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Research article

In *majaalis al-hareem*: The complex professional and personal choices of Qatari women

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INTRODUCTION

Since oil exportation began in 1949, the Gulf state of Qatar has used its hydrocarbon revenues to rapidly modernize in all areas, from infrastructure to health care. Recognizing that the domestic economy cannot rely indefinitely on non-renewable fossil fuels, the Qatari government has focused on human development of all its citizens—male and female—through increased opportunities in the educational and employment fields.

Yet while Qatar is at the forefront of the region in developing the human capital of its female citizenry, the state needs more information about the drivers and obstacles of Qatari women's engagement and empowerment in order to help women balance work-life commitments and ensure successful personal and professional lives. Our project fills this knowledge gap by studying the opinions and choices of Qatari women, making a unique contribution to the social science literature on female participation in public and private life in the Arab Gulf.¹

Specifically, our research team, composed of six faculty members from Northwestern University in Qatar, Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, and Qatar University, as well as fifteen undergraduate students from Northwestern University in Qatar, studied the intersection of two pressing concerns—increasing female participation in education and the work force, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the family and ensuring that women's personal needs are met—through quantitative and qualitative methods. In particular, the faculty mentored the student researchers on the use of ethnographic methods of participant-observation in *majaalis al-hareem* ("women's gatherings"; singular = *majlis*) to provide context for our survey response statistics.²

Our research reveals the conflict between, on the one hand, Qatari women's increased ability to pursue higher education and enter the public sphere through participation in the workforce or political arena and, on the other hand, traditional social norms and attitudes that prioritize domestic life—a conflict that necessitates complex personal and professional choices for Qatari women today.

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²We define *majlis al-hareem* as a designated, intergenerational meeting space or salon, where women gather freely for various purposes, such as to discuss issues, in a formal or informal atmosphere. This definition was provided at the outset of our survey and in our informed consent documents for the ethnographic research so that all participants understood our terminology. Qatari women use a range of terms to describe these gatherings, but we chose to use the term "*majlis*" not only because it is one of the most recognizable terms to the Western academic world, but also because it has been viewed—erroneously—as a male-only space. We wanted to highlight the fact that women, too, have a *majlis* space within the home, with important similarities to the male *majlis*, including: the frequency of meetings; the use of the space as a way of networking and information gathering and sharing; and the various reasons for meeting, which can extend beyond family gatherings to encompass religious topics, educational experiences, neighborhood issues, or socializing. And yet it is also important to highlight the differences that a women's *majlis* has from the men's, such as: the need for increased privacy; the emphasis on foods and drinks, service, and décor; and the specific topics discussed, which have particular relevance to women facing often conflicting pressures from state and society over their gendered roles and responsibilities.

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CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

We focus here on the conflicting pressures facing Qatari women today: the Qatari government's emphasis on active participation in the economy, society, and polity, and the social pressure to focus on home and family over higher education and career. One of the Qatari government's top priorities is promoting human development and fostering a capable and motivated work force in all of its citizens (QNV 2008; see also QNDS 2011). Given the relatively small number of nationals, encouraging the participation of Qatari women is particularly essential. Noting the rising education levels and labor force participation rates of Qatari women, the Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 (QNDS) (2011, 146) calls for “measures to encourage more Qatari women” to participate in the economic development of the country, including encouraging entrepreneurial development and launching initiatives to combat barriers to this involvement (148). By calling for “enhanc[ing] women’s capacities and empower[ing] them to participate more fully in the political and economic spheres,” the government makes it clear that women “exemplify the new opportunities available to all Qataris as a result of the country’s rapid economic growth and social transition” (QNDS 2011, 165).

Yet despite high government priority in the Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV) (QNV 2008) and the QNDS (2011) toward empowering women to participate actively in the public sphere, the government has noted the cultural and traditional barriers to this participation. As the QNDS (2011, 175) states, “There is a collective recognition of women’s educational ability and qualification to assume political and leadership positions, but there is also a culturally conditioned underestimation of scope and ability overall” (see also Meriwether and Tucker 1999, 79–82).

Further, both society and government express concerns with the protection of the family unit as the core of Qatari society and are seeking solutions to halt the rising trends of divorce rates and instances of unmarried Qatari women (e.g., QNDS 2011, 166). These are especially concerning trends because family cohesion is seen as the core of Qatari society. The QNDS (2011, 165) states, “Women are central to the evolving Qatari family . . . Through their nurturing of language, codes of ethics, behavioural patterns, value systems and religious beliefs, women play an indispensable role in upholding traditional familial and cultural values.” Thus, Qatari women find themselves under pressure to both contribute to the human development of the country and maintain their roles at the center of the family. How can they achieve both goals?

To understand the factors that help or hinder Qatari women as they seek to navigate these expectations, our research investigates the social and cultural conflicts at stake, and the complex choices facing Qatari women as they seek to succeed in both the knowledge economy and their personal lives. The QNDS (2011, 177) notes that the combination of “family cohesion and women’s empowerment is both a goal and an enabler to achieve the aspirations of QNV 2030.” As one of the top priorities of the Qatari government is to promote female engagement in all areas of society, our research directly contributes to this goal by enabling a better understanding of the drivers and barriers of women’s engagement and providing key insights that can guide future policy.

Further, our research fills an existing gap in the academic literature. In general, existing research on the Middle East, and the Arab Gulf in particular, has often highlighted exceptional and elite women and their gatherings (e.g., Ahmed 1992; Fay 2012; Lienhardt 2001, 62, 171–72; Mernissi 1993; Peirce 1993; Stowasser 2012), while ignoring the ordinary women of today and their use of gathering space to engage with their societies. Our research challenges this perception of elitism by exploring how the daily *majlis* provides a space for ordinary women to interact with and respond to social pressures, cultural traditions, and the public sphere.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The general research question that we explore in this paper is: Under what conditions do Qatari women feel empowered to engage in wider society, economy, and polity? We hypothesize that, due to the conflict between traditional social norms and attitudes that prioritize the domestic sphere, and the increased ability of Qatari women to pursue higher education and enter the public sphere through participation in the workforce or political arena, Qatari women will choose to participate in venues outside of the home when they feel that both their personal and professional needs are met. Our research findings highlight specific obstacles that hinder this engagement, and suggest possible policy solutions that may help to balance personal and professional needs, and therefore drive further engagement.

In order to fully understand the willingness and ability of Qatari women to engage in greater society, our research project employs both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather crucial empirical evidence. Our multi-method approach—which combines ethnographic fieldwork by student researchers in *majaalis al-hareem*, including participant observation, interviews, photographs, and audiovisual recordings, with professional public opinion surveys of the Qatari population—ultimately increases inferential strength (e.g., George and Bennett 2004; Hall 2003; Tarrow 1995).

Quantitative research, through scientific survey procedures, is essential for ensuring that our results can be generalized to the larger Qatari female population as a whole. In June 2014, Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) administered our survey via telephone in Arabic, with 1,049 Qatari women completing the interviews. Phone numbers were selected at random from a mobile phone sample, provided by a major telecommunications company in Qatar. The person who picked up the phone was the subject to be interviewed, as long as she confirmed she was a female Qatari citizen. Each female Qatari respondent was then asked the same set of questions, which began with a survey of her *majlis* participation and then gathered her opinions and attitudes about a variety of social, economic, and political topics. By following these procedures, the survey resulted in a reliable and valid body of data that is representative of the general population of Qatari women.

Likewise, qualitative research is essential for gathering the in-depth, contextual knowledge needed to produce theoretically valid research (Tessler, Nachtwey, and Banda 1999). In particular, both ethnography and audiovisual research provide crucial ways of “knowing” our data and presenting it in powerful ways to the outside world. Ethnography is a comprehensive qualitative research method used to explore cultural phenomena. It involves the observation of individuals negotiating and interacting with others within their own settings. In documenting how these agents see and talk about their everyday social activities, ethnography highlights the participants' voices, conveying their perspectives, attitudes, feelings, and concerns in a richer way than quantitative data. Ethnographic data helps to contextualize the site as well as the human behaviors that occur within it. Audiovisual research also helps us better analyze the responses of our subjects based on intonation of voice and body language, use of humor or sarcasm, and other indicators of sincerity (Jackson 2012; Mehrabian 1971).

What is particularly exciting about our qualitative research is our research team's access to these relatively unexplored spaces of *majaalis al-hareem*. As previously noted, the daily gathering spaces of ordinary women are understudied in the academic literature. Our project gained access to these private spaces because of our inclusion of local female students as full research partners. Most of these student researchers are Qatari or have lived in Qatar for all (or a great portion of) their lives, and all are knowledgeable of and comfortable with the cultural context. By training the students in ethnographic research methods and guiding them through the participant-observation process, our research team was able to open a unique analytical window into a private but crucial site of engagement for women here in Qatar.³

While conducting our research, we prioritized the privacy of our participants and retained the anonymity of all those who wished it. In fact, the process of ethnographic documentation became a key discussion point for the student researchers as they grappled with issues of representation and voice. As per the ethical regulations of our research,⁴ the anonymity of the *majaalis* and their participants was carefully preserved by following the strategy of Bristol-Rhys (2010, 23) in her anthropological study of Emirati women, in which her written materials “obscured identities throughout by omitting family names, using fictitious first names, altering locations of homes and compounds, and . . . in some cases blend[ing] individuals together.”

Although individual participants had the choice to participate in personal interviews using both audio and visual recordings, we were sensitive to the Qatari cultural custom that discourages women from appearing in video or photography for public use. Some individuals chose to appear on camera

³The nature of the research grant—through the Qatar National Research Fund's “Undergraduate Research Experience Program”—facilitated the inclusion of these students in all aspects of the research process. This type of faculty–student research partnership has been shown to create new, previously inaccessible knowledge through the intersection of foreign and local expertise (Mitchell 2014).

⁴We are grateful to the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar Institutional Review Board (IRB #2014-0207) and the Qatar University Institutional Review Board (QU-IRB #294-E/14) for their guidance and approval of our research.

with their faces showing and their names identified, but other participants chose not to make their narratives accessible through live action and video interviews. To respect the privacy of those Qatari women participants who wished to remain anonymous, but also to ensure that these stories were nevertheless included in the research results, videography was used to depict the overall setting of the *majlis* or to film specific rituals such as pouring coffee (focusing on hands, not faces), and mixed with still photography and audio overlays that removed identifying details. The student researchers also included animation and reenactments to convey and visualize participant stories. This experience led our research team to a wider reconsideration of traditional media storytelling conventions when documenting the lives of women within specific social, cultural and religious contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our survey attempts to capture the demographic realities of the Qatari female population (see Table 1).⁵ Approximately one third of our respondents were single, while over half were married. The majority of the mothers surveyed had between one and four children. Half of our respondents were between the

Table 1. Survey demographics.

Marital status	Percent	Cum. %*
Single	34.3	34.3
Married	52.6	86.9
Divorced	7.6	94.5
Widowed	5.3	99.8
Something else	0.3	100.1
Number of children	Percent	Cum. %
0	8.7	8.7
1	10.2	18.9
2	10.5	29.4
3	13.5	42.9
4	16.3	59.2
5	13.4	72.6
6	9.8	82.4
7	9.3	91.7
8+	8.3	100.0
Age	Percent	Cum. %
18–24	21.5	21.5
25–34	28.0	49.5
35–44	22.6	72.1
45–54	16.0	88.1
55+	11.8	99.9
Education level	Percent	Cum. %
Less than high school	23.0	23.0
High school	30.1	53.1
1–3 year program	9.9	63.0
Bachelor's degree	34.8	97.8
Master's or above	2.1	99.9

Note: Sampling weights utilized.

* Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100.0 due to rounding.

⁵As elsewhere, reported here are weighted proportions. Our survey's demographics closely matched the reality of the estimated Qatari female population as a whole, with most variation not more than 3 or 4 percentage points between the survey respondents and the general population. The clearest sample biases can be found in age and education levels: The survey sampled a slightly younger and more educated subset of the population than the average. Thus, all statistical analyses utilized weights to ensure that the slight demographic differences between the survey sample and the general population do not affect the validity of the results.

ages of 18 and 34, and those aged 55 and above were about 12 percent of the sample, reflecting the youth bulge that affects virtually all Arab countries (Richards and Waterbury 2008, 84–85). About a quarter of our respondents had less than a high school education, while another 30 percent ended their education after completing high school. However, just under half of the Qatari women surveyed chose to continue their education after high school, with approximately 35 percent completing a four-year university program.

Yet as powerful as the statistics are, they cannot tell us the full stories of Qatari women today. The deliberate inclusion of qualitative methodology—via student researchers conducting one-on-one interviews, ethnographic observations, photography, audio recordings and videography of *majaalis al-hareem* in Qatar—provides context to the survey data. Throughout this discussion, we combine our team’s quantitative and qualitative findings to paint a fuller picture of Qatari women’s participation in *majaalis al-hareem* and their opinions on the drivers of and obstacles to their engagement in wider society.

The importance of the *majlis* as a gathering space for Qatari women was seen in all areas of research. In the survey, 84 percent of respondents reported that they participated in at least one *majlis al-hareem* (see Figure 1). The most common *majlis* among participants was, unsurprisingly, the family *majlis* (76 percent), followed by religious and social *majaalis* (54 percent and 46 percent, respectively). A quarter of respondents attended neighborhood *majlis* while another 13 percent attended other types of *majaalis*, such as those that focused on education or health (see Figure 2).

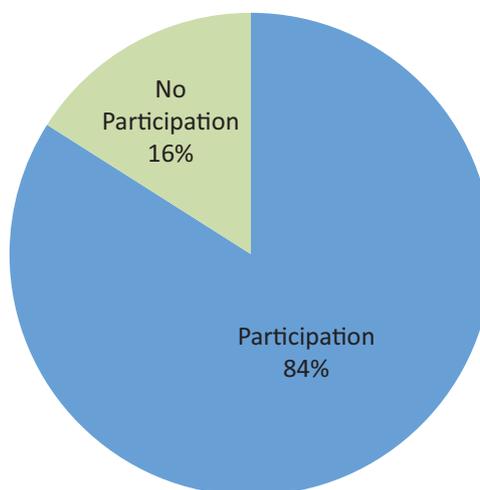


Figure 1. *Majaalis al-hareem* overall participation.

The *majlis* as an integral social institution for Qatari women was also highlighted in our ethnographic and documentary research. One interviewee emphasized the ubiquity of women’s *majaalis* in Qatari daily life:

*I always attend women’s majaalis either at my grandfather’s house on my mother’s side of the family, or my grandfather’s house on my father’s side. It’s part of the family and it’s a routine in Qatar; there’s always a women’s majlis.*⁶

Another interviewee discussed her time spent abroad for her education, reflecting that she particularly missed the weekly ritual of gathering together:

Personally, since I was young the family gatherings were held every Thursday evening. Now everyone’s grown up and it started getting larger, so I started to notice that this habit was

⁶Personal interview with Muneera Al Ansari, Doha, Qatar, 2014. Please note that this interviewee chose to have her name, voice, and hands displayed, but not her face.

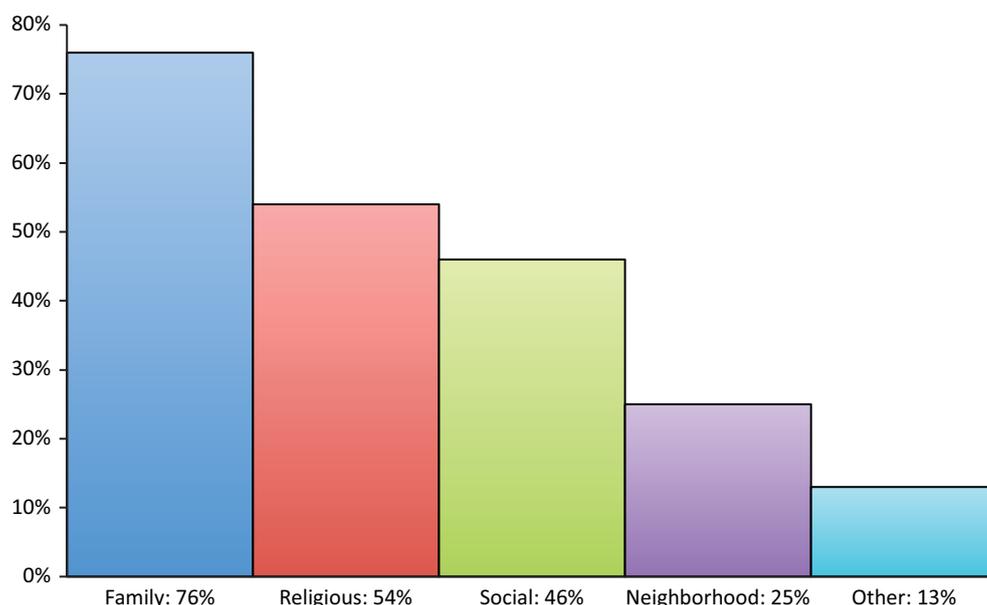


Figure 2. *Majaalis al-hareem* participation by type. Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because Qatari women reported participation in more than one type of *majlis*.

hard to let go of, even when I was studying abroad. The only thing I missed here [in Qatar] was our gatherings.⁷

One of the most significant and recurring topics of discussion in the *majlis* was that of marriage. This topic is notably important today, as Qatari society and government remain concerned about the number of unmarried Qatari women. The QNDS (2011, 166) notes, “Two of the most prominent trends [of family life] are the sharply rising proportion of Qatari women who never marry and steadily increasing divorce rates, which are particularly high among couples married for a short time.” Further showing the severity of the official concern, the QNDS (2011, 168) pledges to “reduce the proportion of Qatari women who are unmarried by ages 30–34 by 15%” through various programs. Voices from the *majaalis* demonstrate the societal and cultural concerns about these statistics and trends. There are often stark generational differences on display when the conversation turns to the reasons behind unmarried Qatari women. One student researcher brought up this topic in her family *majlis* and described the conversation as follows:

The instant response was that ‘girls today are selfish and irresponsible.’ One of my older aunts said it’s better to be with a Qatari man, who can offer a stable life and family for you, than to remain single and living in your parent’s home for the rest of your life. Another woman then shared a story of a Qatari girl who married a non-Qatari and is now living a miserable life in the middle of nowhere. She told the story as if it were one of those horror stories that you would tell your kids so that they wouldn’t stay up late. However, I did notice that the younger girls didn’t speak a word during that discussion. It’s as if they knew there was no winning this discussion and there was no point in even trying.⁸

This ethnographic vignette highlights the important point that Qatari women, while legally allowed to marry any nationality they choose, often avoid marrying a non-Qatari man because their children will not be automatically granted Qatari citizenship—which leads to some Qatari women remaining unmarried because they do not want to leave their country yet cannot find a Qatari man that suits them.⁹

⁷Personal interview with Mead Al Emadi, Doha, Qatar, 2014. Please note that this interviewee chose to have her name, voice, and face displayed.

⁸The ethnographic writings are not attributed to individual students because of the need to maintain anonymity and privacy for the women who participated in the *majaalis* under observation.

⁹See Law No. 38 of 2005 on Qatari nationality, <http://www.almeezan.qa/LawPage.aspx?id=2591&language=en>.

Further, those Qatari women who do marry non-Qatari men either find their husband and children isolated from society or are forced to move to their husband's country so that their children can get the benefits of citizenship (Mitchell 2013, 148–49; Pandit 2011). Our survey results show that Qatari women overwhelmingly believe—by 92 percent—that their children should be granted citizenship regardless of the nationality of the father.¹⁰ While the government has indicated that it is reviewing the laws associated with the citizenship of these children (QNDS 2011, 171), until now they remain without citizenship and its political and economic benefits, making the decision to marry a non-Qatari a particularly difficult one for Qatari women.

Another one of the possible factors behind the increase in unmarried Qatari women is their rising educational levels and career choices vis-à-vis Qatari men. Throughout the Middle East region, and in the Gulf region in particular, female students have surpassed males in all educational indicators, including enrollment, attainment, and achievement (Ridge 2014). Standardized test scores for K–12 such as the TIMSS and the PISA show that female students in the Gulf region have scored significantly higher than males across all subjects, including math and science (Anderson 2012). Further, academics and policy-makers have noted the relative lack of motivation of male students compared to female students in the broader Gulf region (e.g., Althani 2012; Davidson 2005; Foley 2010).

The imbalance of educational attainment between male and female Qataris, in particular, is a widespread problem, beginning with K–12 schooling and continuing through undergraduate and graduate studies (Al-Misnad 2010). For example, Qatar's 2006 PISA scores demonstrated the most significant gender gap in the Gulf region (Anderson 2012). Data released by Qatar's Ministry of Development, Planning, and Statistics (2014) notes that there were twice as many female students as males in Qatar's universities, and that 60 percent of all university graduates were women. As one of the ethnographies described,

Most of the girls expressed discontent with the unfairness of being driven by parents, schools and society towards higher education, but upon the completion of their degree, they realized that most men wanted a wife who did not go beyond secondary school. One of the girls was outraged that her father told her to not sound so smart, because her marriage prospects were dwindling. There was also the unspoken fear that their ambition might sentence them to a life alone. No one spoke of a solution, but the irritation was very much directed towards a society that encouraged its women to learn, but maintained traditional attitudes towards marriage.

Another issue—for those Qatari women who do get married—is whether to work after marriage. Our survey asked Qatari women to agree or disagree with various statements on the social context (see Table 2). We start from the finding that the overwhelming majority of Qatari women (98 percent) agreed that the state of Qatar encourages women to work—with 70 percent in strong agreement. Further, almost 87 percent of women believed that having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person. Yet despite the strong government support for women entering the workforce, 73 percent of our respondents agreed that there is social pressure for women to focus on the family instead of work. Further showing the complexity of the issue, Qatari women themselves were divided on whether disproportionate representation in the workforce is a bad thing. Over 55 percent of the respondents agreed that a man has more right to a job than a woman, and 49 percent felt that relationship problems would ensue if a woman earned more money than her husband.

The ethnographic research depicted the concerns of some *majlis* participants that they would be judged for continuing to work after marriage. One student researcher wrote that a Qatari woman can be both a “working woman capable of asserting herself in society” while also “being a good wife to her husband and to her children.” Yet another student's research argued the opposite: “[A woman] wouldn't want to work after graduation as it may present problems with the marriage since [she] wouldn't be always available to spend time with her husband everyday and it might distract her from raising her children to the best of her abilities.” These discussions speak to the conflict between female

¹⁰This overwhelming support for granting nationality to these children is not limited to Qatari women alone. In a previous survey conducted by SESRI in January 2013 (with 798 Qatari male and female respondents), the same question was asked, with a similar result: 91 percent of Qatari women and 90 percent of Qatari men agreed that giving citizenship to children of Qatari mothers would be “a good thing.” This research was made possible by a grant (UREP 12-016-5-007) from the Qatar National Research Fund (a member of Qatar Foundation). For further details on this survey, see Mitchell (2013, 70–81, 148).

Table 2. Qatari women's opinions on social context.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
"The state of Qatar encourages women to work."	69.8%	27.9%	1.9%	0.4%
"Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person."	42.0%	44.5%	11.9%	1.6%
"There is social pressure for women to focus on family instead of work."	24.4%	48.9%	24.9%	1.8%
"Men have more right to a job than women."	19.4%	35.7%	33.3%	11.6%
"If a woman earns more money than her husband, it's almost certain to cause problems."	17.8%	31.0%	41.1%	10.1%

Source: UREP 15-035-5-013, June 2014 survey, n = 1,049; sampling weights utilized.

participation in the workforce and the maintenance of the family, which is seen disproportionately as the women's responsibility.

Besides the concern over conflict between the husband and wife if a woman chooses to continue working after marriage, there is also a concern about the unequal treatment that Qatari women face in the workforce in general. From our survey, we found that the majority of respondents believed that women face economic and employment inequality in the country (see Table 3). When asked whether a Qatari man or a woman with equal qualifications would be offered a position at a major company, about half of the women said it was more likely that the man would be hired, and that the man would be given a higher salary as well. It is important to note here that the remaining respondents were split between believing the woman would be favored in hiring or salary matters, or believing the decisions would be made fairly or equally.

Table 3. Perceptions of gender inequality in the workplace.

	Qatari man favored	Equal/fair	Qatari woman favored
"Imagine there is an open position at a major company in Qatar. In your view, if a Qatari man and a Qatari woman of equal qualifications were to apply for the position, do you think it's more likely that the man or the woman would be hired for the position?"	53.6%	22.2%	24.1%
"Imagine that two Qataris of equal qualifications, one man and one woman, are hired to work the same position at a major company in Qatar. How do you think the salaries of the two individuals would compare?"	49.2%	42.3%	8.5%

Source: UREP 15-035-5-013, June 2014 survey, n = 1,049; sampling weights utilized.

Ethnographic accounts also described the varied perspectives on accepted gender roles in Qatari society. Of one heated discussion in a *majlis*, a student researcher wrote:

One of the attendees gave the example of a recent debate regarding female equality, where the opposing view simply called the other group angry and envious of men's position in society. This led to a tirade by another attendee who was frustrated with the way a woman was subject to censure if she argued gender issues, even in campuses as open as Education City.

These types of perceptions of inequality, and strong and varied opinions about the proper role of women in society, may discourage some qualified women from entering or remaining in the workforce.

Yet despite these societal and cultural restrictions, many Qatari women are still choosing to pursue their careers, and they often use the *majlis* to receive advice and encouragement, to network, and to gather information that helps them succeed in their work. In one student film, Buthayna Al Zaman, a Qatari female entrepreneur, discussed the impact of the *majlis* on her career. She started her own business based on encouragement and feedback from her *majlis*. She states:

I have my own home-based business and it all started when a lot of friends and families at my gathering . . . always told me, 'Buthayna, why don't you put your own designs, print them on phone covers, print them on T-shirts?' Because they loved them, they told me that seeing them on merchandise would actually look nice. So . . . throughout the gatherings—I gather every

Thursday with my family—and when I go there, I ask them, ‘What do you think of this? Do you think this looks nice? Do you think if I changed the color, it would look better? Would you like to see it on a shirt or a hoodie or a sweatshirt?’ and through [the majlis], I gathered most of my ideas.¹¹

Another Qatari woman interviewed for the documentaries, Mead Al Emadi, who is the head of public relations for the Supreme Committee devoted to planning for the World Cup, has used her connections in the *majlis* to help plan stadium development. She explains:

*We used ‘Jeeran’ [‘Neighbors’] as a platform to gather women to discuss sports that will support our project. For example, we need to build a stadium in Al-Wakrah. How would I know what they want surrounding the stadium? Maybe they would like to have a football field for girls only, or wedding halls, or a park, or schools . . . So the idea of ‘Jeeran’ is that we attend *majaalis* in the area to listen to what they need, because where are we going to find other spaces that consist of educated women who have knowledge about their area, and where they discuss their issues with passion and loyalty, other than the *majaalis*? So we attended these *majaalis* . . . and we listened to their needs through this project. I approached them outside of the workspace and I received great ideas, which we made use of in our project.¹²*

In these examples, Qatari women are demonstrating that they remain eager and able to participate in the knowledge economy, despite societal and cultural restrictions. Overall, our research highlights the *majlis* as a site for critical debate and intergenerational dialogue on the many factors influencing and impacting women’s engagement in the wider society. Yet the important question remains: What kind of support do these women need to attain their career goals, while at the same time succeed in their personal lives?

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although Qatari women are actively encouraged by the government to take advantage of new social, economic, and political opportunities in the burgeoning knowledge-based economy, our quantitative and qualitative research data highlight a number of problems related to Qatari women’s balance between employment, education, and family responsibilities. We present these problems here along with possible policy solutions. It is our hope that these brief suggestions pave the way for further dialogue and debate among governmental and societal stakeholders.

Problem 1. *Qatari women are deeply concerned about hiring equality; they believe that when applying for jobs, employers will favor male nationals over female nationals.*

Policy recommendation: While Qatarization policies are already in effect, they do not differentiate between the sexes. We recommend that Qatarization policies should be amended to include gender quotas within the public sector that aim to increase the percentage of Qatari women hired annually, including for prominent leadership roles, such as municipal council and Shura council members, cabinet ministers, and company boards. Not only is there a growing global trend toward gender quotas in economic settings (e.g., [Smale and Miller 2015](#)), but also comparative studies have shown that quotas targeting the inclusion of women in the public sphere create demonstrable and beneficial results. For example, [Kang \(2009, 560\)](#) found that gender quotas “increase women’s [political] representation in Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries and in countries that are oil rich and oil poor.” Research on gender quotas in East Asia (specifically, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan) also reveals that “quotas and electoral institutions have worked to mediate parties’ patriarchal gatekeeping attitudes and cultural biases against women candidates” ([Tan 2015, 173](#)). Further, studies have shown that the type of “tight” institutional culture found in Qatar, wherein authorities enforce policies and demand compliance, is more likely to be successful in promoting gender parity through these quotas ([Toh and Leonardelli 2013](#)). Increasing the percentage and prominence of Qatari women in the workforce would make this important demographic more visible, helping to counter impressions of gender inequality and under-representation, and empowering the current generation of highly educated Qatari females.

¹¹Personal interview with Buthayna Al Zaman, Doha, Qatar, 2014. Please note that this interviewee chose to have her name, voice, and hands displayed, but not her face.

¹²Personal interview with Mead Al Emadi, Doha, Qatar, 2014.

Problem 2. *Qatari women express considerable concern about salary equality; they believe women will be paid less than their male counterparts for equal work.*

Policy recommendation: In Law No. 8 of 2009 on human resource management, Articles 26 and 27 stipulate that if a married couple is employed in the public sector, only one individual is eligible to receive the marriage benefits of additional social and housing allowances (the spouse continues to receive the “unmarried” level of benefits).¹³ Although the law does not state explicitly that these additional salary benefits should be given to the male, this is common practice and leads to the perception that men are paid more than women. To combat this perception, we recommend that this law should be modified to split equally the marriage benefits of additional social and housing allowances between the wife and the husband within their individual paychecks. This redistribution of benefits would do much to promote a sense of partnership between the spouses, and convey the impression that women are valued at the same rate as their male counterparts.

Problem 3. *There is currently a disconnect between the government’s push toward increased female employment and education, and society’s traditional values, which prioritize the domestic sphere. The challenges of working mothers/wives need to be addressed, and societal expectations and government priorities need to be aligned.*

Policy recommendation: We recommend removing the perceived conflict between government and societal priorities and expectations by rebranding the “Qatari working woman” as positive and essential to national development strategies rather than neglectful of and detrimental to the family unit. This rebranding can be accomplished through the creation of family-friendly policies within the Qatari workplace and higher educational system. Increased maternity leave, flexible working hours, and the possibility of working from home would do much to ease the challenges that wives/mothers face when pursuing employment or tertiary education. Currently, Law No. 14 of 2004 on labor entitles only those women who have worked for their employer for a full year to a 50-day paid maternity leave (Article 96).¹⁴ Dr. Ahmad Al Hammadi, head of General Pediatrics at Hamad Medical Corporation in Doha, argues—and we agree—that “all working mothers who give birth should be given a paid leave between six months and a year to be fully dedicated to breastfeeding their babies” (Toumi 2013). As well, mandatory childcare facilities in the workplace and at higher education institutes would encourage continued breastfeeding and reduce the reliance on nannies, while helping the mother and child feel closer during the workday. We also recommend increased flexibility in educational sponsorships (government or corporate) regarding the minimum number of required courses per semester, depending on family obligations and pregnancy. These policies in the workplace and in the university would help retain and support Qatari women who are pregnant, new mothers, or experiencing exceptional family circumstances, and enable them to show their societies that they can contribute to the knowledge economy while also fulfilling family obligations.

Problem 4. *Qatari women perceive that being highly educated reduces their chances of marriage.*

Policy recommendation: Although the solution to this problem is difficult, the imbalance between the percentage of college-educated Qatari men and Qatari women must be corrected. Qatari men must be further encouraged to pursue and complete their higher education, through a variety of possible financial incentives and mentorship programs. Despite sweeping national educational reforms of Qatar’s existing K–12 system and Qatar University, beginning in 2001 (Brewer et al. 2007; Moini et al. 2009), no program dedicated specifically to the academic struggles and needs of Qatari male students has been created and implemented—leaving a wide-open opportunity for governmental and societal actors to address these issues through innovative policies.

One example of impactful mentorship, the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America program, has demonstrated that one-on-one mentoring helps underachieving students become significantly more engaged in school (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch 1995). A modified version of this program may be a key component of encouraging academic success in Qatari male students from an early age.¹⁵

¹³See the full law at <http://almeezan.qa/LawPage.aspx?id=2644&language=en>.

¹⁴See the full law at <http://almeezan.qa/LawPage.aspx?id=3961&language=en>.

¹⁵The authors thank Nick Mitchell, from the American School of Doha, for this idea, which he is developing for his MA degree in Educational Leadership at Lehigh University.

By succeeding in their fields of study through strong encouragement and mentoring, the new generation of Qatari men will not feel threatened by the thought of a highly educated Qatari wife, but rather will see higher education as a characteristic of a strong life partner.

Problem 5. *Qatari women are remaining unmarried at higher rates, while the Qatari population vis-à-vis the expatriate population is getting proportionally smaller.*

Policy recommendation: We recommend amending Law No. 38 of 2005 on Qatari nationality to allow Qatari women the right to pass their citizenship to their children automatically, regardless of the nationality of the father. By doing so, the government would allow a greater number of Qatari women to marry and raise families within Qatar, helping to ensure stable futures for all Qatari children and reducing the number of unmarried Qatari women. Further, this policy would increase the population of Qatari nationals as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have shown through our research, Qatari women use the spaces of *majaalis al-hareem* to wrestle with the complex issues of joining a knowledge economy while also maintaining social and cultural traditions. It should be clear that Qatari women are not homogeneous and united in how best to navigate these conflicting pressures. Our research attempts to capture this diversity of opinion, demonstrating that women are discussing these issues in *majaalis al-hareem* and elsewhere, and that the decision to emphasize career and education over home and family remains a difficult choice for many Qatari women.

To return to our research question—under what conditions do Qatari women feel empowered to engage in wider society, economy, and polity?—our findings have made clear the importance of supporting both the personal and professional needs of Qatari women. With fuller support from both government and society, Qatari women will be able to make the best individual choices for themselves, whether these choices involve pursuing higher education, entering the public sphere through the workforce or political arena, and/or maintaining a strong family structure. Although creating this support is a gradual process, we have highlighted some policy solutions that the government could implement quickly, which would in turn help shape and guide society's opinions regarding the place of Qatari women today. Specific governmental action in certain areas—including implementing gender quotas in Qatarization policies, equalizing salary benefits for married couples, increasing family-friendly policies and childcare facilities in the workplace and the higher education system, strengthening the rates of Qatari men graduating from higher education, and automatically awarding citizenship to the children of Qatari mothers—will help to meet the personal and professional needs of Qatari women and may further drive their engagement and empowerment.

We hope that our findings can help inform and educate the country's governmental leaders regarding the lived realities of its female citizenry, as well as begin a community conversation about the obstacles and challenges that Qatari women still face in balancing between the knowledge economy and their personal lives. By highlighting the experiences of ordinary women as they use the space of the *majlis* to navigate their public and private lives, our research fills an important gap in the academic literature. Rather than paint an erroneous picture of disenfranchised and disempowered women in this region of the world, our research highlights the voices of Qatari women and their complex choices regarding the balance of their public and private lives, offering a solid foundation for social science work and policy implementation in the future.

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