**CASE STUDY**

Understanding innovative work behaviour of women in service firms

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**Abstract**

Globalisation, digitalisation, and deregulation are megatrends that demand smarter, diverse, and inclusive workplaces for harnessing full innovative potentials of workforces in developed and emerging economies. Motivated by this line of reasoning, this article investigates factors influencing women’s participation in innovative work behaviour (IWB), in an emerging economy context. Based on a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with 34 management employees in the Kuwaiti service sector, the article proposes a gender inclusive model supporting enhanced women’s IWB participation within service firms. The article concludes with discussions on the theoretical and managerial implications of the study and suggestions for future IWB research.

**Keywords** Innovative work behaviour · Gender role · Women and innovation · Workplace innovation · Gender inclusivity and diversity

**1 Introduction**

For service firms, there are on-going pressures to stimulate and encourage innovative work behaviour (IWB) of employees (Bos-Nehles et al. 2017; Abukhait et al. 2020; AlEssa and Durugbo 2021). IWB, in this context, means the behaviour of employees that creates, introduces, and applies new ideas intentionally at work, by a group or an organisation with contributions to overall organisational performance, competitiveness, and resilience. Compared to their men counterparts, women employees face unique challenges for IWB based on long-standing arguments, and perhaps misconceptions, that innovation is gender-biased due to some perceptions that women are less innovative than men are (Audretsch et al. 2022). Literature notes that having

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more women in the workforce supports overall business performance (Gallego and Gutiérrez 2018; Nadeem et al. 2020) but a series of worldwide events reveal deep-rooted societal biases towards women (Davidson and Burke 2016). Events, such as the financial crisis of 2008, and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, radically perturb existing institutions (AlMalki and Durugbo 2022), creating socio-economic distress, disrupting the status quo, and fostering inequality that disrupts progress made towards women’s participation and empowerment.

Considering the IWB of women gives rise to interesting service management challenges for further exploration. For a start, there is a gender inclusivity/diversity challenge to explain and improve the different contexts and experiences of IWB for women when compared to men employees. The challenge emerges from gender biases that persist in workplaces (Proudfoot et al. 2015; Elmore and Luna-Lucero 2017) with efforts underway to address underrepresentation and discrimination against women in workplaces (Begeny et al. 2020). Further complicating this challenge is the COVID-19 pandemic, with a recent ‘Women in the Workplace’ report by McKinsey & Company (2021) suggesting women are experiencing more work pressure and burnout than men, and that 18% of women with families are considering leaving their jobs compared to 11% of their men counterparts. Literature also delineates a socio-cultural challenge for the IWB of women employees in emerging economies when compared to their counterparts in advanced countries. For instance, in Middle Eastern countries, women’s participation requires careful understanding and context for the socio-cultural ideologies and gender roles, occupational gender segregation, and payment inequalities that typifies these countries (Adel and Alqatan 2019). Notably, literature argues for more studies of gender and innovation in emerging economies, given the primacy of innovation in the development strategies of these economies (Azeem et al. 2021). Combining the gender inclusivity/diversity and socio-cultural challenges for encouraging IWB of women in emerging economies creates a unique intermingled context for research and an analysis of the literature suggests limited studies with this focus. This dearth in the literature serves as the motivation for our study.

The aim of this study is to explore factors influencing women’s participation in IWB within the private service sector of an emerging economy and to use insights from these factors to propose a gender inclusive model for enhanced women’s participation at service firms. Using the state of Kuwait as the context and semi-structured interviews as the approach, this study crystallises the perceptions of management professionals on the factors that support IWB among women and how these factors influence women’s participation in IWB.

This research contributes to existing service management theory in two unique ways. First, the study provides new critical insights into IWB factors of women in service firms. Fundamentally, men and women differ in their innovation motivations because women tend to display willingness to help whereas men thrive in challenging situations (Azeem et al. 2021). Consequently, awareness of factors pertaining to IWB remains crucial in enabling firms reach their full innovative potential (Bos-Nehles et al. 2017; AlEssa and Durugbo 2021), particularly in the context of businesses within emerging economies (Asi and Williams 2020; Brugere et al. 2020; Zeb and Ihsan 2020; Al-Razgan et al. 2021). Second, and with close links to the first contribution, the research analyses the gender inclusivity/
diversity context of IWB within service firms. This contribution aligns with suggestions that gender inclusion is significant for companies that want to attract and retain top talents, and with fierce global competition among companies, service firms need to formulate, analyse, and implement strategies to develop and retain diverse human capital (Forbes Insight 2011).

Motivated by these contributions, this study seeks to support managers of service firms with lessons learnt on priorities for creating gender inclusive workforces. Accordingly, the target group for the study is an international community of researchers and practitioners of management strategies and policies for the service sector, and considering the aim and context, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

**RQ1:** What factors influence women’s participation in IWB within the service sector from the perspective of management employees?

**RQ2:** How can service firms enhance IWB and innovation among women for more gender inclusive workplaces?

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, the article presents the background for the research followed by the methodology and findings of the semi-structured interviews. The article concludes with a discussion on implications, limitations, and future research directions.

### 2 Literature review

Although the growing number of studies on women in the field of entrepreneurship (Alsos et al. 2013, 2016) is associated with developments in literature on women in the field of innovation management (Nair 2020; Loarne-Lemaire et al. 2021), this study is grounded on the latter field. Furthermore, there is significant coverage of women’s participation in literature on entrepreneurship within emerging economy contexts (Anggadwita et al. 2017; Mehtap et al. 2017; Bastian et al. 2018; Erogul et al. 2019; Tlaiss and McAdam 2021) but this is not the focus for our research. Additionally, the main goal here is not to revisit or engage in the feminist discourse and debate on gendered understandings (Alsos et al. 2016) or feminist empiricist traditions in literature (Azeem et al. 2021), rather, the interest in this research lies in knowledge on the tendencies of women to participate in IWB within service firms. In so doing, this research seeks to offer better understanding of issues concerning IWB for women and how this understanding can aid in overcoming barriers of women’s participation, thus creating more gender inclusive service firms that optimally utilise workforce innovativeness.

For this research, the main premise is that an awareness and consideration of factors influencing IWB in women—leads to a more gender inclusive workplace for service firms in emerging economies. The next sub-sections present an overview of research on women in service firms and innovation in emerging economies, and a preliminary framing of the IWB concept that drives the empirical portion of this study.
2.1 Women in service firms: an overview

Evidence suggests the service sector, which accounts for two-thirds of global employment and GDP (Crevani et al. 2011), consists of approximately 60% women workers (The World Bank 2021), with trends showing increases in the number of women entering professional services (Kumra and Vinnicombe 2008). However, women are under-represented in certain service sectors such as engineering and technology services (Meyer et al. 2015; Kahn and Ginther 2017), and law (Schultz and Masengu 2020). Researchers also note that women remain a minority in management positions; with a majority of women facing obstacles to secure management positions (Hoyt and Murphy 2016)). Significantly, according to Broadbridge (2010), men on the executive boards of service firms can outnumber women by as much as a ratio of 8:1 and the representation of women on the boards of Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) service sector companies is lower at about 24.3%.

Within sectoral studies, the need to understand potential differences, divisions, and diversity in gender contexts remains important (De Abreu Dos Reis et al. 2007; Akehurst et al. 2012). This need serves as the motivation for on-going service sector research into areas such as entrepreneurial intentions (Anggadwita et al. 2021), error management culture (Guchait et al. 2018), and informal work (Kedir et al. 2018). Research on gender differences traditionally tends to frame studies in terms of the status of women as a ‘problem’ or the status quo as defined by ‘root causes’ (Hicks 1990). In both instances, there is a need for change with pressures to deliver novel solutions or prescriptions for service firms.

Although evidence suggests that empowered women workforces are unexploited sources of economic growth, the gap between numbers of men and women in professional work has hardly progressed since the 1990’s (Grown 2018). Generally, some improvement in women’s education, declining fertility, and women postponing marriages are reasons cited for increased participation of women (Lee and Cho 2005). Accordingly, underpinning sectoral studies on women’s participation in firms is the need to shed light on influencing factors such as firm characteristics and management, innovation motivation, financial strategy, and so on (Akehurst et al. 2012). In addition, several systemic factors inhibit women’s participation at workplaces such as widespread gender inequality, prejudices, preconceptions, stereotypes, and inflexible economic and social structures (WIPO 2017). Therefore, an awareness of factors influencing women’s participation at workplaces is crucial to the strategies of service firms for fixing/preventing these biases and problems. Such fixes aid in boosting human capital for service firms.

2.2 Women and innovation in emerging economies: the context

Contemporary reviews indicate that literature on women in innovation is novel (Loarne-Lemaire et al. 2021) with recent studies highlighting the value of female employees working with an experienced manager (Azeem et al. 2021), female directors for environmental innovation (Nadeem et al. 2020), and so on. Innovation
means “the process through which new ideas, objects and practices are created, developed, or reinvented” (Slappendel 1996, p. 107) and this process drives the growth, financial performance, and employment by businesses (Tidd and Bessant 2018). Generally, researchers tackle the challenge of attracting and involving women in innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship fields (Grosvold et al. 2016; Tlaiss and McAdam 2021) because businesses, including those in the service sector, may not reach their full innovative potential with limited awareness on mechanisms to stimulate and encourage workplace innovation (Bos-Nehles et al. 2017; Durugbo 2020; AlEssa and Durugbo 2021). Evidence increasingly shows positive influences of women employees and their IWB (Hoyt and Murphy 2016; Grown 2018) even though literature consistently notes that gender-based barriers within workplaces and institutions hinder women’s participation in innovation (Alsos et al. 2016). These barriers and impediments include gendered attitudes, limited access to finance, support, networks, and markets, as well as bureaucratic barriers.

Related research (e.g., Pons et al. 2016) identifies a range of individual and organisational variables that explain gender differences in relation to innovation (e.g., creative capacity, openness to experiences, self-confidence, and leadership capacity) but these insights tend to emerge from the context of Western and advanced economies. For emerging economies, social advancement spurred by globalisation and digitalisation sheds the spotlight on entrepreneurial women even though women’s participation in innovation still depends on restrictive contexts (Zeb and Ihsan 2020). Specifically, due to socio-political, cultural, and religious reasons (Asi and Williams 2020), patriarchal gender norms and expectations remain more prevalent in emerging economies, when compared to developed states. The role of social norms in inhibiting women’s participation within emerging economies is also widely recognised with calls for studies on how these norms and other pertinent factors influence innovation contexts (Azeem et al. 2021).

An analysis of the literature highlights two focal points for women’s participation in innovation within emerging economies: gender inclusivity and diversity. The first gender inclusivity focus is an ‘innovation-cum-empowerment’ mandate based on the core premise that the effectiveness of innovation depends on transformations to gender relations (Brugere et al. 2020). Here, empowerment means the power to make one’s own choices and connections, and to pursue one’s own aspirations (Asi and Williams 2020). This inclusivity mandate calls attention to existing gender dynamics and inequalities that major corporations confront through initiatives such as the Women’s Safety Accelerator Fund by Unilever and the 5by20 goal of Coca-Cola. From a policy perspective, these initiatives are in line with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” by 2030 (UNDP 2019), and researchers focus on analysing diverse perceptions concerning regional gender inclusion initiatives. For instance, using the diffusion of innovation (DOI) theory, Al-Razgan et al. (2021) examine perceptions on the legalisation of women driving as a public innovation, an idea flaunted in 1990 and made legal in 2018. Based on sentiment analysis of 150,000 tweets from seven active hashtag, the study shows that from mostly initial negative and sceptical sentiments toward women driving, stances evolved towards positive stances. Using DOI, Al-Razgan et al. argue that acceptance of Saudi women drivers
as part of the wider innovation adoption process takes time and entails knowledge, persuasion, and decision phases. Similarly, using the DOI framework, Brugere et al. (2020) analyse the adoption potential of tubular nets as a technological innovation for women seaweed producers in Zanzibar. Reflecting on the function and influence of the innovation, the authors urge for a rethink of technology designs to reflect transformation potentials of technology and to co-design solutions in partnership with women stakeholders. Using social capital theory, Asi and Williams (2020) also analyse the innovation-cum-empowerment mandate in the context of health information technology integration for empowering women in the health care workforce. The authors argue that using technology for women empowerment requires context for gender power dynamics in workplaces because if adoption takes place in a system of gender inequality, the technology may reinforce the existing social structure and further disenfranchise women.

The second gender diversity focus is on the significant and visible disparities in the participation of women in innovation, described in terms of a gender gap or a gender bias (Nair 2020), and the need for more diversity regarding the presence of women (i.e., variety) and the proportion of women (i.e., balance) (Nadeem et al. 2020). Although evidence suggests gender diversity is positively related to innovation (Østergaard et al. 2011), diversity does not necessarily mean inclusivity. In other words, being in a diverse workplace does not necessarily mean that the entire service firm takes part in innovation or that all employees receive exposure to the same innovation opportunities or are getting the same support and recognition. Generally, the spotlight for the diversity mandate is on the closure of gender gaps in spheres or work and life, which remains a core priority for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Bank (OECD 2018). In the literature, studies such as Ben Rejeb et al. (2019) analyse the moderating effects of gender diversity on the link between company board roles and ambidextrous innovation. With evidence supporting the moderating effects on service and strategic roles, the researchers urge for more women directorships to support alternative ideas and new strategic stances. Likewise, Azeem et al. (2021) analyse how a blending of female owners and female top managers supports innovation, using the World Bank Enterprise survey data from 16 low- and middle-income countries. The researchers find evidence for this support and argue for female-to-female mentoring to overcome social and cultural barriers for women’s participation in innovation that enhances value-added productivity of businesses. In a study of women-owned small- and medium-sized enterprises in Pakistan, Zeb and Ihsan (2020) show significant direct relationships between entrepreneurial traits of risk-taking tendency and the need for achievement and innovation. The study recommends the promotion of fair competition practices between men and women along with special grants for women entrepreneurs in this emerging economy context.

Despite the complementary and progressive nature of both gender inclusivity and diversity mandates, a research-oriented paradox exists for women’s participation in innovation, and this contradiction personifies the need for further scholarly work (Alsos et al. 2016). On the one hand, increasing evidence indicates gender diversity positively influences innovation, and on the other hand, policy makers and scholars continue to overlook women empowerment (through participation in innovation)
due to gendered understandings largely informed by research. In advancement of scholarly work on women and innovation in emerging economies, this research focuses on women’s participation in IWB that fosters gender inclusivity, and in the next subsection, we present a preliminary framing of concepts for the IWB topic.

### 2.3 Innovative work behaviour: preliminary framing

Previous innovation studies note that IWB is different from creativity, yet some researchers use both terms interchangeably (Farr and Ford 1990; Scott and Bruce 1994). However, the difference lies in the fact that creativity relates to processes for creating an idea while the locus for IWB extends beyond these processes to implementation levels (Helmy et al. 2020). From prior literature, four main concepts delineate IWB in workplaces: innovative work learning and leadership (IWLL), innovative work processes and performance (IWPP), innovative work characteristics and condition (IWCC), and innovative work inhibitors and interdependencies (IWII) (AlEssa and Durugbo 2021). Figure 1 presents these concepts in an initial research framing that serves as the basis for analysing IWB in this research.

IWLL involves knowledge acquisition for innovation based on quality relationships between employees and managers (Schuh et al. 2018; Atitumpong and Badir...
The IWLL concept accentuates behaviours of leadership and knowledge sharing as part of IWB (AlEssa and Durugbo 2021) and encapsulates avenues for the development of relationships between employees and supervisors with the spotlight on knowledge exchanges (Park et al. 2013) within organisation climates that support innovation (Topcu et al. 2015). Essentially, company leaders play a crucial role in creating the climate and environment that makes employees feel safe to participate in creating and applying new ideas (Caniëls and Veld 2019).

IWPP entails favourable performances for job processes (AlEssa and Durugbo 2021) and underpinning these processes is human resource management (HRM) (Messmann and Mulder 2012; Schuh et al. 2018) due to the implications of procedures such as performance appraisals. The IWPP concept places emphasis on behaviours within HRM practices and the creativity and implementation forms of performance regarding new ideas for firms (AlEssa and Durugbo 2021). Here, the specific interests vary with focus on areas such as supporting autonomy, ambidextrous, flexibility, reflective employees, and team performance (Dorenbosch et al. 2005; Messmann and Mulder 2012; Theurer et al. 2018; Curzi et al. 2019).

IWCC encompasses individual qualities and characteristics attuned to environmental conditions for fostering innovativeness in organisations (Woods et al. 2018; Azevedo and Shane 2019). The IWPP concept gives prominence to the personalities and competencies associated with IWB (AlEssa and Durugbo 2021), and in line with creative cognition approaches, IWCC reflects a mix of individual proficiencies that account for how people generate creative ideas. Core aspects accounting for IWCC include mindfulness, cultural intelligence, spirituality, creativity, entrepreneurial, political skills, positive self-regard, and so on. Thus, for organisations, the challenge remains to discover the blend of personalities and competencies for achieving positive performance (Tri et al. 2019; Clarke and Higgs 2020).

IWII embodies a range of workplace factors in potential virtuous and vicious cycles that influence IWB, especially beyond the scope of IWLL, IWPP, and IWCC. In line with the expectancy theory of motivation and threat rigidity theory, the IWII concept draws attention to preventive and promotion factors that motivate participation in IWB (AlEssa and Durugbo 2021) but with greater emphasis on potential inhibiting or enabling factors within organisations and the wider environments beyond individual goal-orientations. Psychological empowerment, supportive process innovations, climates for initiative, and psychological safety are some examples of positives that facilitate IWB (Baer and Frese 2003; Rehman et al. 2019), while job stressors, injustice, and job insecurity are negatives that hinder (Vander Elst et al. 2016; Van Hootegem et al. 2019).

Generally, IWB within organisations is a risky behaviour that requires courageous employees in consonance with a favourable and receptive workplace to enable this behaviour (Melton and Hartline 2010). Management commitments combined with employee participation are also essential for facilitating workplace behaviour that boosts the quality of working life and organisational performance (Pot 2011). These considerations reinforce the importance of IWB in research and practice. While research stresses the need to expand the domain of innovation in workplaces beyond novelty in technology, products, and services (Prus et al. 2017), IWB tends
to be perceived as a masculine activity because it involves risk, with some authors noting that due to this perception, women are considered stereotype violators when they innovate (Luksyte et al. 2018).

With research on innovation in service firms increasingly moving away from designs for efficient processes to effective utilisation of the innovative potential of service workers (Crevani et al. 2011), our study focuses on an emerging economy context and seeks to shed light on factors influence IWB among women in the service sector. Driven by the research aim and questions, the next section presents the research methodology regarding the rationale of the adopted methods and research philosophy.

3 Methodology

Case study methodology guides this research due to the methodology’s support for construct validity, generating new theories, making inferences regarding causal mechanisms, historical explanation of cases and addressing complex causal relation (Bennett 2004). This preference enables the research to confront the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions posed by this research and provides in-depth understanding on the perspective of management employees in workplaces. In addition, constructivism is the philosophy of choice in this research. Constructivism argues that individuals actively generate scientific knowledge and researchers can learn about phenomena based on analytical reasoning (Glasersfeld 2005; Groome 2014). The philosophy suggests that participants construct their own reality, and this feature supports the focus of this study on investigating the factors that influence women’s participation in IWB, based on the constructed realities, i.e., the perspectives, of management employees.

3.1 Case setting

The private service sector in the State of Kuwait offers the case for this study. With a workforce of approximately 1.6 million, this sector consists of transportation, storage, communications postal services, wire and wireless communications, wholesale and retail trade, hotels and restaurants, financial intermediation and insurance, real estate, renting and business activities and community, social and personal services (The Public Authority for Civil Information 2020). The need to stimulate innovation and growth of the private sector is a focal point of the National Development Plan (KNDP) and this need reflects the practical relevance of our research. Launched in 2017, the KNDP, known as the Kuwait Vision 2035 program, seeks to innovate and transform Kuwait into a financial, cultural and trade leader.

Related studies of women in Kuwait consider a range of topics such as motives for entrepreneurship (Naser et al. 2012), research agenda for leadership (Al-Salem and Speece 2017), and support for socio-political participation and human resource development (Tétreault 2001; Al-Kazi 2011; Alzuabi 2016). The majority of these empirical studies focus on the Kuwaiti public sector or examine general awareness
and trends for women empowerment. Women’s participation and empowerment in the workforce remains fundamental to economic growth for Kuwait (Al-Hamli 2013) and innovation plays a central role in transforming the purported “resource curse” mind-sets of countries rich in natural resources, like Kuwait, into a “blessing” via diversification and knowledge creation efforts (Al Sabah 2011). Like its oil-rich neighbours in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, Kuwait strives for an innovation-driven economy that is less dependent on oil with targets set to empower the 52.14% of women labour force in Kuwait (The Public Authority for Civil Information 2018). However, discrimination in Kuwait towards women does exist as suggested by research (Alzuabi 2016; Adel and Alqatan 2019), and there is no clear principle in the Kuwait constitution regarding women, even though Article 7 of the Kuwaiti constitution recognises the principle of equality regardless of race, language, origin, or religion. Kuwait ranks 53rd out of 162 countries in the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP 2019), and just like most Arab women, Kuwaiti women face social, cultural, and political challenges (Alzuabi 2016). However, data suggest a range of progressive and on-going initiatives by the Kuwaiti government to support women in innovation (Najib and Whitacre 2020). These unique characteristics make Kuwait an interesting and viable backdrop to explore enabling and inhibiting factors for IWB in an emerging economy context.

3.2 Sample and data collection

Relying on purposive sampling (Barbour 2001), the interviewees consist of 34 management employees from the banking, hospitality, telecommunication, and professional services (marketing, construction, interior design, photography, and law) sectors, as shown by Table 1. The sample includes men and women to capture a balanced perspective on factors influencing IWB among women, and data collection took place between March 2020 and June 2020. This focus is deliberate and intended to support inclusiveness in the service sector where women workers exceed men (The World Bank 2021), making the focus of gender inclusion for IWB in this sector highly significant.

Although surveys offers examination of the level of agreement for factors, this study adopts semi-structured interviews in line with suggestions that studying actual local conditions through meanings and nuances (typically afforded by qualitative research) aids in understanding contexts that advance research and practices (Al-Salem and Speece 2017). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews afford researchers with understandings based on depth on the nature of phenomena and conditions (Pickard 2014) such as factors influencing IWB.

Solicitation for the purposive sample began with initial contact via telephone and email conversations with administrators of major Kuwaiti service firms in the private sector. The administrators subsequently consulted with top management and identified appropriate interviewees for the study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and guidelines for physical distancing, all interviews took place virtually via phone calls in an average time of 55 min (ranging from 21 to 101 min) with an interview protocol (see Appendix) developed based on the preliminary framing of Fig. 1. For
Table 1 Overview of interviewees

| Interviewee | Position            | Service sector      | Working experience in the service sector (years) | Gender | Interview duration (minutes) |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------|
| Fem_1       | Manager             | Banking             | 15                                               | Female | 69                            |
| Fem_2       | Business partner    | Banking             | 21                                               | Female | 46                            |
| Fem_3       | Assistant General Manager | Banking         | 19                                               | Female | 68                            |
| Fem_4       | Head of unit       | Banking             | 14                                               | Female | 34                            |
| Fem_5       | Associate manager  | Banking             | 10                                               | Female | 41                            |
| Fem_6       | Manager             | Banking             | 26                                               | Female | 35                            |
| Fem_7       | Executive director | Banking             | 23                                               | Female | 90                            |
| Fem_8       | Assistant Manager  | Banking             | 15                                               | Female | 32                            |
| Fem_9       | Senior auditor     | Banking             | 13                                               | Female | 21                            |
| Fem_10      | Manager             | Banking             | 17                                               | Female | 31                            |
| Fem_11      | Assistant Manager  | Banking             | 20                                               | Female | 53                            |
| Fem_12      | Deputy General Manager | Professional services | 4                                           | Female | 65                            |
| Fem_13      | Free-lance–owner   | Professional services | 7                                        | Female | 31                            |
| Fem_14      | General Manager    | Telecommunications  | 16                                               | Female | 64                            |
| Fem_15      | Project manager    | Professional services | 10                        | Female | 28                            |
| Fem_16      | Head of unit       | Telecommunications  | 15                                               | Female | 81                            |
| Fem_17      | Deputy General Manager | Professional services | 6                                        | Female | 69                            |
| Fem_18      | Founder–Manager    | Professional services | 14                                         | Female | 33                            |
| Fem_19      | Founder–Manager    | Professional services | 7                                         | Female | 94                            |
| Fem_20      | Unit Manager       | Telecommunication   | 18                                               | Female | 58                            |
| Fem_21      | Manager             | Professional services | 16                        | Female | 77                            |
| Fem_22      | Head of department | Telecommunication   | 18                                               | Female | 101                           |
| Mal_1       | Director            | Hospitality         | 15                                               | Male   | 37                            |
| Mal_2       | Director            | Hospitality         | 22                                               | Male   | 24                            |
| Mal_3       | Manager             | Banking             | 16                                               | Male   | 61                            |
| Mal_4       | Head of unit       | Banking             | 25                                               | Male   | 66                            |
| Mal_5       | Managing partner   | Food and beverage   | 10                                               | Male   | 67                            |
| Mal_6       | Managing partner   | Professional services | 12                                      | Male   | 95                            |
| Mal_7       | Chief operation officer | Food and beverage | 19                                           | Male   | 55                            |
| Mal_8       | Managing partner   | Food and beverage   | 14                                               | Male   | 83                            |
| Mal_9       | CEO                 | Professional services | 15                                    | Male   | 83                            |
| Mal_10      | Founder–owner       | Food and beverage   | 3                                                | Male   | 41                            |
| Mal_11      | Managing partner   | Professional services | 18                            | Male   | 48                            |
| Mal_12      | Managing partner   | Professional services | 9                                         | Male   | 67                            |
balanced responses, and to limit biased views on women’s participation, the protocol avoids leading questions that tend to produce priming effects. Rather, questions focus on gender differences along the lines of “what are the differences between men and women …” and this approach signals focus for the subsequent analysis to isolate and extract perceived differences related to women’s participation. All interviewees gave permission for the recording of interviews to enable transcription. At the request of participants, the article applies pseudonyms, i.e., Fem_1 to Fem_22 (for female interviewees), and Mal_1 to Mal_12 (for male interviewees) allowing interviewees to be anonymous. Open-ended questions of the interview protocol prepared beforehand focus on the four main concepts of IWB, in line with the literature and research background. The research achieves triangulation with some participants through informal follow up phone calls and via email.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis involves identifying and assessing themes within the transcripts i.e., thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2012). The process entails reading and clustering the patterns that arise then reviewing themes separately and jointly to confirm the consistency and inclusiveness of identified themes. The key benefit and motivation for adopting this approach is the support for flexibility and researcher judgement being central to determining each theme (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Transcribed interviews serve as the focus for the thematic analysis that involves using software version 8.4.26.0 of ATLAS.ti (Friese 2014), which aids in managing transcriptions for thematic grouping and coding functionalities. Guiding the thematic analysis is a six-stage process (Braun and Clarke 2006) that involves data familiarisation, initial code generations, identification of potential themes, review of theme, definition of themes, and report production. Combining transcripts from the 34 interviews into a single word processing document (.docx) creates a single focal point and eases the implementation of the analysis stages. Importing the single 217-page document containing 32,270 words in an ATLAS.ti project, preceded subsequent steps for marking quotes and concepts of interest/importance as ‘codes’ and groupings for codes and documents. ‘Memos’ help key track of changes and details of codes, and using network diagrams, the research documents and visualises the relationships between ‘nodes’, i.e., codes, quotations, and documents. Working through the six-stage process generates 171 initial codes from which the study identifies 75 themes that subsequently produced 15 themes for the reporting stage, after review and refinement. Intercoder-reliability based on percentage agreement is 91.5% (75/82), and results in five dropped concepts that relate to men’s participation and two concepts that resonate in other themes.

Five independent researchers reviewed the documents of the established themes, and the purposive sampling of managers from different Kuwaiti service firms seeks to improve the external validity of the research. In line with the inductive method (Denzin 2007) and constructivism perception (Groome 2014) of this article, the process of analysing themes helps construct the worldviews of the participants. This process involves considering all inputs evenly, investigating casual links
about the topic, building inductive analytic conclusions, and disregarding different interpretations.

4 Findings

Synthesis of the data from the interviews suggests seven tendencies or propensities as themes clustered into three categories: individualistic, inhibitive, and inclusive. The interviews also identify eight counterthemes as a critique to these tendencies. The next subsections present these different themes after an initial analysis of the interviewees’ responses on differences between men and women concerning IWB concepts.

4.1 Gender and innovative work behaviour: analysis

Initial analysis of the interviews focuses on expressed differences between men and women concerning the factors of IWLL, IWPP, IWCC, and IWII. Table 2 summarises these differences and shows that 75 (27.6%) out the possible 272 (i.e., 8 factors multiplied by 34 interviewees) observations indicated differences between men and women. Overall, 27 (79.4%) out of the 34 interviewees expressed gender differences concerning IWB, with 22 of the interviewees (18 females and 4 males) noting differences in two or more concepts. The table also shows that two female participants (Fem_16 and Fem_22) noted differences in five factors. During the interviewees, six male (i.e., half of the men interviewed) and two female interviewees (Fem_9 and Fem_15) consistently noted that there were no gender differences related to any of the IWB factors.

Concerning IWLL, the analysis indicates 50% (10/20) of the female interviewees believed there were differences between men and women concerning leadership that motivates IWB, with the exclusion of two interviewees who could not tell (Fem_15) or did not know (Fem_17) if there was a difference. For some, women leaders are uniquely innovative in their behaviour and different due to attributes such as professionalism (Fem_2, Fem_18), support for other women (Fem_22), and smartness and diligence (Fem_1, Fem_16). Empathy (Fem_9, Fem_11, and Fem_12) as a characteristic of female leaders is another aspect with positive and negative influences on implementation, as suggested by a female deputy general manager:

“I feel empathy in men is low … I think women are better in this area just because it’s embedded in them naturally, they don’t have to practice. However, empathy can backfire sometimes. Employees used empathy in the wrong way, they used to be late for work, and work was not done on time” (Fem_12)

Other interviewees noted negative conditions such as limited opportunities (Fem_14) and a lack of appreciation (Fem_21), as accounting for differences. In terms of knowledge exchanges for IWB, 86.4% (19/22) female interviewees believed there were no differences between men and women. In the instances where interviewees note differences, the reasons are exchanges of ideas that tend to occur better
| Interviewee | IWL | Knowledge | HRM | Performance | Personal- | Compet- | Positives | Negatives |
|------------|-----|-----------|-----|-------------|-----------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| Fem_1      | ✔   | ✔         | C+P | ✔           | ✔         | ✔       | ✔         | ✔         |
| Fem_2      | ✔   |            | C+P | ✔           |           |         |           |           |
| Fem_3      |      |            | C+P | ✔           |           |         |           |           |
| Fem_4      | ✔   |           |     |             |           |         |           |           |
| Fem_5      | ✔   |           |     |             | NA        | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_6      |     | C+P       |     |             | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_7      | ✔   | ✔         | C+P | ✔           |           |         |           |           |
| Fem_8      | ✔   | ✔         |     |             | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_9      | ✔   |           |     |             | NA        | NA      |           |           |
| Fem_10     |     |           |     | C+P         | ✔         |         |           |           |
| Fem_11     | ✔   |           |     |             |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_12     | ✔   |           | C+P | ✔           |           |         |           |           |
| Fem_13     |     |           | C+P | ✔           |           |         |           |           |
| Fem_14     | ✔   | ✔         | C+P | ✔           |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_15     |     |           |     |             | NA        | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_16     | ✔   | ✔         | C+P | ✔           | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_17     |     |           |     |             | NA        | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_18     | ✔   | ✔         |     | P           | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_19     |     |           |     | P           | ✔         |         |           |           |
| Fem_20     | ✔   | ✔         |     | P           |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_21     | ✔   | ✔         |     | P           | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Fem_22     |     |           |     |             | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_1      |     |           |     |             |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_2      |     |           |     |             |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_3      |     |           |     |             |           |         |           |           |
| Mal_4      |     |           | C   | ✔           | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_5      |     |           |     |             |           |         |           |           |
| Mal_6      | ✔   |           | C+P | ✔           |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_7      |     |           |     |             |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_8      |     |           |     |             | NA        | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_9      | ✔   |           |     |             |           | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_10     | ✔   |           |     |             | C         | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_11     | ✔   | ✔         | C+P | ✔           | ✔         | ✔       |           |           |
| Mal_12     | ✔   | ✔         | C+P | ✔           |           | ✔       |           |           |

✔ indicates noted differences between men and women, C denotes performances differences in creativity, P denotes performances differences in implementation, and NA indicates non-applicability.
between same genders (Fem_7, Fem_18) and preferences of females to share ideas more (Fem_22). In contrast, the analysis indicates that 25% (3/12) of the male interviewees believed there were IWLL differences between men and women, with the recurring argument against gender differences being that the ability to lead for IWB, “Depends on the demography. There will be challenges for a female employee different from male employee, but when you talk about an innovation, no role” (Fem_2)

For knowledge exchanges, the opinions of the male interviewees are that women tend to look into details (Mal_12) and share more (Mal_10), as earlier noted.

For IWPP, the interviews show that 63.6% (14/22) and 45.5% (10/22) believed there were differences between men and women concerning creativity- and implementation-based performance from IWB, respectively. In regard to how HRM supports IWB, the interviews finds that 45% (9/20) believed there were differences between men and women, with the exclusion of two different interviewees who could not tell (Fem_9, Fem_10) if there was a difference. No male interviewees noted gender differences regarding how HRM supports IWB between while 41.7% (5/12) and 25% (3/12) suggested gender differences relating to creativity- and implementation-based performance from IWB, respectively.

Regarding IWCC, the breakdown indicates that 50% (10/20) of the female interviewees believed there were differences between men and women concerning personalities that drive IWB, with the exclusion of two interviewees who could not answer (Fem_4) or noted it did not apply (Fem_9). In contrast, two male interviewees (16.7%) noted gender differences in both personalities and competences that stimulate IWB. No female respondents noted gender differences concerning competencies for IWB.

For IWII, positive factors from the interviews include incentives (Fem_3), delegation (Fem_7), good communication through one-to-one meetings (Fem_2, Fem_14, Fem_20, and Fem_22), offsite meetings (Fem_6), and open-door policy (Mal_1, Fem_21). Similarly, negative factors include limited time for implementation of ideas often due to bureaucracy (Fem_1, Fem_10, Fem_11, and Mal_5), negative attitudes to change (Mal_1, Fem_12, Fem_19, and Fem_20), restrictive regulations (Mal_2, Fem_3, Mal_6, and Mal_7), and limited empowerment (Mal_3). The analysis shows that 27.3% (6/22) and 18.2% (4/22) of the female interviewees perceived gender differences regarding preventive and promotion factors for IWB, respectively. One male (Mal_4) interviewee noted a shyness-based difference between men and women concerning IWB while there were no noted differences concerning negative factors.

4.2 Women and tendencies for innovative work behaviour: synthesis

This subsection presents a synthesis of the interview findings in relation to instances where interviewees noted differences between men and women regarding IWB. Table 3 and the network diagram of Fig. 2 summarise these instances and the synthesis identifies three main sets of themes that characterise the IWB
Table 3  Viewpoints on the IWB tendencies of women

| Interviewee | IWLL  | IWPP  | IWCC  | IWII |
|-------------|-------|-------|-------|------|
|              | Leadership | Knowledge | HRM Performance | Personality | Competence | Prevention | Promotion |
| Fem_1        | SW1; SW4 | E3; E1 | SW3    | E1   |
| Fem_2        | SW2    | RO4   | DD3    | A1   |
| Fem_3        | DD2; D2|       |        |      |
| Fem_4        |        | RO3   |        | D1   |
| Fem_5        |        | SW1   |        | D1   |
| Fem_6        |        | DD4   | E2     |      |
| Fem_7        |        | NA    |        |      |
| Fem_8        |        | NA    |        |      |
| Fem_9        |        | NA    |        |      |
| Fem_10       |        | NA    | C3     |      |
| Fem_11       |        | E2    |        |      |
| Fem_12       | A2     | RO1   |        |      |
| Fem_13       | A2     | DD2   |        |      |
| Fem_14       | NA     |        |        |      |
| Fem_15       |        |        |        |      |
| Fem_16       | SW1    | SW1   | SW3;   | RO2; |
|              |        |       | RO3    | DD4  | C1    |
| Fem_17       | NA     |        |        | E2   |      |
| Fem_18       | RO1;   | C3    |        | C1   |
|              | DD3    |       |        |      |
| Fem_19       | C1     | A1    |        |      |
| Fem_20       | DD1;   | A1    |        | D1   |
|              | DD3    |       |        |      |
| Fem_21       | C3     | SW1   | RO1    |      |
| Fem_22       | SW3    | RO1   | E2     | DD4  | C2    |
| Mal_1        |        |       |        |      |
| Mal_2        |        |       |        |      |
| Mal_3        |        |       |        |      |
| Mal_4        |        |       |        |      |
| Mal_5        |        |       |        |      |
| Mal_6        | DD3    | RO1   |        |      |
| Mal_7        |        |       |        |      |
| Mal_8        | NA     |       |        |      |
| Mal_9        | DD4    |       |        |      |
| Mal_10       | SW3    | R03   |        |      |
| Mal_11       | DD1    | C3    | A2     | C1   |
| Mal_12       | C1     | DD3; D1 | RO3   |      |

In the table, the tendencies are:

Strong-willed (SW1—strong character, SW2—strong willed women, SW3—persistence and more effort, and SW4—professional and strong)
tendencies of women across IWLL, IWPP, IWCC, and IWII. These themes relate to individualistic, inhibitive, and inclusive tendencies.

### 4.2.1 Individualistic tendencies

The initial set of themes capture tendencies concerning the specific characteristics of women that enable IWB. These tendencies mainly emerge from responses to the IWLL, IWCC and IWPP questions, as shown by Table 3.

**Being strong-willed** (Fem_1, Fem_2, Fem_7, Fem_16, Fem_18, Fem_21, Fem_22, and Mal_10) is the first theme and it entails determination and firmness in support of workplace engagement that spurs IWB, as suggested by the following excerpts from female respondents:

> “Females as leaders in the bank are very strong willed women. They set better examples because they think about the people and how to get them engaged” (Fem_3)

Concepts clustered within the theme include firmness or assertiveness based on smart behaviour and professionalism, as follows:

> “I was reporting directly to a female consultant who was an amazing leader, she was **firm and honest** and didn’t allow connections to interfere, **she was fair**, and employees felt secure at their jobs.” (Fem_18)

> “In my own opinion, I have tried both a male and a female leader; females tend to be **very professional but tough**” (Fem_3)

> “If you believe in something you have to impose it in a very **smart way** that we are not labelled as aggressive and as more as **assertive**” (Fem_16)

The impression from the interviews is that supportive leadership in itself sets a good IWB example that cascades down to employees. For instance, relating experiences of underappreciated IWB during which she felt like “a piece of furniture” with limited recognition of her creative ideas, a now deputy general manager of a bank recalled

> “I actually resigned three times and what kept me from following through with it was a woman leader, she **had high empathy.**” (Fem_12)
Fig. 2 Overview of main themes on tendencies for IWB of women (grey boxes show codes based on interview excerpts, other colored boxes show identified tendencies, and clear boxes with numbering show some illustrative related quotes)
From the interview, persistence as a strong-willed concept remains a personal characteristic with links to the IWCC concept, and employees possessing such quality tend to have more IWB, as expressed by an interviewee:

“Women are more persistent, so she seeks creativity” (Fem_1)

Stemming from IWLL and IWCC concepts, this tendency combines the knowledge transfer focus of IWLL and personality in IWCC, as expressed by an interviewee:

“We learn from each other’s point of view. Going back to skillsets, in teams we have to complete each other…. In terms of innovativeness and creativity, as long as the person is motivated/passionate and has a calm mind these are the ones I see creative but a busy mind that has a lot of tasks and jumps from task to task usually doesn’t have enough time to generate ideas or even good value ideas.” (Fem_17)

The insinuation being that passion generates quality ideas, while persistence delivers it. For the implementation of an innovative idea, employees face difficulties that might deter the process such as time and resources or even a change-resisting manager. However, persisting employees tend to power through these obstacles and follow through with their innovative ideas.

**Being detail-driven** (Fem_2, Fem_4, Fem_8, Fem_14, Fem_16, Int_ 30, Fem_20, Fem_22, Mal_6, Mal_9, Mal_11, and Mal_12) is the second theme, reflected using the term ‘detailed’ 17 times during the interviews to describe the IWB of women. Examples of excerpts in support of the theme include:

“I feel from my experience that females are more detail oriented so to manage them you have to be very well prepared with the details, they ask more questions” (Fem_2)

“Women are more detailed” (Fem_8)

“Women are more into details” (Fem_11)

“Females are better at their attention to detail” (Fem_16)

“By nature, women have more attention into details and are multitaskers” (Fem_22)

This attention to details emphasises the quality of an idea, rather than the quantity or volume of ideas. In this context, the data indicates that knowledge combined with passion facilities IWB for valuable ideas. This tendency, according to interviewees, supports follow-ups, knowledge exchanges and information sharing, in keeping with IWLL, as illustrated by the following:

“When I had a female leader, I felt that the flow of information was better, and she made sure to transfer her knowledge more and even encouraged us to learn information from other departments and do jobs that we aren’t hired to do just to get the experience itself.” (Fem_18)

“Women do follow up more and more into details. For innovation I do think it’s better to follow up, not only take the risk and give me the output because
at a certain stage of implementing the idea you might divert off from the company’s vision, so it’s better to follow up” (Fem_20)

**Being reliability-oriented** (Fem_2, Fem_3, Fem_6, Fem_7, Fem_12, Fem_16, Fem_18, Fem_21, Fem_22, Mal_4, Mal_6, and Mal_12) is the next theme derived fundamentally from concepts of dedication and creativity. Interviewees argued that hard work pays off, and that women who tend to work hard are more reliable and can have more confidence to take risks. The main view is that female workers perform tasks conscientiously to the point that it makes them look like they are trying to prove their competence and capability. This attitude could be due to cultural pressures or to the preconceptions that women worked harder. As three female managers put it:

“I do see a difference between men and women as leaders; women tend to **work very hard**” (Fem_1)
“I feel that women are more hard workers. Men always take breaks females are **more dedicated.**” (Fem_12)
“(Women) are **more reliable and conscientious**” (Fem_16)

Here, working hard implies performance and reliability, and at workplaces where innovation is part of annual key performance indicators (KPIs) for staff, IWB becomes a focus for employees (Fem_14 and Fem_22). Thus, KPIs enacted by human resources departments aid in involving employees in IWB because it becomes a part of their appraisal, requiring employees to work conscientiously on enhancing their innovativeness for better outcomes and performance.

Another IWPP-related perception is being able to conceive unconventional solutions and ‘out-of-the-box ideas’, making an employee stand out in their performance in terms of creativity, and according to interviews, women tend to excel. Here, reliability of women for IWB is a factor highlighted throughout the interviews because male and female interviewees consistently noted that:

“Women are **more creative**” (Fem_6, Fem_7, Fem_10, Mal_4 and Mal_10)
“Women are **more creative** than men” (Mal_12)
“Females are **more creative**” (Fem_3)
“I did notice that ladies ask good questions. In the company I do see that females are more innovative.” (Mal_9)

### 4.2.2 Inhibitive tendencies

The next set of themes concern inhibitive tendencies that negatively influence women’s participation in IWB. These themes hinge on *culture* as playing a significant role in inhibiting IWB for some interviewees, while others note *professions* as limiting to innovativeness for women with suggestions that certain fields inherently make women a minority (e.g., construction and law).

**Conservative** tendencies (Fem_10, Fem_13, Fem_16, Fem_18, Fem_19, Fem_21, Fem_22, Mal_4, Mal_11, and Mal_12) prefer traditional situations to a diverse and gender inclusive work environment for IWB and innovation.
Socio-culturally, Kuwaiti businesses tend to be uniquely influenced by *Diwaniya* or *Majles*—a social gathering place where men sit together to socialise and discuss issues. However, in this context, there is a negative social capital influence, with female interviewees expressing limitations to their innovativeness due to *Diwaniya* restrictions because attendance of women to these gathering remains culturally inappropriate. For women working in fields such as law and telecommunications, this limitation represents a major concern—highlighting a *culture-profession duality* that inhibits IWB among women in certain sectorial contexts. According to a male managing partner for a professional services firm:

“In our (Kuwaiti) **culture** we have limitations concerning the relations between men and women and that can be **limiting to a woman.**” (Mal_11)

Thus, a conservative leader tends to lead a conservative work environment, and this links back to the IWLL concept, emphasising the role of leaders and the prospects of leaders in supporting or hindering IWB. Some views were so extreme to the point that a trend of discrimination and discomfort emerged. As claimed by a female banking manager:

“There is **more support and push for men,** they rise and shine faster.” (Fem_6)

Other interviewees felt that they must be protective of women, limiting their exposure to certain work circumstance, rationalising this view with cultural imperatives and the need to be protective of women. These inhibitors concern the IWII concept in relation to IWB hindrances. Two managers of professional services firms noted as follows:

“Sometimes we don’t get to do tasks just because of the **culture of being protective of a woman.** I feel that women are not appreciated enough, it’s more male dominant as a rule of thumb.” (Fem_21)

“Gender role affects a female lawyer because we **do not prefer to send her** to drug cases and such.” (Mal_11)

**Anxiety** tendencies (Fem_3, Fem_12, Fem_14, Fem_19, Fem_20, Mal_4, and Mal_11) offer another negative layer that inhibits women from participating in innovation. This insecurity leads to fear of self-expression and shyness where individuals keep ideas to themselves, rather than share and implement their ideas. Interviews note that leaders aid in empowering women through encouragement for expressing ideas, in accordance with IWLL. Thus, women flourish around leaders who help them share more, and without these supporting leaders, women tend to be fearful. As remarked by a male CEO:

“I do feel that females might be **afraid to share their ideas**” (Mal_9)

In addition, when women build up the courage to express, another inhibitor arises—sensitivity. For instance, a female head of department for a telecoms firm noting that:

“Women are **more sensitive.**” (Fem_22)
Sensitivity as an inhibitor relates to IWII, with concerns that being sensitive to criticism hinders women from engaging in IWB.

4.2.3 Inclusive tendencies

This next set of inclusive tendencies promote empowerment by involving employees in the process of generating innovative ideas and in decision-making processes. This involvement gives employees a sense of ownership and the desire to participate with positive influences on performance. In this context, encouraging employees to engage in IWB requires job designs with tasks that are challenging and stimulating. This suggestion relates to the IWPP concept with specific focus on job design and its relation to IWB.

**Encouragement** tendencies (Fem_1, Fem_8, Fem_11, Fem_17, and Fem_22) inspire women’s participation and works positively through interdependencies linked to IWII that can take the form of rewards, e.g.

“I feel that anything related to **rewards** and **encouraging** you will find a woman” (Fem_1)

“**Encourage, recognition**, create the feeling that higher management is aware. Praising and listening more than monetary” (Fem_11)

“**Encourage through appreciation**, empowerment, showing trust” (Fem_22)

Preference for rewards is key as a female business partner for a banking firm noted that participation in IWB demands that managers:

“Show them (employees) what is in it for them. We use a lot of tools as I mentioned before but again, we are always open for new ideas. Let us talk about **rewards** for instance some people ask us not to give them monetary value but ask for more work involvement. Motivators are as we saw not necessarily a bonus or a gift voucher, they ask for engagement or challenge.” (Fem_2)

The analysis suggests women tend to need empowerment that encourages them to take part in innovation, for instance a female manager noted, “women need to be heard” (Fem_19). Organisationally, initiatives striving to empower women at the workplace show significant results, with women becoming more involved. Such initiatives originate from human resources (HR) and are part of the IWPP concept. According to a female banking assistant general manager:

“Me and the HR director worked on a program called WOW (women of wisdom). We created a network to connect all women in the bank at different levels and we have monthly meetings with them. We want to **support women** to take roles at executive levels … With this program we achieved higher number of women reaching executive level. We empowered them.” (Fem_3)

Interviews also indicate rewards boost energy, leading to a better work environment. Simple changes in a workplace can feel rewarding and energetic for women as reflected in the following example offered by a female deputy manager for a professional services company:
“When I held my position, I tried to make and build a certain culture, I went to a training course about management and employees and the importance of the environment. I knew before agreeing to hold my position that the environment was not as healthy in terms of employees not being very serious about their working hours and deadlines. They did not abide by HR policy and employees were not motivated enough for many reasons. It was a shock when I agreed for this position because the turnover rate for my position was high, it made them unstable with their job roles because they think that I will come and make changes, and when I leave (in a short period due to the high turnover rate), they will have to change again. So, after the training the best take home message for me was the mantra, which is a quote visible to all employees to empower them, not necessary a core value of the company. I sat with the top management, brainstormed a couple of sentences, and agreed on one. Then I made it into a nice design and put it on the office wall. It was “nothing will work unless you do”. I felt that the environment changed after this.” (Fem_12)

Delegation tendencies (Fem_4, Fem_5, Fem_6, Fem_7, Fem_20, and Mal_12) show trust and confidence in women because it provides women with a sense of responsibility or frees time to participate in IWB, e.g.

“Casual setting helps, giving them (i.e. women) delegation, getting them in charge” (Fem_4)

“The higher the management ladder the more you can delegate and have time to innovate” (Fem_6)

Interviews suggest that in cases where an employee cannot see their own potential, recognition acts an avenue to boost self-confidence. Such steps stem from IWII where delegation is interdependent with IWB. As explained by two banking managers, assigning tasks with authority results in employees feeling more like partners, i.e.

“Delegation, thank them, make them feel part of a family always, say to them ‘you are like my son/daughter/sister/brother’, reassure them that they will have my place someday and I want them to learn from me and even be better than me.” (Fem_7)

“I empower my employees by seeing their potential and challenge them more. I stimulate challenges.” (Mal_3)

4.3 Counterthemes to gender: critique

Eight counterthemes challenge the identified individualistic, inhibitive, and inclusive tendencies and reflect other factors influencing IWB, in contrast to gender roles. These counterthemes, as shown by Table 4 and the network diagram of Fig. 3, include personality, culture, mentality, experience, job roles, competencies, organisation structure, and environment.
4.3.1 Dependence on personality and culture

Rather than gender role influencing the adoption of IWB, some interviewees shifted their focus to the role of personality and character (Fem_2, Fem_5, Fem_6, Fem_14, Fem_17, Fem_19, Fem_20, Fem_21, Mal_1, Mal_3, Mal_5, Mal_9, Mal_10, and Mal_12). According to a female unit manager in telecoms, IWB is “more of the personality than the gender.” (Fem_20). Analysis of interview data suggests some companies associate certain job roles with adopted systems to test personality fit. For instance, a male CEO expressed that:

“I think it’s the personalities more than gender. I am a believer of The Myers–Briggs system, it is a common system used in the States. We use it a lot. In the

| Interviewee | IWLL | IWPP | IWCC | IWB |
|-------------|------|------|------|-----|
| Fem_1       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_2       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_3       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_4       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_5       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_6       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_7       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_8       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_9       |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_10      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_11      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_12      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_13      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_14      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_15      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_16      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_17      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_18      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_19      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_20      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_21      |      |      |      |     |
| Fem_22      |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_1       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_2       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_3       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_4       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_5       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_6       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_7       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_8       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_9       |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_10      |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_11      |      |      |      |     |
| Mal_12      |      |      |      |     |

In the table, yellow boxes indicate answers where interviewees noted no gender differences, with additional details on PC for personality and culture, ME for mentality and experience, OE for organisational structure and environment, and JC for job roles and competency.
Fig. 3 Overview of counterthemes to gender and IWB (grey boxes show codes based on interview excerpts, boxes with black segments show identified counterthemes, and clear boxes with numbering show some illustrative related quotes)
company, to get to a management level, you have to go through this test to get to know their personality.” (Mal_9)

Fundamentally, the study finds that culture plays a major role in personalities and enabling the IWB among women but also acts as a barrier limiting the women’s participation for reasons such as the normalisation of segregation. Again, the female managing partner at a professional service company explained that:

“The way I speak to a woman would be gentler and the way I speak to a man would be firmer. Even the terminology, you know how the Kuwaiti culture is; very aware of being a man and very aware of being a woman.” (Mal_12)

4.3.2 Consequence of mentality and experience

The next counterthemes concern mentality and experience (Fem_5, Fem_8, Fem_12, Fem_17, Fem_19, Fem_21, Mal_2, Mal_5, and Mal_12). Interviewees noted that employee mentality determines IWB and the willingness of employees to innovate because according to a male director in the hospitality industry, “the mentality is what counts” (Mal_2). Another view from the study, related to mentality, involves the experience employee accumulate during their career. For context, a young newly hired recent graduate with no experience could possibly be intimidated to share ideas when compared to an experienced employee. Therefore, interviewees argued that inevitably IWB depends on

“The person not the gender” (Fem_5)
“The community and level of education is the difference” (Fem_8)
“I have worked with a female leader; I felt that she managed the case well. She had experience in the field itself.” (Mal_11)
“Self-confidence and more experience not only generate but to follow up and actually do it” (Mal_2)

The interviews also note that experiences also vary for different generations, with variations in openness to sharing ideas and fear of change. According to a managing partner for a professional services firm:

“Age is something that I noticed makes a difference, people seem to have more faith and trust in an older man than a young woman leader … Not gender but generation and age” (Mal_12)

4.3.3 Reliance on job roles and competency

Next, the interviews find counterthemes on job roles and competency (Fem_6, Fem_8, Fem_17, and Mal_1). For some job roles, innovation is required and is part of the KPIs and annual assessment for an employee, and for some other jobs, the role itself could be restricting. This hindrance may be time-related with some frontline employees focusing on service delivery, particularly for mass services and service shops. In addition, management may not expect innovation from certain jobs, and this expectation limits the avenues, e.g., communication channels, for employees to
deliver their ideas. According to a female banking assistant manager and a male chief operation officer in the food and beverage sector:

“I see my staff once a month; my work is a little bit different because my employees cover the vacancies in branches to avoid understaffing. I give them instructions and they go fill these vacancies; I have a weekly evaluation that I get from branch managers. We take ideas of course but we do not involve them as much, because we do not see them that much. Ideas are mostly my own or from upper management.” (Fem_8)

“In terms of involvement in idea generation, I don’t want to exaggerate but I think 0%. Maybe because they do not understand the Kuwaiti food culture as much as we do.” (Mal_7)

According to segments of the interviews, skillsets and competencies of employee tend to influence IWB, not gender role. The suggestion is that the more skills employees possess the more IWB these employees are likely to exhibit, as argued by the female general manager of a telecom firm:

“Disregard the gender if the person is convincing and has a good way of storytelling/talking that will make you listen.” (Fem_14)

4.3.3.1 Influence of organisational structure and environment For interviewees, an organisational structure and environment (Fem_20, Mal_1, and Mal_3) determines task performance to achieve organisational goals, and this structure aids or obstructs IWB. In this context, structure plays a role in enabling creativity for IWB among women, as noted by the following:

“Depends on the organisation structure and culture, in our company I didn’t see any difference … The structure and culture of the organisation plays a great role in enabling creativeness.” (Fem_20)

Similarly, the environment itself could enable IWB by offering a welcoming place where employees, irrespective of gender, feel free to share ideas with an open-door policy, flexible timings, and acceptance of mistakes. According to a female deputy general manager for a professional services firm:

“I didn’t notice gender as much as if the place of work is comfortable; then the person will feel at ease to share” (Fem_17)

“As management we assess which idea is more effective. Will this environment fit to this idea?” (Mal_3)

5 Discussion

Volutility in the service sector demands innovativeness of firms. Hence, focus on IWB remains a crucial factor for coping with business uncertainty and sustaining competitive advantage. Yet, gender inclusion for IWB remains a challenge for service firms to overcome intentional and unintentional barriers confronting women,
who are a significant segment of the workforce. Addressing such challenges is crucial to enhance gender inclusivity/diversity in service firms (De Abreu Dos Reis et al. 2007; Hoyt and Murphy 2016).

Using insights from management employees within the Kuwaiti service sector, this article confronts the challenge of women’s participation in IWB that fosters gender inclusivity in service firms. The findings of our study seem to suggest a trichotomy of positive–negative-alternative explanations on the role of gender on IWB. Positive enablers and negative inhibitors relate to the role of gender and the alternative counterthemes challenge this research’s premise. Revising the initial model presented in Figs. 1, 4 integrates established themes from the interview for proposing a gender inclusive model, and the next subsections discuss implications related to the revised model and overall study.

5.1 Theoretical implications and significance

From a theoretical perspective, the research has three main implications. First, the findings reinforce the concepts of IWB, as proposed in the initial model and inspired by prior literature (Schuh et al. 2018; Woods et al. 2018; Rehman et al. 2019; AlEssa and Durugbo 2021). Specifically, the research advances concepts of IWB in the form of IWLL, IWPP, IWCC and IWII, as foundations for understanding gender role for IWB. Using the constructivism view and a balance of perspectives between men and women management employees, this study presents a distinctive view of IWB.
tendencies among women in the service sector. Three sets of themes emerge representing tendencies that inhibit or enable IWB among women service workers, and these themes complement previous studies on enablers and barriers to the women’s participation in innovation (Pons et al. 2016; Azeem et al. 2021). Figure 5 depicts a ripple-inspired spin wheel framing based on these different tendencies and connects the tendencies to the associated IWB concepts from the literature, as presented by Tables 2, 3, and 4. Literature critiques the ‘essentialist approach’ to studies of women’s participation in innovation that ask if being a woman is enough and notes that age also plays a role in innovation differences (Loarne-Lemaire et al. 2021). Similarly, this study finds the importance of age as part of a wider grouping set of counterthemes offering different perspectives to current IWB and service business studies. Although presented as counterthemes, these themes are significant in terms of IWB due to emphasis on organisation culture which previous studies suggest has a significant effect on IWB (Lukoto and Chan 2016), and paradox mind-sets or mentalities which also have a positive influence on IWB (Liu et al. 2020). Notably, the study also highlights the multi-faceted role of personality for IWB because the concept explains gender differences of individualistic tendencies (Fem_2, Fem_16, Fem_22, Mal_12) and concomitantly offers a countertheme to the role of gender (Fem_17, Mal_1, Mal_3, and Mal_9).

Second, the research findings signify a multi-layer of contexts and urge researchers to consider these layers in analyses of women’s participation within the service sector. The first is the personal layer that focuses on service employee characteristics such as strong-willed, detail-driven, and reliability-oriented dispositions. This layer contains individualistic tendencies that positively influence IWB among women. The second concerns the relational layer with emphasis on team-member exchanges in service teams and the roles of delegation and female-to-female encouragement tendencies that positively cultivate and influence IWB. However, in line with Asi and Williams (2020), context is necessary for female-to-female interventions.
because as the findings show, some women in the study (Fem_9 and Fem_15) did not perceive any gender differences regarding IWB, as shown by Table 2. Previous research (e.g., Azeem et al. (2021)) argues for female-to-female mentoring that boosts women’s participation in innovation and the findings of this study supports such argument but adds the caveat of a selective and context-dependent approach because some women (e.g., as expressed by Fem_9 and Fem_10) may prefer mentoring from men for countertheme reasons. The third layer is the institutional layer involving formal and informal behaviour that excludes women in service sectors from innovation processes, e.g., Diwanniya in the Kuwait context. In line with previous literature, this research notes the significance of these gatherings, which remains a male preserve (Tétreault 2001; Al-Salem and Speece 2017), notwithstanding efforts by Kuwaiti women to hold their own gatherings (Al-Hamli 2013). The institutional layer involves conservative and insecurity tendencies, and these inhibitors align with principles of neo-institutionalism theory, in the context of wider cultural norms influencing IWB and a culture-profession duality due to regional and sectoral influences.

Third, the study implies that in the Kuwaiti private service sector, a gender inclusion challenge exists, either intentionally or unintentionally, despite on-going Kuwaiti initiatives for enhancing women’s participation in the workforce (Alzuabi 2016; Al-Salem and Speece 2017; Najib and Whitacre 2020). Participants from this Kuwaiti study in banking and professional services (e.g., Fen_7, Fem_15, and Fem_19) express feelings of discrimination, injustice, and less exposure to innovation resources as part of exclusion. These considerations inhibit IWB and gender inclusivity. Interestingly, although the findings suggest gender differences as shown by Table 3, the significant presence of counterthemes and shades of yellow boxes (indicating gender differences for specific concepts) of Table 4 perhaps reflect the progressive efforts by Kuwait to address the gender gap challenge (OECD 2018; Nair 2020). Additionally, while 90.9% (20/22) of the female interviewees noted gender differences for some IWB concepts, half of the male interviewees did not note any differences. In this context, the research supports recent arguments that gender biases still exist in some professions despite increased representation, and that perpetuating this biases are those who think it is not happening (Begeny et al. 2020). Such argument further reinforce the need for gender diversity in tandem with gender inclusivity (Østergaard et al. 2011; Brugere et al. 2020).

5.2 Managerial implications and relevance

Managerially, the findings of the study have some implications for strategic planning of innovation efforts for service firms. For a start, focusing on Fig. 5, the study encourages managers to apply ripple-inspired IWB initiatives promoting individualistic and inclusive tendencies and preventing inhibitive tendencies. Lessons from the interviews provide a set of strategic mixes to enhance women’s participation in IWB. For instance, the findings suggest that IWLL tends to be individualistic and inhibitive, IWII tends to be both inclusive and inhibitive, and the IWCC and IWPP
concepts both involve all the individualistic, inclusive, and inhibitive tendencies. Through clarity in focus and decisiveness for inclusivity initiatives, service firms could improve process redesigns for harnessing potentials of women in workplaces. Thus, using Fig. 5 requires service firms ‘to spin to win’ i.e., drive strategic initiatives that promote enabling tendencies in women to gain through more inclusive and innovative workplaces.

Another managerial relevance of the study concerns support for IWB-oriented incentives and training. This focus also has HRM implications (Al-Kazi 2011; Messmann and Mulder 2012)) for recruitment and talent management driven by inclusivity and diversity that boosts workplace creativity. For instance, lessons from the study suggest the need for reward systems designs (e.g., from Fem_1, Fem_3, and Fen_17) that encourage women’s participation. In addition, delegation for women empowerment (e.g., from Fem_7 and Fem_22) gives women service workers a sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to a more inclusive and innovative workplace. Other suggestions from the study involve the formulation of HRM policies to curb discrimination (e.g., from Fem_3 and Fem_18) and the incorporation of innovation KPIs within periodic assessments of service firms (e.g., from Fem_14 and Fem_22). Managers could apply this research’s model of Fig. 4 for focused assessments to establish training needs for women with options to strengthen or complement identified weak individualistic tendencies, and for service teams (men and women), to promote inclusive and prevent inhibitive tendencies. However, strengthening individualistic and inclusive tendencies requires mindfulness for the IWB concepts because, as shown by Fig. 5, these concepts tend to exist with some form of negative tendencies that inhibit IWB among women. In line with Asi and Williams (2020), this study also recommends frank and open conversations to determine the nature of the organisational structure and environment countertheme in service firms because gender inclusivity initiatives carried out in work systems with deep-rooted gender inequality have the potential to reinforce existing gender biases.

From a regional innovation policy perspective, the findings offer lessons on mechanisms for early cultivation of tendencies to enhance Kuwaiti women’s participation in IWB and workplace inclusivity. This study encourages policymaking to cultivate individualistic and inclusive tendencies in early education with progression through to middle school, high school, higher education, and beyond (Kahn and Ginther 2017). In line with literature, the study recommends special focus on Kuwaiti sectors with lower gender inclusivity and diversity. Such policies for Kuwait, and other emerging economies, entail educational and training programs to promote women’s participation in IWB. In this regard, gender inclusivity could benefit from national initiatives by businesses and/or government remains crucial, as recommended by interviewees (e.g., from Fem_14, Fem_19, and Mal_9), and regional collaboration, e.g., between the USA and Kuwait for sharing workplace ideas and initiatives (Najib and Whitacre 2020).

Overall, gender inclusion policies remain vital for the service sector that aims to maintain and attract top talents (Forbes Insight 2011). The implication being that inclusivity works as a driver for innovation, creativity, and a guide to business strategies, with influences on experiences at workplaces and ultimately career
satisfaction. For gender inclusivity management, based on the research results, management support should promote flow, fairness, passion, persistence, conscientiousness, creativity, energy, empowerment, partnership, and potentials, as shown by Fig. 4. The research also implies institutional practices to avert inhibitive tendencies of discrimination and discomfort at workplaces and to cope with shyness and sensitivity for employees. Due to limited resources, these practices demand optimal policies that strike a balance between what to promote and what to prevent in pursuance of enhancing gender inclusiveness.

6 Conclusions

Although women represent a large portion of the workforce worldwide, women remain underrepresented and excluded in certain service sectors, facing unique challenges for participation in innovative work behaviour (IWB) and innovation within workplaces. This research investigates the factors influencing women’s participation in IWB within the private service sector of emerging economies. The research also proposes a gender inclusive model for enhanced women’s participation at workplaces as influenced by enablers and inhibitors of IWB.

Using insights from interviews with 34 management employees within the Kuwaiti service sector, this article confronts two main questions: ‘What factors influence women’s participation in IWB within the service sector from the perspective of management employees?’ (RQ1), and ‘How can service firms enhance IWB among women for more gender inclusive workplace environments’ (RQ2). The study suggests that the factors influencing IWB among women service workers, involve positive individualistic (strong-willed, detail-driven, and reliability-oriented), positive inclusive (encouragement and delegation) and negative inhibitive (conservative and insecurity) tendencies (addressing RQ1). Additionally, the study identifies counterthemes that offer a neutral perspective to the role of gender. Counterthemes represent an alternative view to gender role and attributes participation for IWB to personality, culture, mentality, experience, job role, job competency, organisational structure, and work environment. Thus, the role of gender appears to have mixed results: positive, negative, and alternative. Enhancement of IWB among women in the service sector towards more gender inclusive workplace requires management to promote flow and fairness, passion and persistence, conscientiousness and creativity, energy and empowerment, and partnership and potentials (addressing RQ2). On the other hand, there is a need for institutional initiatives that prevent discrimination, discomfort, shyness, and sensitivity. Consequently, a balance of promotion and prevention foci is important for enhanced women’s participation in IWB and for creating more gender inclusive workplaces for service firms.

Limitations of the research lie in the qualitative inductive case approach for the study and the focus on perspectives of management employees in the Kuwaiti service sector. Topically, the research concentrates on IWB in physical workplaces with limited insights on virtual- and community-based IWB that may account for workplace behaviour of service workers. Nonetheless, the focus on the rich socio-economic, geopolitical, and cultural context of Kuwait offers a unique and interesting innovation-driven setting for analysing IWB in service contexts.
Future research will focus on generating deductive insights based on conceptualisations and implications from this study. Additional work will investigate potential ripple effects of strategic initiatives for enhancing IWB and the potential mediating or moderating roles of counterthemes. Interesting conundrums also arise from this study, on prioritising risk minimisation through creating conditions that prevent inhibitive tendencies or value maximisation through affording conditions that promote individualistic and inclusive tendencies—against a backdrop and mindfulness for inhibitive tendencies that deter IWB. Such conundrums could serve as the basis for future innovation studies concerning gender inclusivity.

Appendix: interview protocol

A. Background questions

Please give the following,

- Name
- Business and role at business
- Educational background & degree
- Years of experience

B. Gender and innovative work behaviour

Innovative work learning and leadership: acquisition of knowledge and skills required for IWB as determined by the organisation and direction provided by leaders.

- What is the role of gender in leadership for IWB?
- In your opinion, how does gender role affect the knowledge sharing for new ideas within the company?

Innovative work processes and performance: focus on the needed steps for creating and implementing new ideas.

- What is the role of gender in HRM practices for IWB?
- Do you think gender affects the overall performance of an employee for implementing ideas? For creativity that producing ideas?

Innovative work characteristics and condition: focus on qualities of an employee for innovativeness at work.

- Is there any difference between men and women in terms of personalities for IWB?
- How do you think these competencies for creating and implementing new ideas differ from man to woman?
Innovative work inhibitors and interdependencies: focus on what prevents and promotes IWB of an employee.

- What do you think prevents you and your employees from IWB and what promotes or encourages you? How does this differ from male to female employee?

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