's Secretary-General confirmed the agreement:

> Now, it becomes compulsory for the Ministry [Social Ministry] to implement it. After a period, they cannot say we cannot do it. They agreed, and the plan was approved, with financial and Cabinet approval. (Khaled-m, SCPD, 2019)

At this stage, the female officers needed to secure broader societal acceptance of the incubator to counter potential stigma associated with working alongside divorced women. Fayza insisted on involving women entrepreneurs who were not receiving social benefits. She reasoned that this would enhance societal acceptance and promote social mixing between marginalized, divorced women on benefits and the wider entrepreneurial community:

> I wanted trainees on benefits to interact with other entrepreneurs from the wider society, different age groups and social statuses. Success and positivity are contagious. The public would accept it more when they see diverse representation in the incubator. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2019)

The team engaged with media outlets to promote the potential contributions of women entrepreneurs to Kuwait's socio-economic development. Several national and regional newspapers described the business incubator as a distinctive initiative for empowering women:

> The incubator funds, supports and supplies small women-owned businesses with essential skills and services. It empowers women to become self-dependent and generate income. It creates a favorable environment to nurture talents among Kuwait women. (Alfarhan, 2013)

In 2013, *Al-Watan* newspaper interviewed Fayza (Fruit of My Labor) about the incubator's role in empowering women to develop the skills needed to start businesses (Alwatan, 2013). Dalal (Social Ministry) participated in several televised interviews with Kuwait's national TV channel, where she emphasized the incubator's contribution to job creation for marginalized women and others aspiring to launch businesses. She also invited women to apply for incubation (KuwaitTV, 2017).

*Boundary work to dismantle barriers*. The project team engaged in boundary work to render the institutionally entrenched divide between social benefit recipients and entrepreneurs more permeable. Awatef launched a high-stakes campaign targeting Kuwait's Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Her objective was to persuade the Ministry to grant trading

licenses to women receiving social benefits – a bold request that directly challenged existing regulations:

> We met with the Ministry of Commerce, discussed the matter and convinced them until they eventually agreed. It was in the government's interest for these women to stop receiving benefits once they entered the market. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

After months of intense negotiation and sustained advocacy, the Ministry conceded, issuing a two-year trading licence for aspiring female entrepreneurs. The licence enabled women to start businesses without immediately forfeiting their social benefits, alleviating fears of economic vulnerability during their transition from state dependency to self-sufficiency. Awatef recalled how this critical institutional shift dismantled a key barrier: '*They openly and honestly told me, "We cannot abandon social benefits. What would you do to us to abandon it?*"'. The success of this boundary work not only removed a major institutional hurdle but also signalled a transformative commitment by the government to support women entrepreneurs.

*Entrepreneurial identity work: Reassurance and confidence building*. Securing licences provided a critical institutional foundation for self-work, specifically shaping entrepreneurial identities through reassurance and confidence-building. The aim was for aspiring women to see themselves not as passive welfare recipients, but as emerging entrepreneurs:

> It is not nice to receive money and just sit without doing anything. Work is better for us. It expands our horizons, enhances skills, improves self-confidence. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2024)

Beyond policy change, this transformation required a profound shift in how the women perceived their own capabilities and futures. Awatef explained:

> They needed to be convinced that we were going to help and empower them to work… The key thing was to assure them that their benefits would not be affected, … we would change them for the better. … I promised to let them receive benefits for two years, and I would talk to the Ministry of Commerce to get them trading licenses. This reassured them. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

While many aspiring women entrepreneurs 'had intent and were awaiting opportunity', as Sahar (UNDP) noted, entrepreneurship remained a distant and seemingly unattainable prospect. Although Kuwaiti women are well educated, they were reluctant to risk their sole source of financial security on untested business ventures. Fayza (Fruit of My Labor, 2019) emphasized that her ability to empathize with women was essential for fostering confidence and reassurance: '*It was essential for a woman to hold my position – a woman – to understand the needs of trainee women. As I mentioned, we are a patriarchal society*'. The incubator extended beyond technical support to offer a transformative

space where women could escape the constraints of dependency and move toward self-sufficiency:

> We wanted to provide them with support, group them together, and create an entity for them to be able to help themselves by themselves, so that they stop relying on benefits. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

This quote underscores the importance of creating a stable environment in which women can embrace their entrepreneurial potential with confidence and hope.

### Phase Three: Launching the Business Incubator

Phase three culminated in the successful launch of the Al Salam business incubator in 2013. Fayza's appointment as the first Incubator Manager marked a breakthrough following years of stalled efforts. As in earlier phases, this outcome stemmed from persistent negotiation, strategic navigation, and sustained advocacy for the incubator's value, as reflected in the narratives captured. Our findings indicate that four distinct types of work were scaffolded during this phase. Organization work – such as building internal coalitions and materializing the incubator space – was reinforced by institutional work aimed at legitimizing the initiative. These forms of work, in turn, enabled self-work, expressed through the shaping of entrepreneurial identities among incubatees.

*Internal legitimacy work to form a coalition for change*. Creating the business incubator required more than vision; it demanded renewed buy-in within the bureaucratic and rigid Social Ministry. The first type of organization work centred on coalition-building to enhance the incubator's legitimacy. In 2011, Sahar, Fayza, and their colleagues established a Steering Committee to oversee progress and secure internal support. To align interests, authorize actions, and bolster credibility, the committee strategically included Social Ministry staff. As Awatef (Social Ministry, 2019) noted, '*the senior management must head the team to give it more power*'. By assembling a coalition of influential actors, the team elevated its relatively weak organizational standing, gained access to key decision-makers, and formalized the incubator's development within the Ministry's bureaucratic apparatus. This coalition-building effort proved pivotal in legitimizing the incubator and securing government support.

*Material object work to materialize the incubator*. Internal legitimacy enabled a second type of organizational work. The project team created a material manifestation of the novel entrepreneurial arrangements for WEE. Transforming the idea of a women's business incubator into material form was essential not only for functionality but also for symbolizing permanence, legitimacy, and opportunity. In this phase, Fayza's dream was finally realized:

> The incubator…was the dream of my life. I used to pass the building before we started the project…and say to myself 'I will take this building and make it a business incubator'. I used to talk to myself about it, until I worked on it. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2024)

Utilizing pre-approved funds, the team searched for a suitable location to house the businesses of the women trainees. '*We visited several Social Ministry buildings accompanied by engineers to see which one can be best renovated into an incubator*', Sahar (UNDP, 2019) explained. They eventually identified a large hall resembling a mall and named it '33 Boutique', in honour of the first 33 women who began incubation. The space offered booths for women entrepreneurs to market their products – primarily to other women, since '*most shopping is done by women*' (Sahar-f, UNDP, 2024). As Awatef noted, 33 Boutique was more than a venue; it instilled a profound sense of ownership, identity, and pride among the women entrepreneurs.

> Before, they [trainee women] were fragmented, often given a table to sell their products in a mall or market for a few hours or a day. But the incubator [housed in 33 Boutique] was now their permanent place. It's always open …they have their own booths along with resources, and people know whose booth it is as they have their own entity. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

Fayza (Fruit of My Labor, 2019) reflected on her personal connection to the physical space: '*I felt a personal attachment to the place [incubator]. I found myself there*'. Demonstrating deep commitment, Fayza personally funded several project-related expenses. She hired a consultant to design the incubator's organizational structure, aiming to expedite approval by the otherwise slow Civil Service Commission: '*This was at my own expense (2200KD), equivalent to 5500GBP*'. Fayza's initiative and financial contribution underscored the team's dedication to establishing a fully operational incubator.

Similarly, when Awatef became Assistant Undersecretary for Finance, she leveraged her position to facilitate project finances: '*As Assistant Undersecretary for Finance, I oversaw project expenditures and facilitated project finances as planned*'. Fayza (Fruit of My Labor, 2019) added, '*Thanks to Awatef, who facilitated the incubator's furnishing*'. By transforming a concept into a vibrant entrepreneurial hub and popular shopping destination, the women incubatees gained not only a physical space but also a new identity and a lasting foothold in Kuwait City's economy.

*Practice work to design a new organizing form*. To institutionalize the business incubator, the project team engaged in institutional work. Specifically, they undertook practice work to establish a new, functional organizing form designed to support women entrepreneurs in launching new businesses. First, this involved developing a structured framework that specified admissions criteria, support services, and the incubation period. In doing so, they adapted principles from the Shuwaikh Vocational Incubator, whose manager explained:

> Based on the operating arrangements of Shuwaikh Vocational Incubator and other incubators, I advised on a new management system that suits the handicraft business incubator, including admissions criteria, incubation period and renewal, services offered and daily progress of incubatees. (Munther-m, Collaborator, 2019)

Second, the project team collaborated with UNIDO to develop a holistic Enterprise Development and Investment Promotion modality. This entailed delivering structured business support services to incubatees based on their stage of development, identifying challenges, and devising solutions to enhance productivity and competitiveness. Third,

institutionalizing the incubator required strengthening the capabilities of Social Ministry staff to identify and nurture entrepreneurial talent – for example, by training women to develop their business plans. Two capacity-building programs were introduced: 'Training of Trainers' for enterprise creation and 'Developing Business Counselors' for enterprise growth. Finally, the new organizing form required formal integration within the Social Ministry's structure. A civil servant (interviewed) delivered a ministerial letter dated October 31, 2012, to the Head of the Civil Service Commission, requesting a new structure that would situate the incubator within the Family Welfare Directorate. The Commission's approval marked a significant institutional milestone, embedding the incubator within the Ministry's formal framework (see Figures 2 and 3).In sum, by combining vocational incubation and enterprise development models, the team not only developed practices for the new business incubator but also embedded them within the Social Ministry's organizational structure, thereby ensuring the institutionalization of the newly adopted practices.

*Entrepreneurial identity work: Recognition, empathy and compassion*. Organizational and institutional work laid the foundation for self-work on female entrepreneurs' identity, first, through their *recognition* achieved by competitive selection. To continue constructing entrepreneurial selves among women from 'broken families', as Fayza described, the team implemented a selection process that emphasized feasibility, project development, and a demonstrated commitment to building viable ventures. This approach aimed to

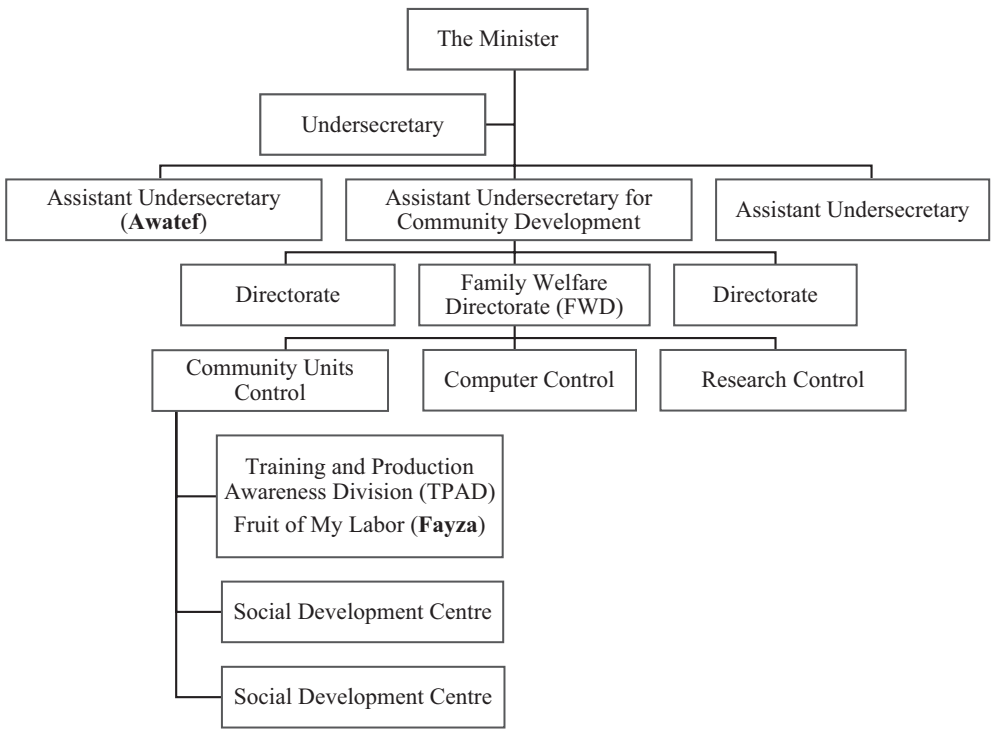


Figure 2. Social ministry's old organizational structure

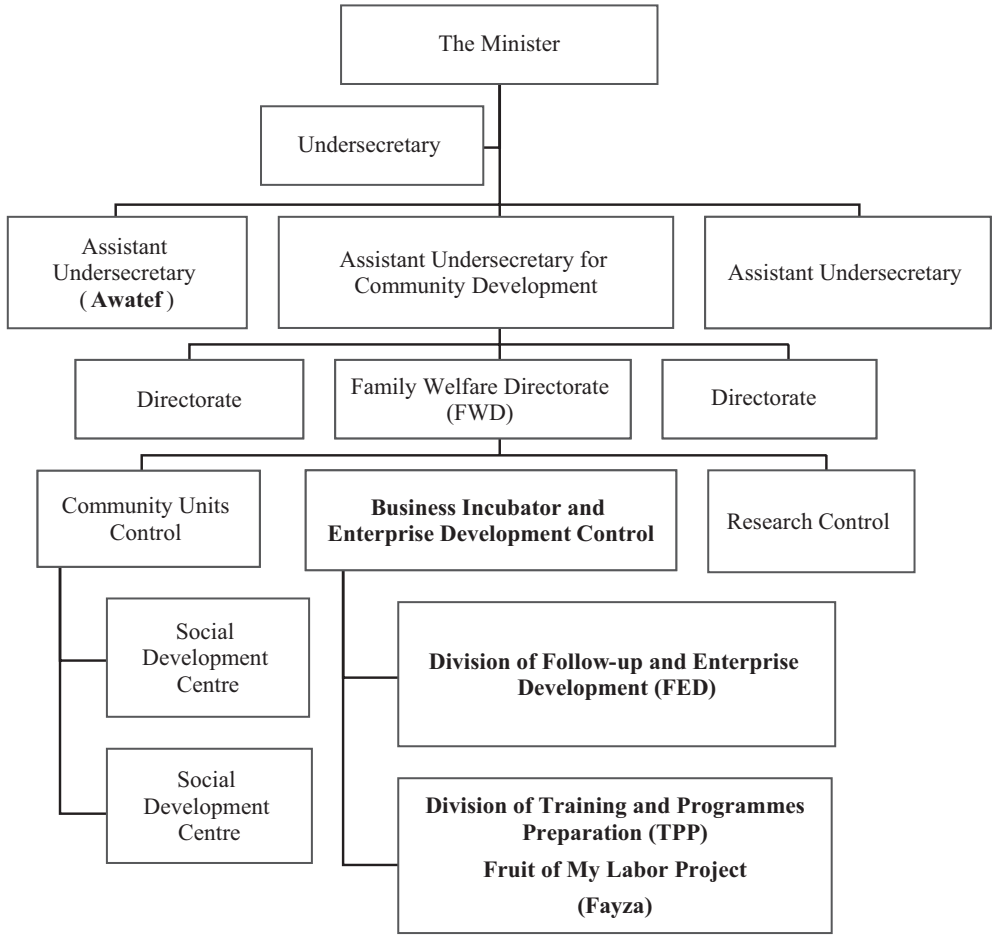


*Figure 3.* Social ministry's new organizational structure. *Source:* Internal documents from the Social Ministry.

identify entrepreneurial talent and cultivate a sense of responsibility and dedication essential for sustained success:

> All welfare recipients can apply for training at Fruit of My Labor project, but for incubation, a feasibility report and project presentation was required to determine whether they were serious and had the willingness to continue. (Fayza-f, Fruit of my Labor, 2019)

The meticulous selection process was designed to prepare incubatees for the competitive market. It filtered out unmotivated candidates and instilled a competitive spirit, equipping participants for the operational and financial responsibilities of business ownership. As Sahar noted, '*They chose the best of the best!*'. Beyond selection, the team cultivated a culture that celebrated excellence, fostering entrepreneurial ambition through sustained positive reinforcement. Financial incentives, recognition of success stories, and the public showcasing of achievements – at international exhibitions and

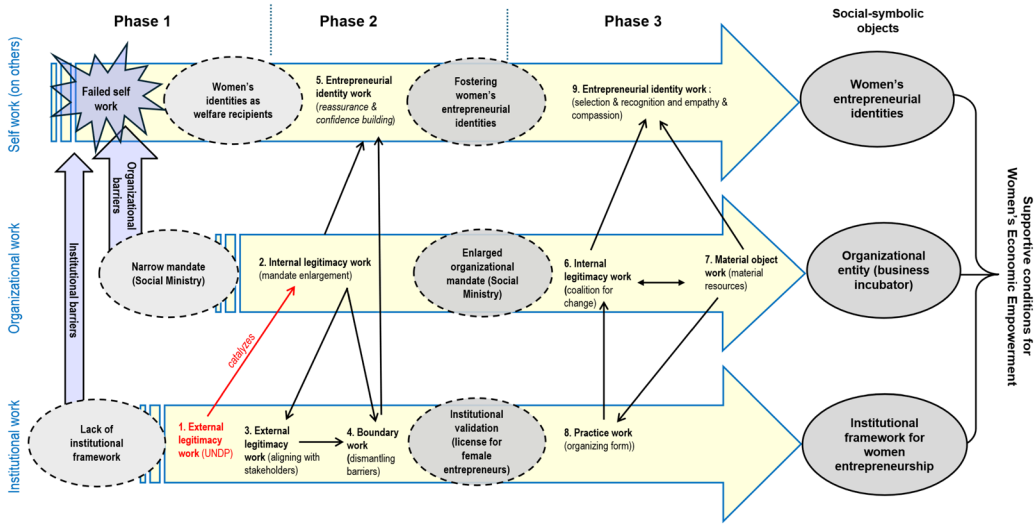


Figure 4. Process model of scaffolding types of social-symbolic work for WEE. → Solid arrow: indicates a unidirectional relationship where one condition enables another. ⟷ Double-headed arrow: represents a reciprocal relationship where two elements enable each other's development

award ceremonies – provided both visibility and inspiration. As Fayza explained, this approach fostered a competitive spirit and contributed to shaping entrepreneurial identities:

> We selected the most talented, those with good products and consumer demand. I supported them to travel outside Kuwait. We offered financial prizes and published stories featuring successful women. The competitive nature motivated them to grow as entrepreneurs. (Fayza-f, Fruit of My Labor, 2024)

The incubator became a space where women could share experiences, exchange knowledge, inspire one another, and receive public recognition. This environment nurtured individual growth and reinforced a collective identity as successful women entrepreneurs.

The second type of self-work on female entrepreneurs' identities involved *empathy* and *compassion building*. The female team formed meaningful connections with women trainees, fostering empathy, trust, support, and collaboration in the construction of entrepreneurial selves. Fayza (Fruit of My Labor, 2019) reflected that her identity as a woman brought her closer to the participants: '*Women feel women's needs, to be closer to each other. A man would think differently; he may say, "they receive social benefits and that's all*'". Awatef added:

> Being a woman meant that I would be closer to trainee women. A woman understands the behavior of women more compared to a man in my position. They can talk to me about matters they would not talk to a man about, either complaining or discussing something personal. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

The team's involvement extended beyond professional duties. Sahar (UNDP, 2024) explained that they developed supportive relationships: '*You get to know them. They start talking about their family… I would passionately promote their boutique and talk about it*'. Despite her senior position as Assistant Undersecretary, Awatef prioritized building personal relationships, emphasizing their shared experience as women:

> I would share their work. I like art and drawing. I used to draw with them…. participating and sharing their work so they feel I am with them. Not whether I have a hierarchical position but that I am a woman with similar interests. …they were happy when I worked with them. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

The empathy and personal involvement the team extended to women trainees helped foster a collaborative environment characterized by camaraderie and mutual support. Awatef said:

> I once did a drawing and put it on display at a ceremony. A guest from Bahrain, invited by the Ministry, asked, who did the drawing? They responded, it's Awatef. He said, 'wow, Assistant Undersecretaries can also draw?' I was happy when I used to see the women and discuss their work, and they were happy when I worked with them. (Awatef-f, Social Ministry, 2024)

Together with the physical space, this recognition and compassion provided women with a supportive environment to grow their businesses and express their entrepreneurial identities. What began as an experimental intervention gradually became normalized, ultimately establishing a recognized practice for entrepreneurial support within the Social Ministry. This reinforced the incubator's institutional presence and symbolic significance as a legitimate vehicle for WEE. While the narratives presented are largely affirmative accounts of progress, they are situated within broader efforts to secure legitimacy for women's empowerment in a conservative institutional context. Despite these constraints, women intrapreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs redefined what was possible for marginalized women in Kuwait, embedding new meanings and practices into the heart of a traditionally paternalistic bureaucracy.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In response to recent calls for a more dynamic approach that considers the interwoven, collective efforts to address complex social issues (Grimes and Vogus, 2021; Tracey and Stott, 2025), this study examines how actors combine different forms of social-symbolic work to promote women's economic empowerment (WEE) in an emerging, culturally traditional economy. Through an in-depth qualitative case study of Kuwait's first business incubator for women – a social-symbolic object aimed at empowering marginalized (single, divorced, or widowed) women on unemployment benefits – we demonstrate how the scaffolding of work across selves, organizations, and institutions promotes female entrepreneurship.

## Scaffolding Types of Social-Symbolic Work for WEE

Our process model theorizes how the successive scaffolding of different types of social-symbolic work can foster WEE. In institutional contexts where entrenched social-symbolic barriers limit women's participation in entrepreneurial activity, WEE requires the purposeful transformation of interrelated social-symbolic objects – women's selves, organizations, and institutions – through phased, interdependent efforts. As illustrated in Figure 4, the model shows *three phases* in which different forms of social-symbolic work are scaffolded in ways that mutually enable and reinforce one another.

In *Phase 1*, *self-work* aimed at constructing entrepreneurial identities among marginalized women is thwarted by significant *organizational* (e.g., the Social Ministry's welfare-oriented mandate) and *institutional* (e.g., preventing welfare recipients from obtaining trade licenses) barriers, discouraging women from pursuing entrepreneurship. In contexts marked by entrenched institutional and organizational barriers, internal actors – especially those advocating for marginalized groups – often lack the legitimacy, authority, or resources to enact change from within. In such settings, change from 'the inside out' can be enabled by legitimacy transfer, where an external actor's credibility is conferred onto internal actors, agendas, or initiatives, allowing them to perform otherwise inaccessible forms of social-symbolic work.

We conceptualize such external actors as *catalysts*: entities that enable change without becoming a permanent part of the solution (Savaget et al., 2025). Instead of maintaining centrality and control, catalysts activate change by configuring the enabling conditions – transferring legitimacy, mobilizing resources, aligning agendas – and then stepping back. It is then internal actors who define the problem, navigate organizational structures, and mobilize local networks to advance transformation efforts. In our case, the UNDP acted as such a catalyst: legitimizing an internal reform agenda, aligning it with global and national policy frames, and unlocking access to material and symbolic resources. However, it was the internal female bureaucrats – motivated by shared identities – who led the work of reconfiguring selves, organizations, and institutions by navigating bureaucratic structures and leveraging their local embeddedness to mobilize internal networks and resources.

In *Phase 2*, the catalytic partnership enables the scaffolding of social-symbolic work to create a more supportive environment for WEE. This includes *internal legitimacy work* (e.g., expanding organizational mandates), *external legitimacy work* (e.g., aligning initiatives with national or global development agendas), and *boundary work* (e.g., dismantling restrictive legal or symbolic categories). Crucially, these efforts are scaffolded on one another: internal legitimacy work enables organizational change, which in turn legitimizes boundary work and institutional reform. These changes help break down symbolic and regulatory barriers that prevent marginalized women from identifying as entrepreneurs. In our case, the catalytic partnership empowered female bureaucrats to reposition the Social Ministry as an agent of socioeconomic change. This internal shift enabled regulatory reforms – such as granting business licenses to welfare recipients – that had previously been blocked. This paved the way for *entrepreneurial identity work*, reassuring women trainees that pursuing entrepreneurial roles was formally recognized and institutionally supported.

In *Phase 3*, legitimacy and institutional changes are translated into durable support for the reconstruction of women's entrepreneurial selves. This includes the scaffolding *of internal legitimacy work* (e.g., establishing internal credibility), *material object work* (e.g., creating physical spaces), *practice work* (efforts that 'affect the recognition and acceptance of sets of routines', as Zietsma and Lawrence define it (2010, p. 190)), and further *self-work* (e.g., reinforcing women's entrepreneurial identities through recognition, support, and symbolic affirmation). These forms of work are mutually reinforcing: material spaces provide legitimacy and visibility; routine practices institutionalize new roles; and symbolic recognition consolidates identity transformation. These scaffolded efforts coalesce into a new social-symbolic object, which embodies and sustains the intended change. In our case, they coalesced in the creation of a women-run business incubator, which symbolized and sustained the Social Ministry's new mandate, provided a physical space for women to build ventures, and offered both material and symbolic support for *entrepreneurial identity* construction.

Overall, the model demonstrates that fostering WEE requires more than individual capacity-building. While the specific interventions and their sequencing may vary across contexts, a consistent insight is that in structurally constrained environments, empowerment is not an individual journey but a collective, phased process. A boundary condition of our theorizing is that *catalysts* – whether development agencies, NGOs, or policy windows – are likely necessary to initiate and legitimize change, but they must be activated by embedded actors to ensure that transformations take root. Ultimately, fostering WEE depends on the interdependent scaffolding of social-symbolic work across the levels of self, organization, and institution, where each type of work enables, motivates, or reinforces the others.

## Contribution to Women's Economic Empowerment

A key contribution of this study is to demonstrate how WEE is contingent on the reconfiguration of social-symbolic objects to support market participation for women entrepreneurs, specifically in non-Western contexts (Wickert et al., 2024), where entrenched patriarchal norms, institutional voids, and socio-economic marginalization create profound barriers to women's entrepreneurship. In settings like Kuwait, women who are single, widowed, divorced, and reliant on social benefits often face social stigma and exclusion from formal economic participation. Unlike previous research, which often centres on female entrepreneurs as key agents of institutional change (McAdam et al., 2019), this study highlights that empowerment – especially in culturally traditional contexts where societal expectations confine women to traditional roles and penalize those who seek economic independence – requires far more than personal ambition or skill. Women's entrepreneurial identities are not automatically accepted but must be actively constructed, legitimized, and supported through targeted interventions at multiple levels, including self, organizational, and institutional. What is required, therefore, are arrangements that facilitate institutional change to remove both tangible barriers (e.g., lack of access to resources, training, and market opportunities) and symbolic obstacles (e.g., societal stigma and institutional indifference).

While institutional frameworks in many Western contexts help mitigate extreme discrimination and gender inequality (Jennings et al., 2016), non-Western contexts often lack the social-symbolic foundations regarding selves, organizations, and institutions.

Thus, the conventional trajectory of 'women + entrepreneurship = institutional change (empowerment)' places the burden of transformation on individual women, leaving existing institutional constraints intact (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Ennis, 2019). By contrast, this study proposes an alternative trajectory: 'women + institutional change = women entrepreneurship (empowerment)'. In this view, empowerment becomes possible through the restructuring of institutional and organizational conditions that enable women to act, be seen, and be supported as entrepreneurs.

The emphasis on social-symbolic work to achieve institutional change provides a more nuanced understanding of the social context in which WEE occurs (Karakulak and Lawrence, 2023). Institutional change involves complex social processes driven by spatially dispersed, heterogeneous activities by a wide group of actors with diverse resources (Abumuamar, 2016), which exceed the capacity of individual actors (Wijen and Ansari, 2007). While prior research has emphasized that female empowerment requires acting 'with others to affect social change' (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013, p. 506), and emphasizes the link between collective action and emancipation (Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2024), our study details the scaffolding of social-symbolic work. A collaborative network of actors (UNDP, UNIDO, Kuwait's Social Ministry) was activated to perform social-symbolic work to create new arrangements that legitimized female entrepreneurship within Kuwait's economy. As Mutch (2007, p. 1137) notes, 'the actual spread and diffusion of institutional change depend not on the original actions of the agent for change, but on their enrolment in a wider network'. In our case, the scaffolding of types of social-symbolic work in the creation of Kuwait's first business incubator for women played a dual role by providing not only entrepreneurial resources but also serving as a visible, material symbol that women's entrepreneurial identities are recognized and embraced by the wider institutional environment. This dual function was critical in legitimizing women's entrepreneurial endeavours in the eyes of both society and other institutional actors, thereby reducing stigma and fostering greater acceptance of women's evolving economic roles.

In contrast, when empowerment efforts focus only on isolated change initiatives, they risk unintended negative outcomes, especially in contexts where deeper structural inequalities persist. As illustrated in Khan et al.'s (2007) study of women workers in the Sialkot soccer ball industry, narrowly targeted interventions to eliminate child labour without addressing broader institutional barriers and women's identity – such as wages and gendered norms of 'proper behaviour' – led to further stigmatization and impoverishment of women in a context where their employment was stigmatized.

A key practical implication for development agencies is that while short-term initiatives like skills training or projects are essential, they are unlikely to achieve lasting empowerment unless they are integrated with broader efforts to remove entrenched social-symbolic barriers. Ultimately, lasting WEE requires not just strengthening individual capacities but also legitimizing new identities and securing institutional buy-in to reshape the relational and institutional environments in which women operate. This need becomes even more pressing in light of the fact that the arrangements studied were available only to Kuwaiti nationals, potentially deepening the economic divide between citizens and non-citizens. Given the central role of migrant workers, especially female domestic workers, in Gulf economies, future research could explore

how scaffolded social-symbolic work might be mobilized to address not only gendered barriers but also the intersecting liabilities of foreignness, cultural marginalization, and legal precarity for migrant women.

### Contribution to Social-Symbolic Work

Our study advances the social-symbolic work perspective by examining the 'largely ignored relationships among different social-symbolic objects and different types of social-symbolic work' and, specifically, how their dynamic configurations 'amplify, undermine and transform their intended outcomes' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 248). While prior studies have explored how different dimensions of work, such as material, discursive, and relational, precipitate institutional change (Geiger and Stendahl, 2024) or shape social constructions of a problem (Karakulak and Lawrence, 2023), few have examined how work operates across selves, organizations, and institutions simultaneously. Our study does so by conceptualizing scaffolding as a process that intertwines multiple types of work. Unlike Mair et al. (2016) emphasis on scaffolding as the pursuit of a concealed goal, our definition provides a broader, multi-form perspective of social-symbolic work. This scaffolding process reveals several critical insights. First, it shows how different social-symbolic objects – selves, organizations, and institutions – are constructed through interdependent efforts, rather than emerging from isolated initiatives. Critically, scaffolding is not merely a combination of these efforts but a structured, phased process in which different types of social-symbolic work are sequentially and synergistically combined to construct and transform social-symbolic objects. Rather than treating types of work as discrete or additive, scaffolding highlights their recursive interdependence and temporal layering. Each type of social-symbolic work lays the groundwork for the next, creating an interdependent chain of small transformations that collectively reshape social-symbolic objects.

Second, the reconstruction of selves is contingent on organizational and institutional transformations. This dynamic is especially relevant to social issues like WEE, which are deeply embedded in broader cognitive, structural, and political contexts (Abumuamar, 2022; Karakulak and Lawrence, 2023). This requires reflexivity regarding the interconnectedness of social issues and the interdependencies among actors (Grimes and Vogus, 2021). In our study, six interwoven types of social-symbolic work scaffolded the creation of a new social-symbolic object: the business incubator for WEE. Each type of work was scaffolded sequentially and interactively to leverage prior efforts in a mutually reinforcing way.

Another aspect of our contribution is to deepen the understanding of the role of catalysts in the transformation of social-symbolic objects. A catalyst is an external actor that creates 'the enabling conditions' to enact lasting change without itself becoming a permanent part of the solution (Savaget et al., 2025, p. 271). Our findings suggest that catalysts become especially important in contexts marked by institutional inertia, bureaucratic resistance, or legitimacy deficits, which inhibit endogenous actors from initiating or sustaining transformational efforts alone. In such settings, external catalysts can facilitate transformation 'from the inside out' by providing the symbolic leverage and enabling resources needed to activate social-symbolic work. In our case, the UNDP played

a catalytic role through legitimacy transfer onto internal actors, securing resources, and framing the initiative within national reform agendas. Yet, catalytic impact emerged not from its presence alone, but from the formation of a catalytic partnership. The partnership was underpinned by shared gendered experiences, aligned commitments to women's empowerment, and complementary capacities: while the UNDP offered symbolic and financial resources, female intrapreneurs navigated bureaucratic systems and mobilized organizational legitimacy.

Based on our findings, we propose that effective catalysts – whether NGOs, philanthropic foundations, professional networks, or external policy actors – must be understood relationally: they do not direct change but enable it by forming alliances with embedded actors who can translate, embed, and advance transformative efforts from within. Such catalytic partnerships require complementarity, which necessitates three core features: relational alignment with embedded actors capable of advancing change from within, external legitimacy that allows for legitimacy transfer to internal actors, and resource mobilization capacity (financial, relational, or discursive). Together, they scaffold a process in which new identities, organizations, and institutional practices are constructed. As emphasized by Phillips et al. (2025), a key aspect of transformative social-symbolic work is setting the stage for relational dynamics to unfold.

The catalytic partnership and its scaffolding of social-symbolic work are critical for understanding complex change initiatives in institutionally challenging contexts, where many interventions fail to scale or sustain impact when transplanted into new environments due to a lack of broader, supporting changes. The absence of scaffolding explains why many well-intentioned interventions – such as micro-loans or business accelerators – even when championed by catalytic actors, often struggle to achieve their intended impact. Without a scaffolded approach that aligns multiple forms of social-symbolic work, isolated efforts risk being undermined by entrenched barriers. In Kim's (2021) study of entrepreneurship accelerators in Detroit, empowerment efforts failed in cases where the broader social-symbolic environment remained unchanged, despite localized, well-intentioned interventions. Even with financial and technical support, local entrepreneurs – many of whom were in vulnerable situations, such as being single parents or previously unemployed – continued to face symbolic barriers, such as redefining what success meant in their socio-economic context. Similarly, change initiatives that focus solely on training disempowered female workers often fail because they do not address broader structural and symbolic barriers (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021).

In sum, our study shows that driving effective social change must move beyond isolated interventions. It calls for a scaffolded approach that aligns multiple forms of social-symbolic work. This is particularly important in complex, institutionally challenging contexts, where entrenched cognitive, structural, and political barriers can easily derail fragmented initiatives. When scaffolded across multiple levels of change – self, organizational, and institutional –through a layered, phased approach, each type of social-symbolic work becomes enabling, motivating, or reinforcing others across levels of social life. This scaffolding model offers a valuable framework for understanding how different forms of social-symbolic work can be aligned to facilitate sustained institutional transformation.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Certain limitations of our study merit reflection. First, our analysis focused on the early stages of creating a women's business incubator. However, WEE is an evolving, long-term, and fragile process. Future research could explore how empowerment efforts develop during the incubation period – whether women sustain their ventures, navigate market challenges, or extend empowerment to others. Second, set in Kuwait, our findings reflect a context shaped by both cultural constraints and economic privilege. The conditions enabling scaffolding may not be present in more resource-constrained or politically unstable contexts. Comparative research across diverse socio-economic settings would enrich understanding of how social-symbolic work unfolds under different conditions (Tomizawa et al., 2020). Finally, we acknowledge that our positionality shaped both access and interpretation. The largely affirmative accounts reflect genuine commitment, but also the strategic framing of success in a context where legitimacy must be actively performed. Future research might explore how empowerment narratives are constructed, contested, and sustained over time and what silences they may obscure.

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