The Doha Paradox: Disparity between Educated and Working Qatari Women

Tehreem Asghar 1, Mariam Bengali 2 and Rumsha Shahzad 3

1,2,3 Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar

Authors Email: tja37@georgetown.edu 1 mb878@georgetown.edu 2 rs1537@georgetown.edu 3

“This publication was made possible by a UREP award [UREP 16-120-5-032] from the Qatar National Research Fund (a member of The Qatar Foundation). The statements made herein are solely the responsibility of Tehreem, Mariam and Rumsha, the author[s].”

Abstract
Qatar is considered one of the best places in the world for women to get an education. Research has shown that for every man, there are six women enrolled in tertiary education. This upward trend in the willingness and ability of women to receive higher education is undeniably encouraging. However, though labelled a “vital element within the development process” of Qatar, the Qatari women’s role in the labor market is, at best, limited. Recent data demonstrates that the participation of women in Qatar’s labor force was a meagre 35%. Qatar, however, has made the empowerment of women in the labor market a significant part of its Development Strategy. The designers for Qatar National Vision have formulated its first National Development Strategy (2011-2016) with Human development being one of the four major pillars of this strategy. One of the aims of Human Development under NDS (2011-2016) is to increase opportunities for women to “contribute to the economic and cultural world without reducing their role in the family structure.” This research, therefore, intends to analyze a) Qatar’s success in carving out a more vital role for its female citizens and b) the obstacles in the realization of their goal to establish a more gender-inclusive labor force. The reasons for this analysis are, therefore, not solely to augment and scrutinize Qatar’s Development Strategy but to demonstrate that Qatar’s extensive investment in education will not reap benefits if the majority of its educated does not take advantage of the various avenues their learning opens up. Whether this is due to unwillingness on the part of women to work or due to gender neutral reasons such as the gap between education, training and job placement or other motives; this research aims to ascertain the reasons for this difference.

Key words: women, education, Qatar, disparity, women in the labor force
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Sample:
We surveyed 274 Qatari females from the ages of 17 - 25. Most of our participants were 19 years old. All of those surveyed were university students. The students were from Georgetown University, Northwestern University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Texas A&M, Carnegie Mellon University, Cornell University and Qatar University.

Methodology:
Our research had two components to it. The first consisted of hypothesizing barriers to workforce participation by Qatari females. Our hypothesis was formed by examining existing literature on female labor and education in Qatar. While there was a dearth of solid, recent research done on these two topics, we gathered secondary data in the form of a) various news articles, b) data found through the Qatar Statistics Authority, c) studies on the topic done by organizations such as the RAND Corporation and d) literature on working women (not specific to Qatar.)

The second part of our research was collecting primary data through. These surveys were designed on conclusions derived from our research and attempted to understand whether the factors preventing women from being equal participants in the workforce were self-imposed, structural or cultural. The primary part of our survey consisted of Yes/No/Maybe/I don’t know/Not applicable to me questions and was designed to see a) what Qatari females themselves believe in preventing them from seeking employment opportunities and b) what we could derive from their answers to more indirect questions. The secondary part of our survey was more in the form of multiple choice questions and the last was open ended questions. The open ended questions received the least number of responses from participants.

Findings:
According to research conducted by the Rand Corporation, “While Qatar has made notable progress toward expanding educational opportunities for its citizens… family responsibilities, cultural tradition, and social attitudes in Qatar continue to limit many women.” Most of our findings were in line with this research done in 2008. However we found a significant change in social attitudes towards working, especially amongst Qatari women themselves. We also found that Qatari women had a positive stance on juggling family responsibility and work.

Our first objective was to discover if Qatar had been successful in encouraging and/or achieving a gender inclusive workforce. While a 36.3% female workforce participation suggests otherwise, in the opinion of young, university going women, Qatar has made significant steps towards the achievement of its aim. For example only 19% of our participants felt that working had not become easier for their generation, as compared to older generations while 56% thought the opposite. Our second objective was to make an attempt to understand why Qatari women were not participating in the labor force. According to our hypothesis and pre-survey research, there were institutional and structural obstacles in the way of Qatari women’s career choices. We divided potential inhibiting factors into a) socio-cultural, b) political and c) economic factors. Thus each of our questions was directed towards determining the career impediments Qatari women faced and whether trends or attitudes towards women in the labor force have changed over the years.
We drew the following conclusions based on our findings:

a) Participants generally had a positive view towards the job market and ease of integration into it.

b) Financial independence was the primary reason for seeking work.

c) Occupational segregation was a part of the mindset.

d) Familial and marital prosperity were deeply valued. Career and family life were mostly not seen as mutually exclusive.

Qatari girls’ opinion on the work force and what it means:

Our surveys showed that participants generally had a positive view of the Qatari labor market and the prospects it had for women. Furthermore, one of the most significant findings of our survey was that all the participants who chose to answer the question of whether or not they wished to work after graduation, answered in the affirmative. This indicated that there were few, if any, personal reasons inhibiting the participants from working.

When asked about the composition of Qatar’s labor force, participants were divided over the question of whether or not there were enough female role models in Qatar’s working community. This division of attitudes demonstrated a divide in opinion amongst those who believe Qatar has gotten where it needs to be in terms of female work force participation and those who feel there is still room for improvement. 35% of those surveyed believed Qatar had a sufficient amount of female role models whereas 33% believed it did not. The majority of the rest said they were unsure. Similarly, 33% of our respondents were unsure whether or not there was a wage gap between men and women in the work force. 32% also felt there was no wage gap between men and women.

Those who said they were unsure about female role models or wrongly believed there was no gender wage gap, demonstrate a lack of awareness about the situation of Qatar’s actual labor force. This deficiency can be traced to a want of vocational training and work opportunities available to Qatari women at the post-
undergraduate level, resulting in a dearth of exposure and knowledge about the work force. According to Tahseen Consulting, a private consulting firm that has done research on educational trends in Qatar, there needs to be more of an emphasis on technical and vocational education and training for women. They believe there are simply not enough on the job training opportunities for women. This is more so in technical fields where “lack of early career guidance, and few experiential opportunities for girls to be exposed to technical fields at a young age”. This results in a paradox of sorts where because young girls do not have enough mentorship prospects and therefore are not exposed to the labor market- they are unaware of what it might be like to actually work in Qatar as a female.

However that is not to disregard the 35% that believe there are enough female role models for Qatari women since their response was only referring to the presence of role models, not to the availability of training or mentorship. These role models may come in the form of influential figures such as Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned or in the form of family members or celebrity personalities such as Buthaina Al-Ansari, a business executive who is known for being an inspiration to several Qatari women. Familial role models are also a very high possibility considering 81% of our respondents said they had women in their family who worked. These women include women in local start-ups and home run businesses, which are common amongst Qatari women. Examples of several famous start-ups include Fatima Al-Hudifi’s Tasmeem Flowers and Chocolates’ or Layla Al Dorani’s Raw Middle East.

It is also interesting to note that 35% of our participants felt gender did not have an impact on their ability to pursue a career and 18% felt their gender impacted their career prospects in a positive manner, hinting towards an encouraging change in mindsets towards working women.

![Bar chart showing how respondents think their gender affects their ability to pursue a career](chart.png)

**Occupational Segregation:**

So, if Qatari women are increasingly self-inclined to work and believe in the availability of opportunities, what factors are preventing them from being a part of the work force? When asked this question, 48% of
participants responded that nothing was stopping them from working. However 46% cited parents and/or culture and norms (i.e. most women in our family don’t work), and/or religion as constraining factors. Furthermore, 54% of our participants believed that there were certain jobs that could only be done by women and certain jobs that could only be done by men. Globally, there has been a movement towards ending horizontal occupational segregation which works through our basic understanding of gender roles. However, the image of work in Qatar still remains gender specific. For example, Virginia Commonwealth University, which is a design school, has only 4 males in its current undergraduate class, showing that certain careers are still considered obviously “feminine”. This occupational gender segregation is aggravated by the fact that the majority of Qatar’s economy is oil-based. According to Michael Ross, it is difficult to empower women in oil-based economies because the majority of well-paying jobs such an economy generates are traditionally considered to be “male jobs”, preventing women from entering into the labor force. Moreover, rapid oil-wealth also skips several stages of industrialization that normally bring women into the workforce. Finally, technical jobs such as those in the field of engineering require vocational training, of which there is already a dearth in Qatar.

Occupational segregation also comes in the form of workplace mobility i.e. vertical occupational segregation. According to research conducted by Shareefa Fadhel in 2011, founder of a center which helps women create start-up businesses, 80% of Qatari families want their daughters to be in a gender segregated environment. This means women often miss out on leadership and mentorship opportunities since most of those who are in leading positions are men, which means that “women are forgotten and left behind in the development and leadership ladder.” Thus, according to Moza Almalki, a Qatari psychologist, despite the admirable progress Qatar has made towards greater gender mainstreaming and women empowerment, it is still a society in which:

“...boys grow up knowing that they will inherit family businesses or easily find high-paying government or military jobs that may not require a degree. Men have more social freedom than women, which helps explain their low university enrollment rates...Boys have their cars, their friends, their own lives. Girls don’t get that at all that.”

The “social freedom” of Qatari men does demonstrate a casual attitude towards university. It can be seen in the undergraduate class statistics for all Education City universities which have more female than male undergraduates enrolled currently. Even more telling is the universities with predominantly female students. For example, Texas A&M, though an engineering school, a field which is dominated by Qatari men, has more female students than male. This reiterates the comparative ease with which men can get into the labor force.

Despite all of this, there does seem to be a slow but budding change in attitudes towards the type of jobs women can perform. For example even though more than half (54%) of our respondents did believe women and men had a gender-specific set of jobs to do, many still felt they were capable of doing the jobs typically done by men. 59% of our respondents said women could perform jobs men performed, indicating that their beliefs about occupational gender segregation did not stem out of inherent feeling of inferiority or disempowerment, but merely a belief that men and women’s roles in society were different.
Economic Independence primary reason for work:

According to a 2011 survey by Catherine Hakim, “the idea of most women wanting to be financially independent is a myth”. Instead women prefer to “marry up”, looking for financially stable husbands as opposed to being financially independent themselves. However, the Qatari women we surveyed disproved this idea. While most of the women classified themselves as ‘middle class’, it is important to note that Qatar, recently categorized as the richest country in the world by Forbes, has an average income per capita of 88,222 dollars a year. Therefore Qatar’s middle class is quite well-off. Despite having strong and stable economic backgrounds, women still desire to be financially independent. In fact 71% of respondents said their family’s income did not have an effect on their desire to work, demonstrating a strong aspiration towards economic independence. The increasingly career-oriented mindset of Qatari woman is true to global development trends; the majority of our participants said they wished to work to “support (them) selves financially”.

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**Do you think there are certain jobs only men can do and certain jobs only women can do?**

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**Men are more capable of doing certain jobs**

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For most women, pay inequity results in power dynamics that are skewed towards the men in the family. For our participants, empowerment was translated into career choices as 62% of those surveyed said they felt a job was needed for them to feel empowered in society. That is unsurprising considering how independence, especially economic independence, is considered to be at the core of gender equality, allowing women to “make genuine choices about their lives through full and equal participation in all spheres of life.”

However, while the women themselves feel the pressure to carve out a role for themselves in a society where men have more social capital, the economy doesn’t feel the pressure to increase female participation in the labor force. For example, the need for more female participation is realized when a country is in an era of economic depression or is not doing well. Since the desire for increased participation does not stem from a genuine economic need, Qatar’s wish to increase opportunities for women to “contribute to the economic and cultural world without reducing their role in the family structure” is more of a symbolic aspiration.

Attitudes towards marriage and family life:
Qatari girls’ inculcated desire for a cohesive family unit was shown by the respondents adherence to the idea that marriage and children were essential to wellbeing; an idea that might be a working hindrance in light of recent debates over marital vs upward career mobility. In our research, 48% of the respondents surveyed believed that children were crucial to family being. Moreover only 21% of respondents said they would delay childbearing for a career. Thus while strongly advocating for their careers, when pit against marriage, pursuing a career did seem to be a lower priority for the respondents.

For example only 26% of the respondents cited a ‘job’ as being their sole plan after graduation. The rest included marriages and jobs, marriage, and undecided futures or futures that hinged on what their parents said. It was also interesting to note that 58% of respondents thought children would not stop them from working, showing that family life and careers were not mutually exclusive. While many women struggle with attempting to balance work and family life, the reality of the second shift might be lost on a young generation of Qatari’s who are used to having their maids and nannies around. For example, 83% of our respondents had maids and nannies and 40% said that maids and nannies were responsible for most of the household chores. However, while the traditional definition of the “cult of domesticity” might not apply since Qatari women do not usually physically undertake domestic labor, the image of the woman as the domestic head of the household remains; an image that compels women to have lower career aspirations than men and see the domestic/family life as their nucleus.
Gordon and Fraser trace the genealogy of dependence and talk about how certain types of dependencies have been embedded into our mindsets. While the idea of more economically independent women has become more pervasive, it seems Qatari women’s identity is still not seen as completely separate from the family structure. 30% respondents surveyed said that men have the most authority in the household. There was also a sign of dependency, not only on male figures in the house but on comfortable and interconnected familial structures and comforts. For example, 42% of the respondents surveyed had a driver drop them off to university and other popular locations.

However while generally ideas towards marriage seemed to be positive, there was a change in trends seen in the age that our respondents wanted to get married. While earlier women in Qatar were seen as getting married at the average age of 18, our respondents cited 23-25 as the age at which they would want to get married. The majority of our participants (58%) said they would want to have 2-3 children, corresponding to Qatar’s fertility rate of 2.04 births per woman. Only 2.5% of our respondents said they did not want to get married and have children. Why is there such a huge desire to get married? The answer can be traced back to the symbols, values, norms and beliefs of Qatari society. According to Simone de Beauvoir, since women are not born but created, our respondents seemed to have learned to embody what it means to be a Qatari woman. Even as young, female Qatari students might be more and more inclined to view future careers as empowering and essential to their empowerment, without many successful working women to look up to, young Qatari would probably try to embody the traits of older women within their family. Since labor force participation amongst previous generations of Qatari woman was even less than it is now, the successful woman that young Qatari girls would try to emulate would be a family-oriented woman.

Conclusion:
Our research showed a new generation of Qatari women who were very willing to work and had a positive, uplifting attitude towards their prospects in Qatar’s labor force. However, while Qatar, has taken positive steps in advocating for the education of women and therefore encouraged this positive, career-oriented mindset, the widening pay gap between Qatari women and men is a dangerous factor that may inhibit female workforce participation. According to a 2011 Labor Force Sample Survey, “Qatari women are paid 25 to 50 percent less than men, despite the fact that their working hours are comparable – and sometimes higher”. This worrying trend is exacerbated by mindsets that encourage occupational segregation which feeds socially constructed ideas about a woman’s supposedly predominant role as a wife and mother. When looked at from a culturally relativistic point of view, the incredible amount of respect and adherence shown by Qatari women towards familial and cultural values is intensely admirable; such a mindset may inhibit workforce participation by promoting a one-dimensional, typically domestic image of Qatari women.

Finally, there is also a lack of graduate opportunities available to women as demonstrated by 63% of our respondents saying they wished to go abroad for further studies. A lack of post-undergraduate opportunities, both in terms of vocational training and schooling is also antithetical to the Qatar government’s efforts to increase female workforce participation. As predicted by the Rand Corporation in their 2008 study of Qatari Women in the Workforce, “the lack of graduate education opportunities in Qatar… was a significant career barrier for women seeking job advancement…and could become a serious deterrent to achievement of Qatar’s long-term economic development goals.” However the opening of various vocational training centers and the pending opening of a new graduate school in Qatar could rectify this situation.
References

2Qatar Statistics Authority (http://www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/index.htm)
8Though that question was asked in our survey, it did not reveal significant trends.
10Ibid
13Most Qatari women do not marry lower than themselves, so would probably marry a middle class or upper class man.
20Qatar fertility rate, Source: World Bank