Introduction: Gender and Crafts

Numerous social and anthropological studies have attempted to investigate gender in art and aesthetics in general (e.g., Koloski-Ostrow, 1997; Mullin, 2001). To narrow the area of study, the relationship between crafts and gender (especially women) has been widely investigated in worldwide anthropology and social sciences literature. For example, both Marla C. Berns (1993) in her work “Art, History, and Gender: Women and Clay in West Africa” and Adria La Violette (1995) in her contribution “Women Craft Specialists in Jenne” explored women’s important role in constructing social and cultural meaning through their pottery crafts production. The role of women participating in what are usually considered as “male crafts” (hard crafts) was investigated in an anthropological study, “Craft Development and Development Through Crafts: Adaptive Strategies of Labrador Women in a Changing Fishery,” which was conducted by Szala-Meneok and McIntosh (1996). Predominance of any gender in certain types of craft was also explored by Jennifer McDowell (1999), when she examined women fighting to get their position in the Japanese craft movement, as McDowell showed in her article “Japanese Women and Their Connection to the Craft Movement and Craft Production in Japan.” Furthermore, evaluating craftswomen’s contribution to the economy was a major part in craft anthropological studies, and the issue of craftswomen’s skills and specialization was explored by Clark and Houston (2008) in their work “Craft Specialization, Gender, and Personhood.” To investigate gender as a subject in “crafts enterprises,” it is worth mentioning the contributions of Alila and Pedersen (2001) who investigated the socio-economic consequences of women’s domination of craft enterprises in South Africa, using the case study of Eldoret town, the study of Clare Wilkinson-Weber (2004), which focused on commoditization and commercialization of the craft industries in South Asia, and the study of Rogerson and Sithole (2001), which investigated the small enterprise economy, in South Africa as a whole, and explored variations between groups of male wood carvers and women grass weavers in craft enterprises.

The Research Method: Collecting and Analyzing Data

This research follows the phenomenology (interpretivism) paradigm, because unlike the positivism paradigm, in this research, phenomena (gender change in crafts enterprises) can be analyzed in terms of issues, not variables as usually occurs in natural sciences studies. Also, this research relies on data that were collected by participants and by the observer (researcher), all of whom have varying degrees of involvement and attachment and so are not dispassionate outside observers. Because the focus of this research is on...
Omani craft enterprises and gender (social sciences), it is logical to ignore the positivist philosophy (paradigm) of research and adopt the phenomenology (interpretivism) philosophy. As will be explained later in this article, this research will mainly rely on face-to-face interviewing, and this requires direct interaction with people (mostly women in craft industries) and all that drove the researcher to adopt the phenomenology philosophy.

In fact, qualitative research methods used to investigate the challenges facing Omani craft enterprises were chosen because this method is concerned with society and contemporary social changes. Omani craft enterprises were affected by social changes within Omani society that occurred within the last three decades, changes that have transformed the society from one based on agricultural and craft industries to that of an oil exporting country.

When the researcher chose a qualitative method, instead of a quantitative method, he also chose an inductive approach rather than a deductive one. Hence, the qualitative research characteristics have driven the researcher to use this method, where the research examines a social and humanistic topic focused on craft enterprises. This research demanded an in-depth investigation of challenges relating to craft enterprises and gender change, using interviews, visual data, and secondary data collection.

So interviews took place in the summer (from June 20, 2014, to August 10, 2014) in Oman. The interviews occurred face-to-face and sometimes at distance (telephone). At one extreme, the interview conducted was tightly structured, with a set of questions requiring specific answers (semi-structured questions were made especially with uneducated female artisans in mind), but most of them were very open-ended, taking the form of a discussion. The interviews were recorded in a variety of ways, such as taking notes, audio recording, and taping (the researcher gave priority to ethical issues for the recording stage, according to Sultan Qaboos University regulations and the Scientific Research Council in Oman). Interviews in this research were mostly conducted with participants belonging to some selected enterprises, under the management of the Public Authority for Crafts Industries (PACI; governmental authority), Department of Art Education (Ceramic Unit), and the Handcrafts Centre (for pottery, a private enterprise).

After the data collection stage, interviews passed through several processes from preparation to analysis. As mentioned, most of the interviews were recorded electronically, and even those recorded by hand were all prepared to be more applicable to the later analysis stage. The preparation stage included transcription of the interviews (converting electronic recorded materials into Arabic written texts), followed by translation into English. Then the researcher organized and coded his data, making them more adequate and useful for the research discussion on one hand, and satisfying the research’s validity and reliability on the other.

Specifically, most of the research interview data were originally extracted from open-ended and semi-structured questions, and according to Betty Swift (1998), these types of data need a lot of effort where the raw data, extracted from all interviews, are very large (p. 166). Nevertheless, Betty Swift (1998) classified coding qualitative data within three approaches. The first approach is called the representational approach, which relies on reducing data to their essentials. The second type is that of coding the interviews according to the researchers’ belief that the data needed additional and implicit meaning. The last approach would mainly rely on the researcher believing that the data are complicated and have multiple meanings. In practice, the researcher classified all answers to each question under its themes in one category, and he gave each answer a code to make it easier later when referring back to the original texts. The researcher then classified the answers to convert them to more direct data.

**Gender Change: Women’s Predomination of the Craft Industry**

The PACI statistics, based on the genders of their craftspeople, showed craftswomen predominating some areas of craft industries, and craftsmen became less in number than craftswomen in their centers (PACI, 2007). Dhamija (1981) summarized women’s roles in crafts industries, when he asserted that “although handicrafts are often advised when incomengenerating activities are sought for women, ‘feminine’ crafts tend to be time-consuming, give poor returns, and offer little opportunity for upgrading skills” (p. 8). Omani women’s predominance is evident in some traditionally male craft areas, such as silversmithing and pottery, where statistics show that, in the Khanjar Centre, craftswomen represent 19 out of 20 craftspeople, and the case is similar in the Pottery and Ceramic Centre (Dhamija, 1981). In the *Results of Crafts Industries First Field Survey* (PACI, 2008), females form 66% of craftspeople, working in all the PACI crafts centers. Female domination of the craft industries caused a lot of changes in the traditional craft industry, artistically and socially. For example, the Omani traditional daggers (made in silver) got less attention than silver women’s accessories. Another example came from the pottery industries, where the size of pots became very small, compared with the large-scale pottery that was usually made by Omani traditional male masters in the past (Alwatan, 2008). Changes in size, expression, production line, functionality, and even pattern could cause negative or positive reflections on Omani traditional crafts’ well-known identity.

Most classic studies on the topic of women’s predominance in the craft industries have only contributed to the issue with very descriptive and general outcomes. To illustrate, studies such as “Caught in the Wheels” (Cockburn, 1983) and “Women Who Work in Factories” (Agassi, 1972) documented the issue of women’s predominance in craft
industries, with only descriptive and statistical contextual information. In contrast to these studies, modern literature regarding this issue, such as the study of “The Work of Her Hands” (Luttrell, 2005), has done some investigation of the positive and negative consequences of female predominance of crafts. In contrast to much of the current studies on women and material culture, which focus primarily on women as consumers, Maureen Daly Goggin’s (2009) book, Women and Things, 1750-1950, provided case studies of women who produced material objects.

Although extensive research has been carried out on this issue worldwide, no single study exists, which adequately covers women’s predominance on the craft industries in Oman. The above literature regarding the PACI did not give the issue of “taking advantage of women’s predominance of crafts industries” more recognition. Female predominance in the crafts sector in Oman became an existing fact, and the PACI purports to move from investigating the reasons for this domination to discussing ways to take advantage of the situation. Regarding this point, the researcher will investigate ways to take advantage of women’s predominance in the craft industries and the consequences stemming from that, on the issues of society’s identity, using social, anthropological, and field data collected to date to discuss this subject.

**Gender Change: Data and Statistics**

Rather than studying women’s predominance in the craft industry in general, it is better to investigate the PACI’s ability to take advantage of the predominance of females in the authorities craft centers. While craftswomen were considered as a central sample in investigating their predominance in local craft enterprises (especially the PACI craft centers) in the data collection period, the researcher also investigated this issue with craftsmen to better understand their absence from some craft enterprises. The reflections from both genders provided useful data to understand this social change, where, as will be shown in this part of the research, craftsmen used economic reasons to explain their absence, while craftswomen explained different thoughts about their predominance in crafts in Oman. It was logical for the researcher to concentrate on interviewing craftswomen from the Khanjar and Silversmith Training and Producing Centre (KSTPC) in the capital Muscat; the Silk Weaving Training and Producing Centre (SWTPC) in Ibi, Al Dakhliya Province; the Weaving Training and Producing Centre (WTPC) in Samail, Al Dakhliya Province; and the Carpeting Training and Producing Centre (CaTPC) in Al Musannah, Al Batnah Province, because these four enterprises represented female predominance in craft industries in the country and also represented more diversity due to their regional and ethnic differences (e.g., only Arab craftswomen in the SWTPC but mixed identities in the KSTPC).

The researcher invited selected participants to choose the venue for interview meetings, and most of them selected their workshops. This choice was very beneficial to the research because all technical, artistic, and cultural evidence, associated with their crafts, are available to be used as extra information for the researcher to evaluate the participants’ arguments. Similar to some other Arab cultures, Omani females refuse to record their interviews electronically for cultural and social reasons. In an attempt to make each female interviewee feel as comfortable as possible, the interviewer gave his permission to electronically record her interview. For those who refused to record electronically, their interviews were recorded by the researcher’s note taking.

Many documents were reviewed as were a large number of existing statistics, which confirmed that craftswomen predominated some of the Omani craft enterprises, and craftsmen no longer existed in the same enterprises. For example, some statistics showed that in the KSTPC, craftswomen predominated in the silversmith crafts, where 13 out of 15 craftspeople were female (PACI, 2010), and the percentage of women has increased, where the researcher observed that 19 craftswomen worked in the center at the time of data collection. Female participants connected the gender change in some crafts with the appearance of new technologies, so that males and females became equal in terms of specialization and skills, where in the past, men had predominated crafts that needed hard skills, like stone and metal working. Today, some technologies help women to practice all crafts including hard skills and activities. A craftswoman from the KSTPC, who is very active in the workshop and specialized in making silver accessories, and preferred to work with burnishing machines rather than with her naked hands, asserted,

> Because of new technologies available in all workshops today, I don’t think men had priority in any type of crafts over women. (Craftswoman from the KSTPC)

There is a strong relationship between the above interpretation (technological factors) and female predominance in crafts centers, and this argument could contribute indirectly to show a positive side of “machines domination” of craft enterprises.

Some participants refused the justification of skills and the introduction of technologies in the crafts area for changing the gender balance, but they supported the notion that the special cultural characteristics of each region are responsible for the gender changes in the crafts sector in Oman. The PACI statistics on gender showed that pottery making crafts in the PCTPC in the north of Oman (Bahla, Al Dakhliya Province) was predominated by craftsmen, but southern pottery making (especially frankincense burners) were usually made by craftswomen. Prior studies that have noted the importance of “regional special cultural characteristics” in changing gender in the crafts field, such as the first volume of The Craft Heritage of Oman (Richardson & Dorr, 2003a) where the authors, for example, identified the role of women in crafts industries in Dhofar Province.
Five of the male respondents (craftsmen), from different crafts centers, gave justifications for their absence from some craft enterprises of the PACI, by asserting that their high financial responsibilities (providing a house, wedding expenses, supporting their family) drove them to ignore part-time and low salary jobs, including craft industries (especially in the PACI). The majority of participants declared that working in the PACI craft centers, in part-time jobs with a salary of 150 OR (nearly 300 GBP), was only appropriate for craftswomen, where socially in Oman, females have no financial responsibilities. In the silversmith center of the KSTPC, a craftswoman from the KSTPC, who graduated from secondary school, living very close to the center, and was considered as one of the best craftswomen in using silver raw materials creatively, declared that,

> Men need high salary jobs, the craftsperson’s salary in any center (belong to the PACI) is not enough to cover their financial responsibilities. (Craftswoman from the KSTPC)

The economic factor above may invoke connecting the present Omani society’s economic and social circumstances and craft enterprises future strategies. In other words, this group of participants raised the awareness of building plans in the field without considering the local social conditions.

To present the appropriate image, some documents and statistics backup the participants’ arguments and claims. Women’s position in Omani traditional crafts is shown in Table 1 (including craft types and individual registered craftsperson).

| Craft type | Male number of craftsmen | Female number of craftsmen | Male percentage of craftsmen | Female percentage of craftsmen |
|------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Palm leaves | 763                       | 722                        | 52                           | 48                            |
| Textile    | 275                       | 1,558                      | 15                           | 85                            |
| Pottery    | 38                        | 239                        | 14                           | 86                            |
| Silversmith | 1                         | 19                         | 5                            | 95                            |
| Perfumes distilling | 4 | 37 | 10 | 90 |
| Frankincense | 9                        | 167                        | 5                            | 95                            |

Source: PACI (2010).

As shown in the literature review, a large and growing body of literature has investigated gender change in craft enterprises. But the majority of literature, such as the studies of Cockburn (1983) and Agassi (1972), were very descriptive studies and did not contribute to investigating ways of taking advantage of women’s domination of craft enterprises. In fact, it could be considered that Lutterell (2005) contributed slightly to evaluating the importance of the predominance of women in some craft industries. In general, the majority of researchers who studied the issue of women in the craft field gave the consumption of crafts by females more attention than women’s contribution in making, as shown, for example, in Maureen Goggin’s study in 2009. To conclude this part, participants interviewed contributed slightly toward clarifying the future impact of female predomination of Omani crafts. The researcher’s questions regarding the “future impact of gender change” were built to understand the possibilities to take advantage of women in this field and how the framework built in this research can achieve this objective.

### Discussion

Recent attention to the importance of the domestic economy in studies of crafts highlights the role of gender within cultural and social development, as asserted in both the primary and secondary data of this research. As established in the research findings, participants showed three main arguments regarding gender change in the crafts industry, in Oman in general and in the PACI craft centers in particular. The first argument is that the female predominance in some types of crafts came about because of new technology, which entered the craft industry workshops, and this in fact caused a social and cultural change in the field. Second, women had predominated some types of crafts in the past, but only in some regions, so for these participants, women’s predominance is a historical issue, rather than a contemporary change in the Omani crafts sector. The third argument, which stems from primary data, declared that there was a socio-economical change in the local society of Oman, when some participants believed that male craftspersons cannot establish their life with low income careers, like craft making, because of their socio-economical responsibilities. In fact, because the interviews were conducted using open-ended interviews and sometimes semi-structured questions, most participants’ answers went toward explaining the reasons behind gender change in craft industries, and that was a positive improvement in the interviews toward understanding the situation in
Oman in depth. But because this research’s main objective was to develop a framework for craft enterprises, the required data aimed to concentrate mostly on the future effects of gender change on crafts industries, so the researcher can build this part of the framework pragmatically. Participants’ answers in fact contributed (directly and indirectly) to the investigation of the “future impact” of gender change as well as their direct justifications of the reasons that led to gender change in crafts industries in Oman in the first instance.

Before starting the discussion of participants’ arguments and other relevant social and cultural literature, it is worth remembering that gender identity does not always mean biological sex. In her article “Gendered Spaces: Craftswomen’s Stories of Self-Employment in Orissa,” India, Jyotirmayee Acharya (2004) provided a citation of Beauvoir (1947), when she stated that “gender identity is not determined by one’s biological sex; rather, gender is a social construct” (p. 3). She also asserted that gender is essentially a relationship similar to social class and recognized race (Acharya, 2004). It seems that Acharya (2004) believed in the importance of the notion of the “social construct,” but she also strictly emphasized that in the field of crafts and particularly in craft enterprises, female’s “ideology of body” (p. 3) is a very essential part in investigating women’s participation in this field. Constructing social and cultural meaning through women’s craft making and production was a central advantage of women’s predominance in the crafts industry as identified by Marla C. Berns (1993), and this led to discussing the part of Omani women’s domination of craft enterprises within social and cultural contexts.

In fact, “body” as an issue was very important in the case of women’s predominance in some male’s crafts in Oman. Introducing machines in the PACI crafts centers in particular converted “hard work,” such as loading large pots into kilns, twisting metals, engraving hard wood, and using huge looms, to be easier, and therefore, this could be implemented by women’s soft hands. That was a reason for the predominance of (mostly less than 25 years old) girls in the Dagger Crafts Centre, and Rug Weaving Centre, as shown in the findings part. In reality, women’s “capability of using machines and technology” itself is considered as a problem for some scholars in the industrial field, and that was declared in the Social-Marxist, Cynthia Cockburn’s (1983) study, “Caught in the Wheels,” which protested against the notion that “every self-respecting man knows that ‘women are no good with machinery,’ [and] they are ‘hopeless at technical things’” (p. 16). This in fact led to enlarge the perceived negative impact of machines predominance of what were supposed to be traditional crafts centers. This also enlarged the lack of “hand skills” as another weakness associated with the domination of machines in the craft industry. But with the exclusion of the bad affects of machine domination, for women who work in the Dagger Crafts Centre, for example, machines provide them with the chance to work in the silversmith field extensively. In the past, the silversmiths’ technical practices were carried out by craftsmen only, because this type of craft contains hard technical practices such as using manual kilns for melting silver, and hard hands to twist and coil silver wires, and these types of working steps were altered by advanced machines. The positive thing in this social change in the field could be that “female artistry and taste” became part of this craft industry, and that may be the reason for the concentration on making women’s accessories, more than male daggers, in the Dagger Centre as observed by the researcher. Women bodies’ biological abilities as a subject is discussed by Germaine Greer (1999) in her work The Whole Woman. In her social contribution, Greer concluded that part of her study with the declaration that women’s working hours and the bodies’ abilities to achieve hard jobs make them at least equal with men. Similar to her study, the anthropological contribution of Szala-Meneok and McIntosh (1996), when they discussed women working at fisheries, and the study of McDowell (1999), when she investigated machine impact on craftswomen in Japan, give an optimistic image about women’s predominance in craft enterprises, including Omani crafts industries. It is not a surprise that the biological abilities of women in general and craftswomen in particular are influenced by religious thoughts and that these considerations encourage society to accept the notion that women have less abilities in work fields. These considerations can be found as reflections in Omani craft industries (e.g., small pottery making in southern Oman is a female industry, and large pottery making northern Oman is a male industry). In fact, religious thoughts about women’s abilities and their impact on craft making was documented in McDowell’s (1999) study “Japanese Women and Their Connection to the Craft Movement and Craft Production in Japan,” where she mentioned that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto led to a decline of the contribution of women in the craft movement in Japan. Similar to the case of Japanese women in Jennifer’s study, Dawn Chatty (1991) presented the anthropological study “The Bedu and Al-Badiyah in Oman,” which investigated Omani nomadic life across the country, and in her work, she showed a classification of Omani women and domestic work alongside a connection with cultural and religious traditions. The research findings sometimes support inequality between genders in the craft field because of religious or cultural traditions. For example, in the state of Iibri (north of Oman), it is hard to find female potters, female gypsum block makers, and so on, just because of the local perspective that these professions are created for craftsmen only. After nearly 10 years from the above-mentioned article, Chatty published her article “Women Working in Oman: Individual Choice and Cultural Constraints,” and she asserted that the social and cultural status of women was still unchanged and inequality between genders still existed locally in Oman. In fact, Chatty’s anthropological works are supported by a very recently published book, Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition, which was written by Khalid Al-Azri
manship as one of the jobs that cannot provide a secure life. low-income occupations. Therefore, men considered crafts- responsibilities. This made Omani men refuse to accept any Omani confirms the fact that men are in charge for establish- on the notion that man is responsible for building the family, Omani people’s “family social system” in the modern state could be referred to as a social issue, related directly to the craft enterprises was that, because of low incomes, this actually in traditional craft making tasks, the division (part of the job) of men, in some craft industries, led people to think that these craft industries were predominated by women. In other words, the hidden role craftswomen’s homes) led participants to consider these two processes only represent half of the making operation; men usually collect the product from trees with very complicated steps and hard work. Also ceramics in the southern communities of Oman became a feminine craft because of the size of the product (coal burners); this type of pottery is usually made in very small sizes (10 cm × 5 cm dimensions). This gave women the opportunity to create coal burners as the work can be done at home as well. This analysis showed that the object characteristics (size, process of making, simplicity of control, and effortlessness in management because they are made at the craftswomen’s homes) led participants to consider these two professions as feminine crafts. In other words, the hidden role (part of the job) of men, in some craft industries, led people to think that these craft industries were predominated by women. Actually in traditional craft making tasks, the division (between genders) reflects “community harmony through cooperative work” (McDowell, 1999, p. 12), where she emphasized that the community harmony in the field of crafts cannot exist without both genders’ contributions. The third argument about the men’s rejection of work in the craft enterprises was that, because of low incomes, this could be referred to as a social issue, related directly to the Omani people’s “family social system” in the modern state (soci-economical factor). The “family social system” rests on the notion that man is responsible for building the family, even before marriage. In more detail, the social system in Oman confirms the fact that men are in charge for establishing shelter (family housing), wedding costs, and all financial responsibilities. This made Omani men refuse to accept any low-income occupations. Therefore, men considered craftsmanship as one of the jobs that cannot provide a secure life. Craftsman’s income is an issue related in particular to craft marketing and also to the society’s consumption of crafts. As mentioned before, the interviews with participants contributed toward showing the interpretations for women’s predominance in some craft industries in Oman, but what will help to develop the framework is evaluating the consequences of this predominance in the national crafts, and on the PACI craft centers in particular. In other words, will the gender change play a role in transforming Omani craft’s identity either positively or negatively? Answering this question required identifying women’s predominance in craft enterprises clearly. It is worth remembering that the researcher here is talking about women’s predominance but not existence in the workshops, and the term domination supposes that in each craft center, women form the majority of craftspersons in terms of biological gender. Literature and field findings directly and indirectly showed both advantages and disadvantages of women’s predominance. Some recognizable negatives of female domination were that females were not as good with machines and technologies, were less interested in what may be called “dirty crafts” such as pottery (using dirty materials especially in preparing clays), were less involved in the marketing stages, and also had less experience in developing their crafts’ designs, because of a lack of experience traveling, even regionally inside Oman. In contrast to the aforementioned negatives, women’s predominance in craft enterprises has some positives, such as women being more creative in the craft design, when the craft is related to fashion and female accessories. They also had more patience in the making of some craft industry products, such as rug weaving and other textiles crafts. Moreover, females had less financial responsibilities, so they usually continued working in the center even when they earned less money (sustainability factor). Likewise, when the craft center had a good supervisor, women became more careful about following the instructions of work than men. Finally, and most importantly, women considered the craft center as a social environment, where females in eastern cultures usually have fewer opportunities to meet each other, and that made working in the PACI craft centers more than just a job. The aforementioned negative and positive consequences of women’s predominance in craft industries cannot be examined except by comparing these consequences with the main objectives and future aims of the PACI. To illustrate, if the authority aimed to contribute in providing job opportunities for Omani’s youth, then women can be more successful because they are accepting of working for low incomes. In this situation, selecting women to work instead of men will be a solution rather than an excuse. To conclude this part, gender predominance as a phenomenon seemed to be a consequence of society’s social and economic changes, and it will not be practical to force craft enterprises to make an even balance between genders.
The evidence from this study suggests that women’s predominance in the craft enterprises in this sector of cultural industries in Oman can become a strong point by taking advantage of new technologies in the field of craft. Also, the results of this study indicate that when women accepting small wages helped employ them in craft enterprises smoothly. Furthermore, the results of this research support the idea that by employing women, craft enterprises can take advantage of female creativity in making women’s accessories. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that the fields of craft industries in Oman take advantage of female commitment in following their advisors on one hand and their patience in making crafts more than men on the other. Figure 1 summarizes the final research outcomes (suggestions).

**Figure 1.** The final research outcomes (suggestions).

**Conclusion**

“Gender diversity” plays an important role in any cultural heritage enterprise, as shown in this article. Women’s predominance in the PACI, as contemporary gender change in this sector of cultural industries in Oman, can become a strength by taking advantage of women’s special social and biological qualities. Discussion of qualities, such as accepting small wages because of the Omani special social structure, positive impacts of introducing technologies, taking advantage of women’s creativity in females’ accessories crafts, and their regional predominance in some crafts industries, led in the end to identifying the strengths and weaknesses of women’s predominance in the craft industries. In other words, identifying women’s roles in cultural enterprises such as the PACI craft enterprises comes by identifying their social, cultural, and biological qualities within their own social structure.

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