

# Marrying Out: Exploring Dimensions of Cross-National Marriages among Qataris



## Research Team:

Sanaa Taha Alharahsheh, PhD  
Feras Al Meer



**DIFI**

معهد الدوحة الدولي للأسرة  
Doha International Family Institute

عضو في مؤسسة قطر  
Member of Qatar Foundation

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In an age of social transformation characterized by globalization, wireless communication, and ease of travel and migration, more and more people around the world are marrying across national boundaries. This has occurred worldwide with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as no exception to this trend. As with the rest of the GCC, Qatar has witnessed remarkable social changes because of the discovery of petroleum resources that have affected the daily lives of people within Qatar in myriad ways. This includes marriage patterns, whereby cross-national marriages (marriages with non-Qataris) have shown a marked increase during the past few years, reaching 21% of total Qatari marriages in 2015 compared with only 16.5% in 1985.

While cross-national marriage has come to public attention and is gaining traction amongst Western scholarship, it is still an understudied phenomenon in the Arab region. Thus, this study is essential because it adds “the missing piece of the puzzle” regarding the topic of cross-national marriage in the Arab region. The main objective of this study was to explore and describe cross-national marriage among Qatari citizens by analyzing and documenting its main patterns and trends from 1985-2015, social acceptance of cross-national marriage, its reasons from the point of view of the participants that inform us about a Qatari’s decision to marry outside his or her own nationality, the instability and quality of such marriages, and its challenges and benefits.

Multiple data sources were used to achieve the aforementioned objectives. Firstly, data from Qatar’s Annual Vital Statistics Bulletins was analyzed to document patterns of cross-national marriage among Qataris from 1985-2015. Secondly, in-depth interviews were used to explore and gain a better understanding of the lived experience of Qatari men and women within these marriages. A total of twenty-six Qatari participants married to non-Qatari spouses were recruited to participate in this study (see Appendix 1).

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The analysis of the vital statistics and the qualitative interviews has revealed the following key findings:

### **Trends and Patterns of Cross-National Marriage**

Although endogamous marriage (Qatari men married to Qatari women) is the norm accounting for 79% of the total in 2015, cross-national marriage has risen steadily, reaching 21% in 2015 in comparison with only 16.5% in 1985. Qatari women have typically married cross-nationally at higher rates than men, with the exception of the period between 2000-2005 and 2015 during which men married cross-nationally at higher numbers than women. The relative percentages for Qatari women marrying cross-nationally reached 12.3 percent in 1985 compared to only 8.7 percent in 2015. On the other hand, Qatari men have chosen to marry cross-nationally at a steadily increasing rate, up from 5 percent in 1985 to 12 percent in 2015. Compared to Qatari men, Qatari women are more likely to marry someone from neighboring GCC states.

### **Social Acceptance**

Results from the interviews reveal that Qatari society has become more accepting of cross-national marriage over the years. Yet, negative perceptions and resistance to cross-national marriage still persist. According to the majority of interviewees, the growing acceptance can be owed to the expansion of education, the accessibility of technology, ease of travel, and exposure to other nationalities that make up Qatar's large migrant workforce. However, such acceptance varies as Qataris are more accepting of marriages from neighboring GCC countries than any others with an inverse correlation between such acceptance and increased geographical distance.

Since marriage is regarded as a family affair rather than merely a partnership between individuals, family consent is important for marriage survival. However, the collective experience of the interviewees indicates that acceptance and consent is not expressed uniformly between families. Some families are more open and supportive towards cross-national marriages, while others express rejection and resentment that may or may not resolve itself as time passes. Such family acceptance is also gendered as it was found that the reaction to those marrying a non-Qatari spouse tended to be less severe for men versus women.

### **Reasons for Marriage Choice**

The cost of marriage to other Qataris, background similarities, exposure to other cultures, an opposition to traditional marriage, and personal traits have all been identified as reasons that interviewees chose to marry outside their nationality.

### **Cross-National Marital Quality and Instability**

According to available statistics, cross-national marriage trends among Qataris seem to be less stable and more prone to divorce than marriages between Qatari nationals as it reached 54.1% of the total in 2015. However, results from the qualitative interviews show a majority of the interviewees reported a high level of marital quality.

### **Challenges and Benefits**

Cross-national couples tend to face challenges, most of which are rooted in the couple's cultural differences and the unique dynamics embedded in that given context or interaction. Yet, these marriages also entail a slew of benefits including fostering openness and acceptance towards other cultures, having less genetic disorders among children, and having lower costs than endogamous Qatari marriages.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalization, technological development, easier global travel and migration, and the accompanying social transformations, more people are marrying across national boundaries. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are no exception to this global trend (1, 2). Advances in technology and ease of travel have brought people from different backgrounds together. The boundaries of oceans and continents are no longer major barriers and language barriers no longer stop people from reaching out to one another. The possibilities for experiencing the world and exploring new facets of human relationships are myriad, paving the way for cross-national relationships and marriages to blossom (3). As with the rest of the countries in the GCC, the discovery of petroleum resources in Qatar have allowed it to rapidly develop into one of the world's wealthiest nations, thereby undergoing social changes that have immensely affected the daily lives of people within Qatar. These changes have also affected marriage patterns, whereby cross-national marriages in Qatar have been on the rise much like in the rest of the world (2).

The increasing oil and gas revenues have transformed the country from an impoverished pearling and fishing state into one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Globally, Qatar has among the highest GDPs per capita (99,371 USD in 2013), and its HDI value (Human Development Index) places it among the most advanced countries of the region, having reached 0.850 in 2014 (ranking 32nd out of 188 countries) (4, 2). Subsequently, large investments have been directed towards its large-scale national development initiatives, which in turn could only be facilitated by a large migrant workforce. Thus, Qatar's total population has risen steeply over recent decades from 111,000 in 1970 to 2,347,000 in 2015. Almost 88 percent of its population is comprised of expatriates while Qatari nationals compose less than 15 percent. Thus, Qatari society can be described as a heterogeneous, multiethnic, multicultural, multi-skilled, and multilingual population as a result of the massive influx of socially and culturally diverse migrants, whereby "nearly 15 percent of the population is Qatari, 13 percent is non-Qatari Arab, 24 percent is Indian, 16 percent is Nepali, 11 percent is Filipino, 5 percent is Bangladeshi, 5 percent is Sri Lankan, 4 percent is Pakistani, and 7 percent is 'other' (5, 6, 1, 2).

Its investments and developments contribute too many of the country's social sectors in a bid to increase the overall quality of life for Qatar's residents, whether in terms of the education, labor, or health sectors. Today, Qatari citizens enjoy a very high standard of living with high wages, free health care, and free education (6, 7). Younger generations of Qataris are more educated, technologically sophisticated, open, and exposed to the external world than older generations. In addition, Qatari women have surpassed Qatari men in terms of education and their participation in the labor force has steadily increased over the past few years (1).

These sweeping developments have triggered changes in the structure of Qatar's families, particularly in regards to marriage. Among these changes are increased rates of celibacy, heightened rates of divorce, increased delays in marriage, and more instances of cross-national marriage (8, 9). In regards to postponing marriage, the average age of a Qatari man at his first marriage has shifted from an average of around 26 years old in 1990 to around 27 in 2014 with the averages for a Qatari woman also shifting from 22.1 to 24.1 years. In addition, the divorce rate has increased moderately, from 17.4 out of 1,000 married couples in 1995 to 17.5 in 2012 (6). In regards to celibacy, the percentage of never-married Qatari men above the age of 30 rose to 8.6 percent of the total in 2010, while the percentage for Qatari women rose to 12.9 percent (10). Cross-national marriage (defined within the scope of this study as a marriage between a Qatari and non-Qatari) itself has increased markedly over the past few years, reaching 21% in 2015 (11). Such changes have major demographic, social, and cultural implications for Qatari society.

Yet, research on cross-national marriage is relatively new and understudied in the Arab world. Thus, this study is important because it addresses "the missing piece of the puzzle" of

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cross-national marriage in the Arab world. Further, exploring cross-national marriage in Qatar is of great importance as its impacts are of major concern to both the Qatari state and Qatari society. As mentioned earlier, the rise in cross-national marriage is also linked to the increased rate of never-married Qatari women. This is further compounded by the behavior of both Qatari men and women. More cases of celibacy have contributed to a decline in fertility rates, which has decreased to 3.3 children per woman in 2011, a noticeable drop from 5.2 children in 1990 and 4.2 in 2005 (13, 14, 1). Furthermore, the fertility rate is predicted to decline further in the future (15).

However, divorce rates among cross-national marriages have risen to a significant 54.1% in 2015 compared to only 35.1% among Qatari endogamous marriages (11). These demographic changes have important policy implications for the state of Qatar. Any results accrued from the study of this type of marriage could help inform policy makers on its impacts, whether individual, familial, or societal in scope, and thus assist further developing and improving upon existing policies towards cross-national marriage. Moreover, the information gathered in this study will also be a resource for family counselors interested in designing programs specifically geared towards cross-national couples and their families and tailored to their unique situations and needs.

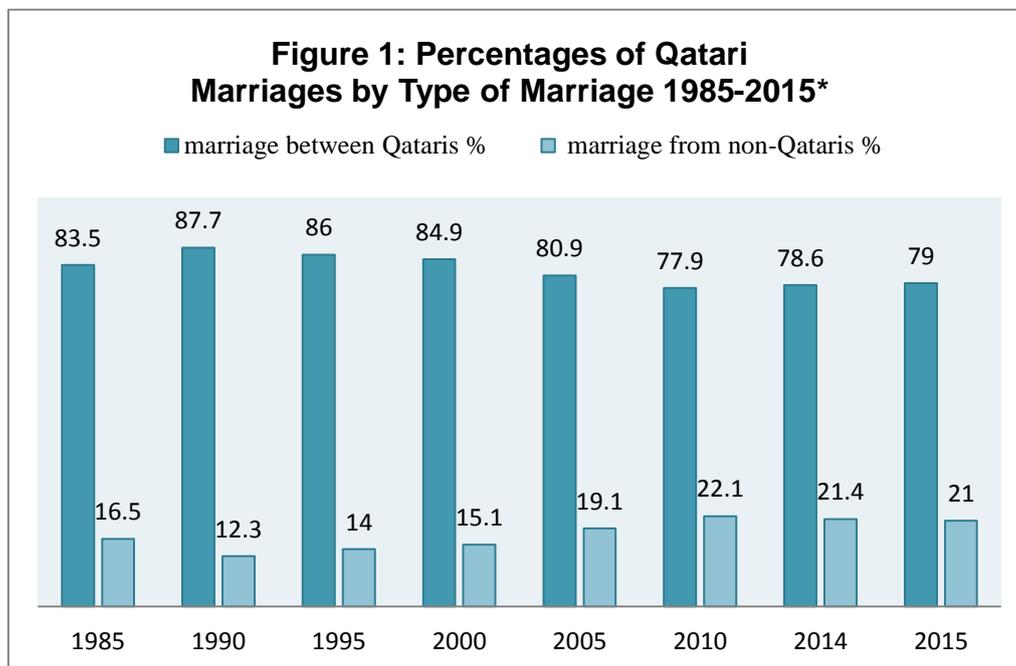
Therefore, the main objectives of this study are as follows:

- Explore and describe cross-national marriage among Qatari nationals, by analyzing and documenting its patterns and trends from 1985-2015.
- Gain a better understanding of the firsthand experiences of Qatari men and women who are currently married to non-Qatari spouses, its social acceptance, the participants' own motivations, and the quality and instability of such marriages.
- Explore and gain a better understanding of the perceived challenges and benefits of cross-national marriages.
- Fill an important gap in the literature concerning the phenomenon of cross-national marriage among Qataris.

This report is divided into seven chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter Two documents the trends and patterns of cross-national marriage amongst Qataris. Chapter Three discusses the social acceptance of cross-national marriages. Chapter Four presents the reasons behind Qataris marrying cross-nationally. Section Five discusses cross-national marriage quality and instability. Chapter Six describes challenges and benefits of cross-national marriage. The conclusion is presented in Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER II: CROSS-NATIONAL MARRIAGE IN QATAR: TRENDS AND PATTERNS

The family is the fundamental unit around which Qatari society is organized and marriage in Qatar is typically both endogamous and arranged (8). However, there has been a notable rise in cross-national marriages in Qatar. Figure 1 shows that while marriage between Qatari nationals composed the bulk of marriages amongst all Qataris in 2015 at 79% that the absolute number of cross-national marriages amongst Qataris has still risen notably since 1995 with its relative share reaching 21% in 2015. The only exceptions to this are the intervallic periods of 1985-1990 and 2010-2015, whereby there was a drop of 4 percent and 1 percent respectively. When placed in a global perspective, these rates are higher than those in Asia or the United States, yet similar to other countries in the GCC.



\*Calculated by the authors from State of Qatar Annual Vital Statistics, Marriage and Divorce for the corresponding years. Available on the Internet:

[http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject\\_area/Publications?subject\\_area=289](http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject_area/Publications?subject_area=289)

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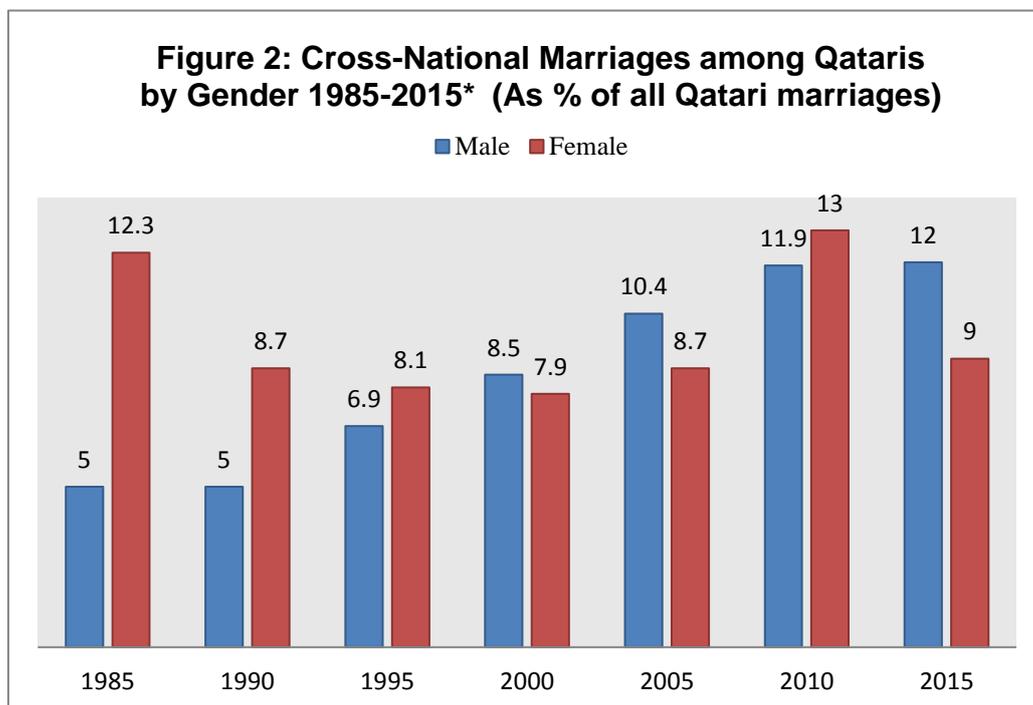
In the USA, for example, the proportion of cross-national marriages to all registered marriages was documented at 2.4 percent in 1970 and rose to 4.6 percent in 2010 (17). Countries throughout Asia show a similar story, at least, in comparison to Qatar. In South Korea, the percentage of marriages involving a foreigner rose from 3.5 to 10 percent between the years 2000 and 2010 while in Japan those percentages were 1 percent in 1980 and 5 percent in the intervallic period of 2008-2009 (17). Countries within the GCC show a starker increase by comparison and are more in line with Qatar's own demographic shifts. Between 2014-2015, the proportion of cross-national marriage reached as high as 19.1 percent, 28.8 percent and 28.9 percent for Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain respectively (18, 19, and 20).

The high prevalence of cross-national marriage in Qatar can probably be explained by several factors. First, it is a result of the rising cost that faces Qatari men who wish to marry a Qatari woman that may be attributed to conspicuous consumption behavior, whereupon Qatari

brides and their families insist on excessively high marriage expenses, even in cases where brides and grooms are blood relatives or cousins (1). Second, there is an increasing ratio of Qatari women who are more educated than their male counterparts, making it more difficult for them to find a suitable match. Hence, this pushes Qatari men to marry other nationalities (1, 2). Finally, more exposure to other nationalities vis-a-vis work, education, travel, or technology facilitates the formation of more cross-national relationships and marriages (2, 1).

Figure 2 demonstrates the gender shift that has occurred in regards to the percentage of Qatari men and women in cross-national marriages in comparison to the total number of Qataris. The general trend found in the data is that Qatari women have married outward at higher rates than Qatar men over the entire period with the exception of the interval between 2000-2005 and the year 2015 wherein the percentage of Qatari men marrying outward outweighed Qatari women. Looking at the changing trends for each gender, the data shows that the relative share of Qatari women in cross-national marriages has remained fairly consistent throughout the entire period described, ranging from 11.7 percent in 1985 to 13 percent in 2010. Yet, these percentages did decrease between 1990 and 2005, falling to an average of only 7.5 percent. Also, after 2010, the percentage dropped again to almost 9 percent in 2015. On the other hand, Qatari men have been marrying cross-nationally at a steadily increasing rate, from only 5 percent in 1985 to 12 percent in 2015.

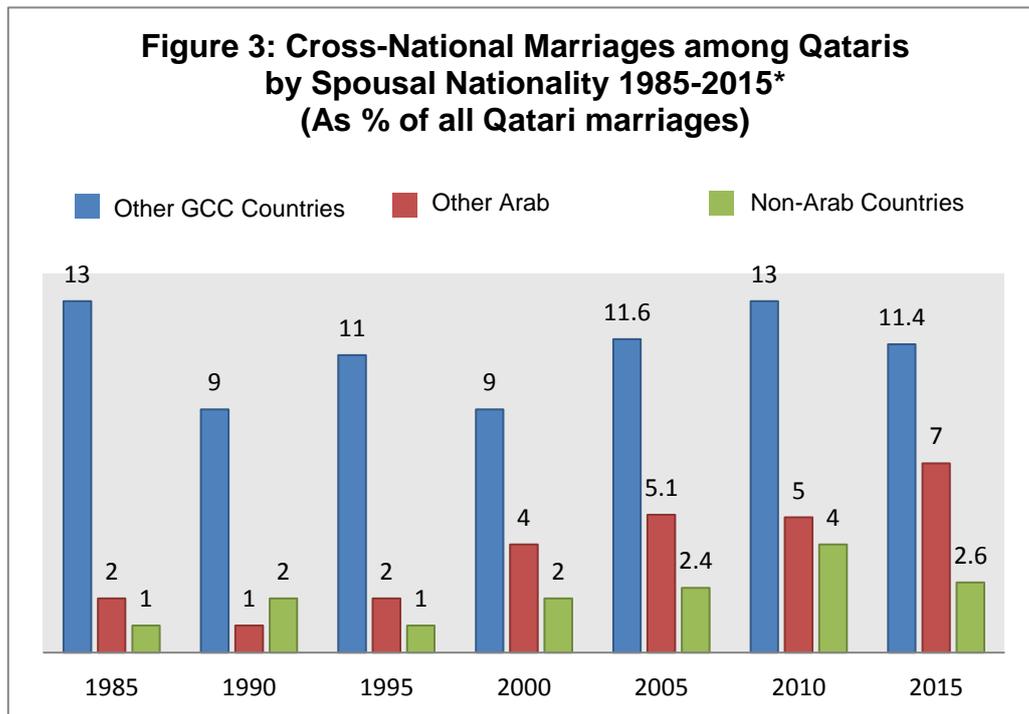
When marrying outward, Qataris generally favor marrying another GCC national first, followed by nationals of other Arab countries outside the GCC. The data provided in Figure 3 reveals that 11.4 percent of Qataris married a spouse from the GCC in 2015, followed by 7 percent who married a spouse from other Arab countries, and only 2.6 percent of Qataris who married a spouse from non-Arab countries.



\*Calculated by the authors from State of Qatar Annual Vital Statistics, Marriage and Divorce for the corresponding years. Available on the Internet:

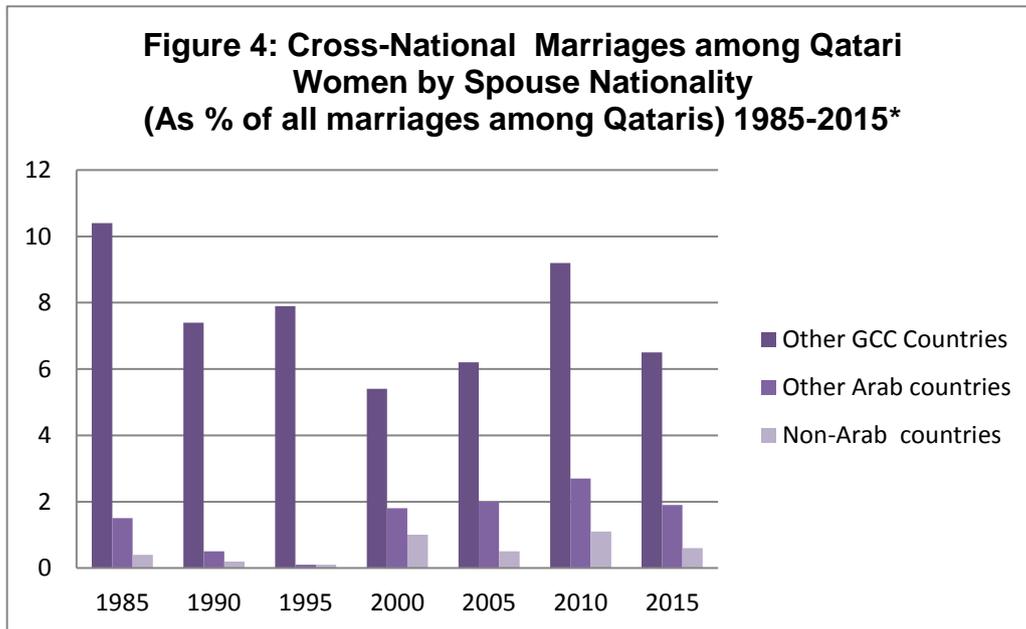
[http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject\\_area/Publications?subject\\_area=289](http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject_area/Publications?subject_area=289)

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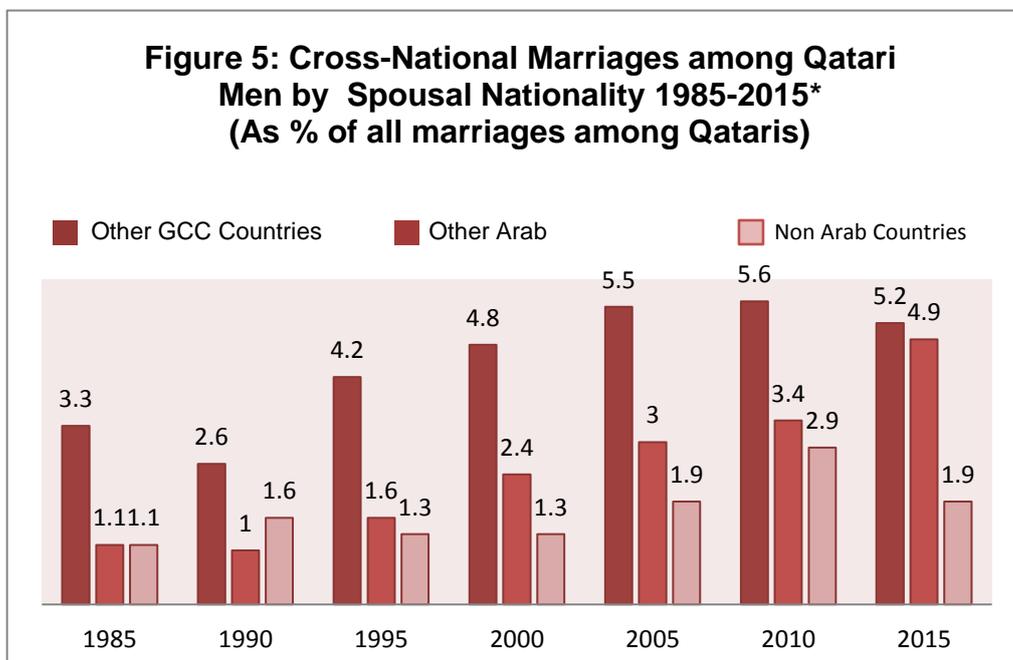


\*Calculated by the authors from State of Qatar Annual Vital Statistics, Marriage and Divorce for the corresponding years. Available on the Internet:  
[http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject\\_area/Publications?subject\\_area=289](http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject_area/Publications?subject_area=289)  
 (16)

While Qataris are more likely to marry a spouse from the other GCC states (*khaleeji*) followed then by other non-GCC Arab countries, there are some gender differences. As shown in figures 4 and 5, the general pattern that emerges from the data indicates that Qatari women are more likely than Qatari men to marry someone from other GCC countries. Cross-national marriages between Qatari women and other GCC nationals reached around 7 percent in 2015 followed by other Arab countries at a mere 2 percent while less than 1 percent of Qatari women married a spouse from non-Arab countries. On the other hand, Qatari men tended to marry someone from GCC countries on a lesser scale, only reaching 5.2 percent in 2015 compared to 2.8 percent in 1985. The data also reveals that there is a systematic increase in marriage between Qatari men and spouses of other Arab nationalities, reaching about 5 percent in 2015, which is nearly five times its share of merely 1 percent in 1985.



\*Calculated by the authors from State of Qatar Annual Vital Statistics, Marriage and Divorce for the corresponding years. Available on the Internet: [http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject\\_area/Publications?subject\\_area=289](http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject_area/Publications?subject_area=289) (16)



\*Calculated by the authors from State of Qatar Annual Vital Statistics, Marriage and Divorce for the corresponding years. Available on the Internet: [http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject\\_area/Publications?subject\\_area=289](http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject_area/Publications?subject_area=289) (16)

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## CHAPTER III: SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF CROSS-NATIONAL MARRIAGE

### Societal Acceptance

Societies vary in their attitudes to intermarriage. The USA is a good example of this. During the 1950s and 1960s, interracial, interethnic, intercultural, interfaith, and cross-national relationships and marriages were deemed socially unacceptable (21, 22) due to enduring beliefs that these relationships were inherently stressful, dysfunctional, and prone to divorce (23). Yet, the United States today is more accepting of mixed relationships including cross-national marriages. In the GCC, endogamy is still generally treated as the preferred option. However, research from Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates suggests that cross-national marriage has become more accepted in the Gulf over the past few years (24, 25, 26, 1, 2). Yet, results from the in-depth interviews conducted for this study indicate that negative perceptions towards cross-national marriage still persist in Qatari society despite signs that society has changed over the years to become much more accepting of marriage to non-nationals. As one Qatari man (45 years old) in this study noted that migration, education, and more inter-cultural openness has fostered societal changes over the years that has led to cross-national marriage becoming more accepted:

*“Qatari society has changed. It is not like before. The increase in education, migration, and openness to other cultures has led to more acceptance of marriage from outside.”*

In general, Qataris are more accepting of marriages from the GCC countries than other regions as these countries share similar cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. However, as Qataris marry those from farther away, the less acceptance one receives. As expressed by a Qatari man (37 years old) in our study:

*“A lot of males and females marry from the GCC because they have the same traditions and customs, the same environment, and social status. Most of them have family relations... When you go further to the other Arab countries and foreign countries, the acceptance decreases. But there are some families who still do not accept marriage from outside.”<sup>1</sup>*

Marriage from the GCC countries is much easier and does not require official permission from the government. Marriage laws within the GCC dictate that government approval is required to marry a non-GCC spouse (2). One Qatari male participant (age 42) related:

*“People are becoming more open and accepting of marriage from other nationalities than in the past, especially from the GCC followed by the Arab region. Marriage from the GCC is easier because it does not require the government approval, but when you marry from the other Arab and foreign countries, you need an approval from the government”.*

Some participants do not consider marriage from GCC countries to be cross-national based on the belief that GCC countries are essentially one in the same. For example, A Qatari man (age 37) revealed:

*“In fact, the Arabian Gulf man in general considers that all GCC countries are part and parcel of his national social fabric, as they all share the same culture, customs, and traditions. As a result, a marriage with a Khaleeji man or woman is not considered as a mixed marriage since the Arabian Gulf societies are bound by the same national fabric, customs, and traditions. There is hardly any Khaleeji family that does not have relatives, close or far, in neighboring*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee's English speech

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*Gulf states”.*

Regardless of these reports of the increase in openness and acceptance of cross-national marriage within Qatar, negative perceptions and resistances also still persist, owing to the society’s emphasis on tribalism. Many families not only prefer endogamous marriages but also consanguineous marriages between cousins (1, 2). This serves to explain why some Qatari families still resist the notion of cross-national marriage. As pointed out by a Qatari man (age 58):

*“There are some families who do not allow their children to marry outward. For example, bedouin and tribal families are less accepting of marriage from outside than al-hadar [agricultural or urban based people] ... They still have the idea of cousin marriage to maintain the wealth and the family ties. They still look at the family roots and names”.*

These negative perceptions also can be attributed to the enduring notion in the GCC that cross-national marriage negatively impacts families and society, being inherently unstable, uncondusive to raising children who will be able to integrate into Qatari society (24, 26, 27). Some interviewees confirm this, attributing these attitudes to the inherent instability and stigma associated with cross-national marriages and cite these marriages as more potentially damaging to a family. For example, as stated by a Qatari man (age 45):

*“There is still a stigma behind breakups from foreign marriages, as people know that the kids are going to remain here in Qatar where the spouse is going to her family’s house. But with a foreign marriage, there is a very strong possibility that the spouse and the kids will leave... So from that perspective there is always that cloud sitting on top of certain people with regards to total acceptance or not.”<sup>2</sup>*

He elaborated further:

*“We do get some interesting puzzled faces when we’re out in public sometimes, especially with some younger Qataris. They see this Qatari with this European blonde and blue eyed, and then there are the kids who are mixed with different skin color and blue eyes... so their eyes are there and you can tell from the head and the face it’s like what is this... who is this guy!... And who is she and are they really married or what’s going on?! ... there is a lot of that...”<sup>3</sup>*

The degree of acceptance and openness also tends to be gendered. Though Qatari women have made significant progress over the years in several sectors such as work, health, and social affairs, Qatari society still perceives them differently from men in some regards. A Qatari woman (age 43) illustrated this through her personal experience. She was judged harshly for going against her own culture’s traditions, describing how the negative perception of outward marriages can also extend to the children of those married couples. Expressing worry over society’s acceptance, she said:

*“Although the Qatari society is undergoing several changes, it still has a negative perception of mixed marriages and the offspring produced by such marriages. As men are leading Qatari society, it tends to reinforce the gender perception of women in general. This is even so if the woman is a foreigner... .... I myself had to face anticipated challenges when I decided to marry a non-Qatari. I was worried about acceptance and being accepted. People say: “Who does she think she is to break the tradition... I feel like I live in a bubble. I was even subjected to personally insulting remarks but I do not care.” (2)*

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee’s own English speech.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee’s own English speech.

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A Qatari man (age 37) further reported that there is still some gender inequality when it comes to marrying from abroad. Qatari society accepts it when men marry outside more so than when women do with the exception of marriage from the GCC countries:

*"There is gender discrimination when it comes to cross-national marriages. The Qatari society accepts the marriage of local men with foreign women much more than it accepts the marriage of local women with foreign men. A woman faces restrictions if she wants to tie the knot with a foreigner, unless her future husband is a Gulf citizen."*

### Family Acceptance

Family acceptance is important for a healthy, stable and long-lasting cross-national marriage and also eases the adjustment process for a foreign spouse moving to a new country. Some families see no problem with cross-national marriage and support their children's decision to marry outwards from the onset while others express rejection and resentment that may or may not be resolved as time progresses. A Qatari man (age 36), for example, stated that his family was surprised at first when he decided to marry a non-Qatari spouse but ultimately did not object as she was from the GCC region. There was even a prior relationship built between his and her family. He stated that:

*"At the beginning, my decision to marry a non-Qatari woman came as a surprise for my family, yet nobody opposed it. My family and my wife's family have good relations and the reactions of my siblings were normal. To put it in a nutshell, there was no objection from my family."*

A large determinant of a family's openness to cross-national marriage is whether or not there is a prior history of such marriages within the same family. As illustrated by a Qatari woman (age 26):

*"Yeah, there is a history of marriage from outside in the family. I mean there are other ladies in the family who are also married to foreigners. So it's not a difficult concept for the family. We embrace all cultures. We embrace diversity. So again, it wasn't something that we were wrestling and fighting for... And, the parents of both parties are in agreement and are happy so this marriage to happen." <sup>4</sup>*

Other families express rejection and resentment that may be resolved as time progresses. As stated by a Qatari man (age 58):

*"I informed my family about my marriage a while after tying the knot. At first, my family members were shocked and not accepting but, over time, they accepted this reality as a fait accompli and a personal decision, then they started to accept my wife as well. My wife stood by my side and supported me to face this issue with my family. At the beginning of my marriage, I visited my family alone and left my wife in the United States, in order to put my next of kin in the picture of my new life. Afterward, I brought my wife to Qatar and introduced her to my family. At present, they do not see my marriage as an issue. On the contrary, they support it and accept it more than ever before."*

The odds of a family's acceptance are also heavily influenced by gender. Qatari women tend to receive intensely negative reactions much more often than Qatari men (2). One Qatari woman (age 45) related that nobody from her family supported her marriage due to her spouse being a non-Arab, emphasizing the importance of a potential husband's family name.

With time, her mother has become completely supportive and accepting but the rest of her family has been somewhat reluctant. She said:

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee's own English speech.

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*“Originally, nobody supported the marriage and I had to wait for many years to get married. He did propose twice, both times he didn’t get any positive response... they disapproved it. Mostly it was because he was not a Qatari... when it comes to marriage, the family name gets linked too... like I said, nobody showed their support.... now things are much better. My mother became the most supportive of it, and I was afraid that she wouldn’t be supportive at all ... I have my family, keep their respect but from a distance because I don’t want anyone involved in my marital life.” (2)*

## CHAPTER IV: REASONS FOR MARRYING OUT

Choosing a mate is among the most important decisions an individual can make. This justifies the importance of exploring the factors behind spousal selection within this study (28). Identifying the reasons for choosing a spouse has long been a focus of research in a variety of fields. Physical attractiveness, personality traits, love, financial status, and similarity in backgrounds have been cited as the most prevailing criteria for marriage (29, 30, 31). These criteria are not expressed the same way universally, varying significantly between cultures. Some focus on religion and education while others focus more singularly on physical attractiveness (29, 30, 31). Others still might consider social status as the important factor (32). According to research conducted in the GCC, these factors are the most commonly cited for marrying out: the prohibitive cost of both dowries and marriage; ease of travel and exposure to different nationalities; and cross-national marriage being regarded as a simpler option as well as a way to avoid illegitimate relationships (24, 26). The qualitative results of this study reflect some of the aforementioned factors. This includes the hindrance of expenses associated with endogamous marriage and *mahr*<sup>5</sup>; presence of similar backgrounds; exposure to other cultures through travel, work, education, and technology; personal traits criteria; and an opposition to traditional marriage. Below is a discussion of each reason.

### Cost of Marriage

Due to the drastic increase in wealth from oil and gas resources in the Gulf, Qataris have become predisposed to expensive and luxurious lifestyles with a high standard of living, a predisposition that extends to people’s attitudes about weddings. The social pressure to have a lavish wedding and the high cost of *mahr* has encouraged some Qatari men to search for a non-Qatari bride who will require a lower *mahr* and less expensive marriage (34, 24, 26). This trend is widespread in the Gulf with dire affects across the region economically, socially and demographically. Marriage, seen as an essential component of the family—and by extension society itself—is now at risk due to high rates of divorce and an increase in celibacy, which are both indirectly linked to the increasing cost of marriage (35, 34). Results from qualitative interviews also revealed that the cost of marriage and a high *mahr* is one of the main reasons that Qatari men marry outside their own nationality. One Qatari man (age 42), for example, relates how a prospective wife’s family had demanded a car, house, gold, and an expensive wedding on top of an already steeply priced *mahr*. Instead, he opted to marry a non-Qatari woman who had less demands, stating:

*“Qatari men do not marry Qatari women because money of course number one. Some Qatari guys cannot pay QR 80,000 or 100,000 for advance (mahr). You know the Qatari habit or the Arabian habit is that before you get married you have to pay for advance to the family of the bride (mahr). The wedding party costs QR50, 000. Oh my god, those guys most of them are*

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<sup>5</sup>*Mahr* is an amount of money or possessions (e.g. jewelry, land, house, etc.) that should be paid by the groom or his family to the bride at the time of marriage. In fact, the *mahr* can be paid to the bride in stages. The first part is given to the bride at the signing of the marriage contract (which is called *muqaddam*) and the other part is deferred until divorce (called *mu’ajjal* or *mu’akhhkar*). (33, 2)

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*young ...who is going to marry and start his future life with a loan... He got to take a bank loan .... I have a limited salary. I cannot pay a lot of money for a Qatari woman. Her family asks for a lot of money ... so what I am going to do? I want to marry ... I got no money so I'm going to marry from outside.”<sup>6</sup>*

### Similarities in Backgrounds

Similarity between spouses is another important factor when addressing spousal selection among Qataris. Research in the field has determined that individuals mostly tend toward spouses with common backgrounds in culture, ethnicity, religious attitudes or socio-economic status (31, 36, 1, 2). It is easier for them to communicate with, understand, and trust someone of a similar cultural background who shares their language, values, and attitudes (31, 1, 2). This, in turn, contributes to marital satisfaction (28). Likewise, numerous interviewees in the current study pointed out that similarities in background characteristics such as culture, education, and social environment played a significant role in the selection process when they married outward. A Qatari woman (age 53) with a graduate degree stated that she chose a partner who came from a similar tribal environment and educational background:

*“Of course, he is an educated man with a Master degree, came from a tribal society like me. He is a badawi<sup>7</sup> who came from similar environment.”*

Another Qatari woman (age 27) pointed out how being Arab, Muslim, educated, and residing in the GCC region were the most important factors that led her to marry her current non-Qatari spouse:

*“To me, it was important to be connected to someone who is Arab, first and foremost Muslim, and an educated man and who lives close by in the GCC region. He was my classmate.”<sup>8</sup> (2)*

A Qatari man (age 37) expressed similar sentiments:

*“She is from the GCC area with the same culture, tradition, and background. She is a relative who lives in another GCC country. So I did not bring a stranger to the family or bring another culture”.*

Coming from families with the same history of cross-national marriage is a crucial factor in marrying a non-Qatari spouse. As pointed out by a Qatari woman (age 33):

*“I do not see there is a difference between us. Both of us came from mixed marriage families. Maybe if I'm married to another person and his mother is not a Qatari, I will see the difference. I do not feel any difference between us.”*

### Exposure to Other Cultures

In today's interconnected world, it is easy for people to establish contact with other cultures from around the world, in turn providing them with a wider range of relationship opportunities. Increasing contact with and exposure to others through study, work, travel, and technology increases the chances for people to meet, fall in love, and marry internationally (37, 3, 2). Our study echoes these observations with some interviewees who have met their spouses through studying abroad, working overseas, or travel. Other interviewees explained that they met and communicated with their prospective spouses abroad via social media. One Qatari man (age 58) related how he met his current spouse while studying abroad in the USA. His marriage helped him pursue his studies and adjust to life there:

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee's own English speech.

<sup>7</sup> *Badawi* refers to someone whose lineage comes from a nomadic Arab tribe.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewees own English speech.

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*"I met my current American wife at the university library. My marriage with an American woman facilitated greatly my integration into the US society, as well as learning English, pursuing my studies, and settling down in life".*

Work is another venue where people can meet and develop relationships that lead to marriage. This was reported by a Qatari man that met his current wife at work. She used to work with him in the same office:

*"I was a manager in one of the government sectors at that time, and she was working there. I knew her through work. I got attracted to her. Then I went to visit her family and give them an idea about the subject and make it formal" (2).*

The internet also has become a hub for social interaction where people can meet, interact, build close relationships, and choose marriage partners. Typically, this is accomplished via platforms like Facebook, e-mail, various messengers, etc. (38), which was the case for a few of our participants. A Qatari woman reported that she met her current husband through the internet, where she started to communicate with him before meeting him face to face. Afterwards, he came to Doha and proposed to her:

*"We met through Facebook but we did meet in person later..... Then, he proposed to my father and asked for my hand."*

### **Personal Traits**

Research on mate selection shows that physical and emotional attraction as well as individual personality traits are all important factors in choosing a spouse (39, 40, 29) though these criteria differ between cultures. Some participants in our study also emphasized the importance of certain personality traits when selecting their non-Qatari spouses. This is exemplified in the case of one Qatari woman (age 53) who said:

*"He has many fine traits and, quite honestly, I was attracted to him. He is self-confident and has a strong personality. .... moreover, I do not like men with simple or weak personalities. Thus, he was the right man for me."*

Another Qatari man (age 58) further indicated that:

*"I chose her for her personal traits, she was very conservative and she converted to Islam. She has a good personality."*

Physical attractiveness also plays a significant factor in spousal selection. Some of our interviewees pointed out that they chose their non-Qatari spouse because of their physical attractiveness. As illustrated by a Qatari man (age 60):

*"She was young, pretty, has a good personality, and I got attracted to her."*

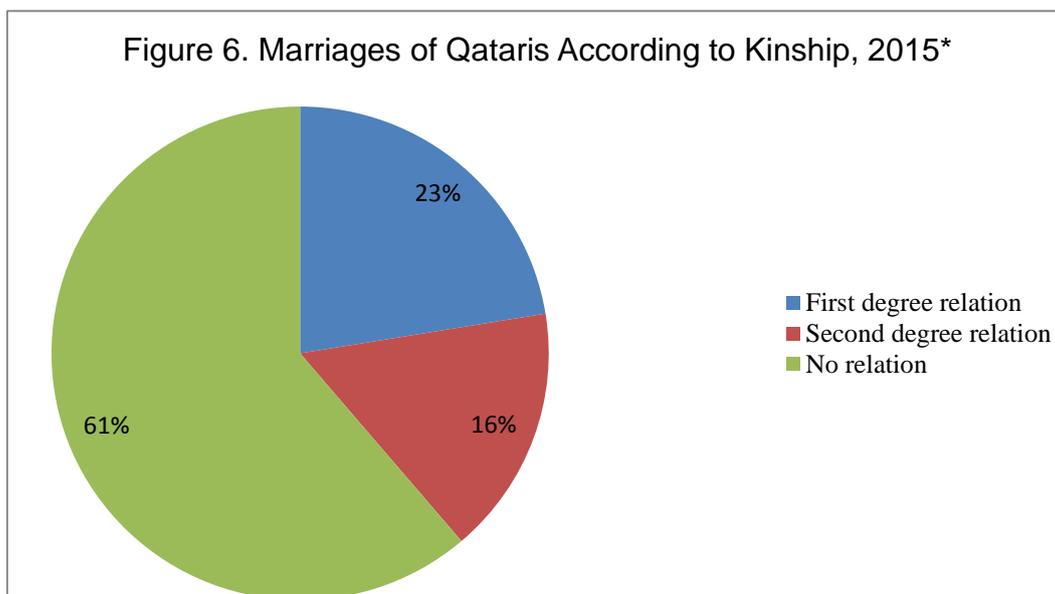
### **Opposition to Traditional Marriage<sup>9</sup>**

Like many countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (41-47), marriage in Qatar has always tended to be, for the most part, consanguineous and arranged by the family (43, 1, 2). Such marriages are considered to be more stable and more economically beneficial, as they preserve a family's wealth through the tribal structure of extended families (43, 48, 49) while maintaining family ties and identity (1, 2). Additional factors supporting this practice are the perceived risks of marrying a stranger and the ease of marriage preparations with family

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<sup>9</sup>In this study, traditional marriage refers either to arranged or consanguineous marriages or a combination of both types.

members (50, 51). Figure 6 shows the percentage distribution of marriage contracts of Qataris by kinship for 2015, with the percentage of consanguineous marriages<sup>10</sup> remaining high at almost 39% of all Qatari marriages. The marriages of first-degree relatives were about 23%, whereas marriages among second-degree relatives were around 16%. The percentage of spouses who are not relatives made up 61% of the total Qatari marriages that year.



\*Calculated by the authors from State of Qatar Annual Vital Statistics, Marriage and Divorce, 2015. Available on the Internet at: [http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject\\_area/Publications?subject\\_area=289](http://www.qix.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/qix/subject_area/Publications?subject_area=289) (11)

Despite its prevalence in Qatar, results from the current study further pointed out that some participants opposed arranged and consanguineous marriages, preferring cross-national marriage. As reported by one Qatari man (age 45):

*"Marriage is qism wa naseeb<sup>11</sup>. I was not likely to go to my parents and ask them to find me a wife the traditional way. I was likely to find my own wife."<sup>12</sup>*

Another Qatari man (age 51) also indicated that he rejected the idea of a traditional marriage and decided to marry someone from outside Qatar, saying:

*"I know well our society. We can be judgmental at times. As for me and quite honestly, I can say that my own experience during my stay abroad affected me positively. This is why I rejected traditional marriage and decided to marry a foreign woman, but I chose a pious and a conservative one."*

A Qatar woman (age 36) also documented that she married a non-Qatari spouse because she is opposed to traditional marriage. She did not want to marry either a Qatari or a relative:

*"Even though my brothers and sister are married to Qataris, I chose him because I did not want to marry a Qatari or a relative... I did not want to marry in a traditional way."*

<sup>10</sup>Consanguineous marriages are typically arranged by families in many parts of the world including Qatar.

<sup>11</sup> *Marriage is qism wa naseeb* means that marriage is fate and destiny. On other words, it is "something meant to be or meant to happen to you."

<sup>12</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee's own English speech.

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## CHAPTER V: CROSS-NATIONAL MARRIAGE QUALITY AND INSTABILITY

Research on marital quality and instability<sup>13</sup> of cross-national marriages in the GCC is very scarce. To the best of our knowledge, no research on the subject in Qatar is available. Available studies from the United States (52, 54, 55, 56) as well as Europe (31, 57, 58) and Southeast Asia (59, 60, 61) indicate that mixed marriages of any type tend to be less stable, have lower marital quality, and are at greater risk of divorce than endogamous couples. Yet, some studies state the opposite, saying that such marriages are more stable and have higher marital quality than endogamy (55, 62).

A variety of factors have been found to threaten their quality and stability, subsequently leaving these marriages prone to divorce. These include differences in values, religious beliefs, attitudes, or cultures (57, 61); conflicts that stem from differences in social, cultural, and ethnic identity; negative attitudes of society towards intermarriage; the lack of family members' approval and support that may negatively affect the couples' relationships; and difficulty in communication (63, 54, 61).

Available statistics from Qatar reveal that cross-national marriage is less stable and more prone to divorce than marriage between Qatari nationals. The rates of divorce in cross-national marriages reached 54.1% of the total marriages among Qataris in 2015 as compared to a divorce rate of 35.1% for marriages between Qatari nationals (11).

However, results from the qualitative study indicate that cross-national marriages among Qataris have a high level of marital quality and stability. Several interviewees identified a number of essential components that influence marital quality and stability, such as satisfaction and happiness, openness in communication, degree of commitment, the amount of time spent together, the type of relationship with their families, and the level of disagreements and problems within the marriage. Because each of these components is directly related to marital quality, a careful examination of each is important.

### Happiness and Satisfaction

Marital happiness and satisfaction are very important factors contributing to marital quality. A high quality of marriage would be associated with a high degree of marital satisfaction and happiness and a lower level of marital quality would mean the inverse is true (64). If a spouse is unsatisfied in their married life, this can cause instability, ultimately leading to divorce (64). Several interviewees in our study reported that they are very happy and satisfied with their marriages to non-Qatari spouses as related by one Qatari man (age 33):

*"I'm very happy and satisfied with my marriage. Happiness is like when you feel happy and comfortable. Happiness is something that every human has to experience and I think that she makes me very happy with her simplicity you could say."*

Another Qatari woman (age 26) highlighted something similar:

*"So I'm highly satisfied and happy in my marriage and the most satisfying and happy aspect of the marriage is that we're not just husband and wife, but we're also best friends. We're very close to each other. We're soul mates."*

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<sup>13</sup> Marital instability refers to one or more of the following: trouble in the marriage, perceived likelihood of divorce, discussion of separation, the act of separation, and actual divorce. Marital quality is often used to indicate happiness and satisfaction as well as marital adjustment (52, 53).

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## Communication

Good and effective communication is essential to the success of any marriage, whereby both spouses openly and honestly express their thoughts and feelings while making an earnest effort to understand the thoughts and feelings of their counterpart (65-68). Effective communication involves understanding their partner's emotions, being able to interpret their language correctly or 'read between the lines', and careful observation of how said partner deals with life issues (68 -70). However, negative and destructive communication decreases marital quality and increases thoughts and conversations about divorce (71). The amount of communication also differs between maritally satisfied and dissatisfied couples. Happy and satisfied husbands spend significantly more time talking to their wives than unhappy and unsatisfied husbands (72).

If a couple fails to communicate their feelings, desires, problems, and expectations, their relationship will likely be adversely affected. Communicating with each other about the problems in the relationship may provide avenues for solving them. Communication also makes the relationship strong by decreasing the possibility of anyone else creating misunderstandings (64). Most interviewees in the present study agreed that communicating with each other was a crucial element to a thriving marriage. More specifically, their observations echo the notion of open communication as a preventative measure for misunderstanding and as an effective problem solving tool. As stated by one Qatari man (age 33):

*"When it comes to communication, it's the main important factor to keeping a relationship alive. Our marriage is built on communication and that it stays that way because if you have anything that you don't like or if you have any issue you would like to discuss, you don't have this thing inside you that tells you I cannot talk about it. It's always discussed and always brought down to the table and we just like to talk about it. So the quality of my marriage I refer to it when it comes to communication."*

Similarly, a Qatari woman had this to share (age 45):

*"Communication is excellent. We talk a lot with each other and discuss a lot of things. We have a very open dialogue with each other. We are both in different things, but we stand on the points of agreement through discussion."*

The frequency of communication is also a factor contributing to the enhancement of marital relationships as one Qatari man (age 45) related:

*"We spend a lot of time talking to each other. We share almost everything."*

## Commitment

Commitment is a vital element in marital quality and stability. Available literature reveals that complete commitment is essential in long-term marriage relationships (73, 69, 74, 68). According to Lauer and Lauer (1986), (75), it is defined as the "willingness and determination to work through troubled times" (p. 57). Commitment involves hard work (75) and maintaining an idealized romantic view of marriage (76, 68) throughout the 'good and bad seasons, moments of anger and joy, and times of happiness and quiet contemplation' (77, 68). It also encompasses commitment to the relationship itself and commitment to one another (68). Results from our interviews corroborate with the research, with interviewees feeling that commitment is an important element in the success of marital relationship. As a Qatari man expressed:

*"Commitment is one of the biggest factors in order to have a successful relationship. In any relationship, commitment is very important. I'm committed to my marriage and spouse 100%..."*

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## Shared Activities and Spending Time Together

Spending time together is another key component of marital quality (70, 78). It has been reported that couples who enjoy leisure activities together are more happily married (79), meaning this enhances their marital quality (70). Even spending time together without communication can cultivate and strengthen marital intimacy (80, 70). In accordance with the aforementioned literature, results from the current study showed that being together and spending time with spouses is a fundamental contributing factor to marital quality as exemplified by one Qatari man's statement (age 45):

*"We spend a lot of time together. We do things together, we are a team. We go out together. Actually I said that yesterday to my wife we are a fantastic team."*<sup>14</sup>

A Qatari woman (age 26) reflected the same sentiment:

*"We spend perfect and sufficient amount of time together. We also make so much time together. We do activities together outside of work. .... We do sports together. Even he always asks me to come with him to his business meeting if it's at night because he wants me to be there which makes him happy to have me around. It's so important, so important to keep this dynamic."*<sup>15</sup>

## Relationship with the Families

When two people of different nationalities enter a new relationship, it is likely they will not understand each other well. At this time, family can either help them both understand one another and play an active part in making their relationship strong and successful or weaken their relationship by creating misunderstandings between them (81, 64). A positive relationship one's in-laws and the presence of a family support structure could increase the level of marital quality while stress from any negative family influence and/or lack of support could reduce marital satisfaction and overall marital quality (82). In this study, the majority of the interviewees have reported a positive relationship with their immediate families and their in-laws. Their spouses tended to have a positive relationship with their immediate families and in-laws as well, feeling that their families were very supportive and welcoming to their non-Qatari spouses. This facilitated their spouses' adjustment to Qatari society and helped make their marital relationship strong and stable. This was the case for a Qatari man (age 37) who married a spouse from the GCC:

*"My relationship with my family members is excellent. We are a closely knit family and we almost meet up every day. Moreover, my relationship with my wife's family is good to a certain extent, but somewhat superficial because of the geographical distance separating us. My wife's relationship with my family members is excellent. She is close to them and remains in touch with them."*

Another Qatari woman (age 26), who is married to a non-Arab spouse, stated that she has a good relationship with her family and in-laws as well just as her husband has a positive relationship with her family. Her family was very welcoming and supportive of her marriage:

*"Hamdellah<sup>16</sup>, my husband's relationship with my family is excellent. He is very close. He is there every day, even for lunch and he calls my dad all the time. It's a fantastic relationship. It is just the most natural, comfortable, and healthy relationship I can imagine with the family. Even he sees my extended family weekly, especially my grandparents and my uncles and aunts ... My relationship with his family is excellent as well. I do not have any problem with them. I'm very close to them and I keep in touch with them frequently."*

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee's own English speech.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee's own English speech.

<sup>16</sup> *Hamdellah* means "Thank God".

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On the other hand, despite some interviewees having a good and positive relationship with their families, the relationship between their family and their spouse and their family was less so. For example, a Qatari man (age 36) pointed out that he lives with his family in the same house and his wife's relationship with his family is unstable, especially with his father and sisters:

*"I have an excellent relationship with my family. They love me a lot. My wife's relationship with my mother is very beautiful because she is a close relative to her, but my wife's relationship with my sisters is not that good. I feel that her relationship with them is very bad ... Even my father, her relationship with him is ups and downs because he was not supportive to my marriage from her from the beginning. Even now he hasn't taken to it.... He is very tough with her ... he didn't want her very much from the beginning."*

### Disagreement and Conflict

Individuals can feel satisfied with their relationship and still fight and disagree. Disagreement occurs in all marital relationships and cross-national marriages are no exception. Because marriages encompass intimate relationships and frequent interactions, the possibility of conflict mushrooms (81). Some disagreements are more manageable than others. Frequent conflicts are more likely to decrease the level of marital quality (84, 81, 56) and their sources are varied. Tallman and Hsiao (2004)(85) pointed out that conflict develops partially due to individual expectations that one's partners will fulfill their emotional, social, and material needs throughout their married life. Conflict can also erupt because individuals hold diverse values and objectives, utilizing distinctly different decision-making processes or orientations (86). Language and communication, stereotypes, child rearing, and financial issues were found to be other sources for such disagreements and conflicts (87). Other researchers suggest that conflicts may be the result of personality differences or situational factors and are not exclusively the byproduct of cultural differences (88). Results from the current research also revealed that disagreement and conflict do exist in the relationships studied. However, the majority currently manage their disagreement and conflict constructively in a way that both parties find fulfillment in the resolution. Through mutual understanding and effective communication, they can continue to derive marital satisfaction from the relationship. One Qatari man (age 37) who was interviewed reported that disagreement occurs in every marriage. He disagrees with his wife about parenting and ways of disciplining the children. He also cites him being more social than his wife as a source of conflict but he notes that such disagreements are resolved through mutual understanding:

*"In my marriage, just like in any marriage, my wife and I agree on certain issues and disagree on others. We also have our own mechanisms to resolve certain conflicts. I disagree with my wife over the level of discipline that our children should have as part of their education. We keep wondering whether we should be stricter or more lenient. By nature, I am more social than my wife and this particular fact may often lead to certain problems."*

Another Qatari man (age 51) illustrated that:

*"There are disagreements, as is the case in any marriage, but we uphold certain principles, quite honestly. Ever since we married, my wife decided that we resort to religion as a frame of reference if a disagreement erupts between us. Let me take for instance the local celebration of Garangao<sup>17</sup> event. She told me that Garangao is the local version of the US Halloween event and that she would not allow our children to celebrate it."*

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<sup>17</sup> Garangao is a celebration in the middle of Ramadan (the month of the Islamic calendar when Muslims fast) during which children dress up in traditional clothing and go door to door to sing and collect sweets.

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## CHAPTER VI: CROSS-NATIONAL MARRIAGE: PERCEIVED CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

### Challenges

Cross-national couples tend to face numerous challenges, most of which are rooted in the couples' cultural differences and the unique dynamics embedded in that given context or interaction (3) and cross-national couples face several of them. Romano (1988) (89, 90), for instance, lists some of the challenges of intercultural and cross-national marriages such as male-female roles, time, place of residence, friends, finances, in-laws, social class, religion, raising children, language/communication, dealing with stress, illness and suffering, and ethnocentrism. Many of these stressors are common to all marriages, regardless of the culture of the spouses (90). Other research also cites the challenges in communication, differences in values, autonomous behavior and practices, and prejudices and stereotypes held by society and families (91, 92). Donovan (2004) (90) further raised the issues of cultural differences and how they affect lifestyle and family-related decisions. Sung (1990) (91), on the other hand, asserted that cultural differences are not a challenge. Similarly, the results from the present study showed that some participants have experienced challenges within their unions, most of which are rooted in the couples' cultural differences and the unique dynamics embedded in that given context or interaction. The reported challenges stem from cultural background differences and the challenges inherent in raising cross-national children. Below is a detailed discussion of each reported challenge.

### Cultural Differences

Cultural differences are one of the challenges that cross-national couples face in their marital union. When two individuals merge their lives into one, both parties carry their unique experiences, personalities, expectations, and cultures with them into the marriage (81, 93, 94, 95). Cross-national couples hold even more diverse values, beliefs, attitudes, languages, and habits than couples who are of a similar nationality or culture (94). Such cultural differences may create higher levels of stress and conflict in cross-national marriages and reduce their overall marital satisfaction and social integration compared to same-nationality and same-culture marriages (56). This was shown to be the case with our participants. Some pointed out that cultural misunderstanding can stem from differing cultural backgrounds as stated by a Qatari woman (age 37):

*"...we found out that there is a cultural barrier between the two of us, which we have to accept. I do not think like (this country) lady does. I believe he would have been happier if he got married to an (country) woman instead, who would understand him. This is something that I felt sorry about. As you know, (people of this country) like to crack jokes and they adapt a lot of jokes from movies and soap operas. If he tells a joke to a fellow national, the latter would understand it, whereas I would not. Thus we have to bear with such awkward moments when he cracks jokes as I feel unable to understand what he is saying".*

A Qatari woman (age 42) further pointed out that there was a difference in their cultures. She said:

*"Most disagreements broke out as a result of cultural misunderstanding, in which he was referring to something in particular, while I was referring to something different. This is probably due to the differences between our respective cultural backgrounds, customs and traditions."*

Others have mentioned that the cultural impact that they face is related to language, especially those who are married to non-Arab spouses, as an obstacle in communicating and

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integrating with the surrounding environment. As declared by a Qatari man married to a non-Arab spouse:

*"My first language is Arabic and my wife's first language is English. The biggest challenge is the language... when you have all these occasions where you gather up and the family start speaking in Arabic, it's hard for her to pick up the words ... Again, the language is the first challenge and the biggest obstacle when it comes to her."*<sup>18</sup>

## Raising Children

The ability to raise children and integrate them into society is a unique stressor for cross-national couples. Available research suggests that the children of cross-national marriages are more vulnerable than children of endogamous marriages. Parents tend to put in extra effort to raise their children, who themselves are more prone to negative behavioral and psychological outcomes, and the ability for children to adjust to their social environment affects the quality of their parents' marriage (96, 97). Assessing how cross-national couples raise their children, either in relation to one another or to the society around them, is important in order to understand how they operate. The literature on mixed marriage tends not to focus specifically on cross-national marriage. However, cross-national marriage is covered within the wider scope of mixed-marriage research, and some overall themes can be gleaned and related to our study. First is the choice about how each parent intends to raise their children (90). While it can be argued that all parents essentially want the same thing for their children, a parent's choices tend to be informed, in part at least, by their respective culture (3). A number of important questions arise: Which parent will decide how the children are raised? Should one set of traditions and cultural norms be upheld over another or will a balance be struck between the two (90)? How does a child's upbringing and social environment at an early age affect how well they integrate into the culture and community around them?

Some of the participants in our study reflected these facets to varying degrees in their responses. Regarding different roles between parents, one Qatari woman (age 56) noted how her husband was in charge of all the decision-making when raising their children while her role was essentially one of domestic support:

*"As for our children's upbringing, my husband is taking the larger role. I strive to meet the children's needs in terms of food, drinks, and hygiene, while my husband is in charge of their education. He plans their future and paths in life. He is the one who discusses with them and provides them with advice, not me. I am only handling the basic needs, such as cleanliness, food and drinks, but the more serious issues are handled by the father."*

By contrast, another Qatari woman (age 38) decided to take an active role in making certain that her children would have a traditionally Qatari upbringing:

*"I particularly appreciate the Qatari tradition of going to the majlis,<sup>19</sup> especially that my children are boys. I wanted my children to attend certain majlis sessions in order to learn new things, sit with elders, discuss with them, and serve them coffee. These are beautiful customs to learn about! In addition, we say in our culture that "majalis are tantamount to schools". In other terms, the customs, traditions and values you learn in a majlis cannot be learned in a school."*

Also, the presence of family helps determine how a child learns to socialize and is a key determining factor of how they self-identify and, in turn, how successfully they integrate with the people around them (98). The account of one Qatari parent (age 39) reflects this:

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted verbatim from the interviewee's own English speech.

<sup>19</sup> The *majlis* is a meeting place at home or in public location where men get together and socialize.

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*“No, he doesn’t know even know that he is [non-Qatari nationality], even now he considers himself Qatari, and he has Qatari residence documents, and he’s renewed his [non-Qatari] passport, even if someone were to ask him of his nationality he would tell them: Qatari....Outside school they [his friends] are all Qatari, he doesn’t know anyone non-Qatari, because he plays with the children of his maternal uncle and aunt...”*

A child’s early social environment is not restricted to their family. The immediate community surrounding that child, such as their school, plays a role in how they learn to socialize, integrate, and shape their identities (97). This was related by some of our interviewees, whose children learned to be restrictive regarding with whom they socialized. As stated by a Qatari mother (age 56):

*“Their school is multicultural and includes students of all nationalities ... But the Qatari students have the same profile as my children. They travelled extensively, have a distinguished educational background, and speak English. In a nutshell, my children mingle with this particular type of Qatari students.”*

One parent noted how each of their children socialized in different environments, alluding to their individual adoption of different social behaviors that persisted to adulthood:

*“My eldest son has rather an Arabic education background with a stronger religious culture. If you ever meet with my second son, you would think that he is a westerner, as he lived in (country) for 10 years where he studied engineering.”*

One important component to a child’s ability to integrate into and engage with a community is their ability to speak its language (3, 99). A few of our participants who are married to non-Arab spouses showed some awareness of this fact. One Qatari parent (age 57) illustrated how his children had trouble engaging with their relatives due to the language barrier:

*“Yes, when they come here and go out with their cousins, their language is broken. It’s become a mix of Qatari and English [...] I noticed [one son] started becoming embarrassed and he’s become unable to talk.”*

It can be surmised from our interviews that social habits and skills established from an early age are carried through a child’s life, directly affecting how they interact and integrate with the culture in which they find themselves. In addition to our previously discussed points, children of mixed heritage are also more vulnerable to discrimination (3, 97). In such cases, this has a lasting effect on the child’s sense of identity and their ability to socially connect with their community freely. There was evidence of this happening to the children of some of our interviewees, one of which had children facing discrimination at school:

*“At school my eldest son used to complain to me from time to time about his school. He wanted to move to another school. When I asked him once why he was unhappy, he said that he often falls out with his peers who tell him that his mother is [non- Arab].”*

## **Benefits**

Whilst marrying someone from a different culture or nationality can provide some unique challenges, it can also provide some beautiful and enriching benefits. Numerous studies on intermarriages tend to overstate the negative aspects or negative impacts of such marriages on individuals and families. As viewed in the literature, intermarriages including intercultural, cross-national, and interracial marriages are often characterized as ‘confused’, entailing deep-seated identity problems, communication issues, and rife with marital problems or instability, primarily due to the complexity of manifold backgrounds (3). However, some empirical studies (3, 100) noted the advantages of being involved in bi-cultural, bi-national or bi-racial marriage unions. Some of those advantages include having a higher level of self-esteem due to an

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increased sense of uniqueness, having the ability to bridge cultures and enjoy the best of both worlds, and being more open-minded, welcoming and sensitive to other people (3). Results from our study also identified numerous benefits from cross-national marriages, such as openness and acceptance towards other cultures, the presence of fewer genetic disorders among children, and lower marriage costs. Below is a detailed discussion of each advantage.

### Openness and Acceptance of Other Cultures

Existing evidence has shown that cross-national and intercultural marriages foster global awareness and an acceptance of other cultures as well as a diminished ethnocentrism (3, 81). They also enhance the abilities of people involved in such marriages by bridging two cultures together and allowing them to enjoy the best of both worlds in addition to being more open-minded, welcoming and accepting to other people. Participants in the present study also suggested that cross-cultural marriages have the capacity to expand one's mind and alter how they view the world. This was outright stated by a Qatari man (age 46):

*"One of the advantages of cross-national marriages is one becomes open minded and open to other cultures."*

It also encourages acceptance and how to appreciate other cultures while diminishing ethnocentrism and prejudice. As illustrated by a Qatari woman (age 26):

*"The other advantage is prejudice will disappear, you know we need to start accepting people of other cultures, and we do again. Qataris in my generation are very accepting of people of other cultures but I think it needs to be stronger."*

Other participants shared the idea that one has the ability to pick and choose what is best from each represented culture in cross-national marriages. One Qatari man (age 33) stated:

*"The mixed culture in itself, that you take the best of each basket to create something beautiful and masterpiece because every culture has something special and unique when it comes to building a characteristic. So the biggest advantage I am saying is coming up with a generation that is very unique that has a Qatari culture... but at the same time to have certain things from other cultures ...without losing their own identity."*

Additionally, other participants expressed how their children positively benefit from the blending of two cultures with their unique backgrounds and heritage. As clarified by a Qatari man (age 58):

*"One of the advantages of cross-national marriages is that your children will learn more than one language and could be exposed to more than one culture. My children's proficiency in English helped them pursue smoothly their studies in the United States and integrate into the American culture. Mixed marriages allow people as well, among other benefits, to have a healthier progeny and help them prevent certain genetic diseases which are generally related to cousin marriages (or inbreeding)."*

### Decreased Presence of Genetic Disorders among Children

As indicated earlier, consanguineous marriage is very common in Qatar and makes up about 39% of all Qatari marriages (11). Despite the prevalence of such practices, consanguineous marriages have started to face increasing resistance in the Qatari populace due largely to an awareness of its negative health effects. Available research from Arab and GCC countries indicated that consanguineous marriages can lead to physical and mental disabilities including deafness and blindness among children as well as genetic disorders (101, 102). Other studies have shown a relationship between consanguinity and some genetic conditions and health problems such as phenylketonuria (PKU) (101), immunodeficiency disorders (103), children's hypertension (104), beta-thalassaemia, protein-C and protein-S deficiency

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(101), low birth weight (LBW) (105), and Down's Syndrome (106). In line with previous research, results from the current study also revealed that one of the advantages of cross-national marriage is producing healthier children with fewer genetic disorders. Therefore, the recent trend of accepting and increasing cross-national marriage is due largely to the rising awareness of the negative health impacts on children associated with consanguinity, such as hereditary diseases and disabilities. As demonstrated by a Qatari man (age 33):

*“Some of them would always stick to the family marriages, which is they are married to their cousins, and stick to the same family route... we need to keep it in the family, we need to keep our identity ... and that's something I don't support at all because we hear about all these diseases that are associated with such marriages. I personally know a specific family that has at least three cases of disabilities.... and there are so many people, thousands actually who think about it the same way I do...”*

Similarly, a Qatari woman (age 26) further clarified that the most advantageous aspect of cross-national marriage is having healthier children. She said:

*“I think the most important advantage of cross-national marriage is medical. You know, we need to diversify the genetic pool in order to get a healthier generation. But I think that diversity is very important in a marriage, especially when it comes to having healthy children. I mean, of course there are isolated cases, where even mixed marriages resulted in genetically modified, what you call it poor genetic pools, but not too generalized.”*

### Lower Cost of Marriage

The social pressure for the groom to have a lavish wedding and to provide a large *mahr* has encouraged many Qatari men to search for a non-Qatari bride who will have lower requirements for the *mahr* and marriage expenses (1, 2, 24, 26, 34, 35). This phenomenon has had dire affects across the region economically, socially, and demographically. It is becoming an critical national problem and a threat to the social order of the conservative societies of the Gulf (Safar, forthcoming chapter). This trend also manifested itself in the results of the current study. As stated by a Qatari man (age 36):

*“One of the advantages to marrying from outside is spending less on the marriage and the dowry. The net of the cost of marriage from outside in the end is about a fourth of the cost in Qatar... The Qatari women are very demanding. They want high dowry, gold, gifts, expensive clothes and bags, wedding, etc.... Then I went to another country and got married. My wedding only cost me 50,000 QR. In Doha, the cost of marriage is very high. For instance, my brother when he got married, his wedding cost him 200,000 QR. So he could not afford it. Then he went to the bank and took a loan and we helped him as a family with the cost.”*

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## CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

Cross-national marriage has become a noticeable phenomenon worldwide and Qatar is no exception. Although endogamy remains the main type of marriage practiced in the country, rates of cross-national marriage have risen consistently, showing a strong preferential bias towards cultures that are similar. Non-Qatari spouses from neighboring GCC countries are the most prevalent and are followed first by other non-GCC Arab nationals and then followed by non-Arabs, who make up the smallest share of foreign spouses. These trends are largely echoed throughout the GCC region. Qatari women are more likely to marry from the GCC region than other countries.

Viewed from a structural angle, the increase in the cross-national marriage rate in Qatar can be attributed to the interplay of several factors including increasing globalization, international migration, the expansion of education, ease of travelling, and access to technology. These factors have led to greater opportunities for finding a spouse from abroad. However, these factors do not explain everything. A simple cursory look at the structural level is incomplete as it is only through investigating the phenomena at the individual level that we can get a better understanding of the factors involved. Results from our in-depth qualitative interviews indicated that there are still negative perceptions towards cross-national marriage that persist despite the fact that Qatari society has become more accepting of it over the years. This growing acceptance can be attributed to several factors, such as the expansion of education, access to new technologies, ease of travel and the exposure to other nationalities resulting from the presence of a large migrant workforce in the country. Such acceptance, however, varies by the region and gender. As expressed by the interviewees, Qataris are more accepting of marriages from the GCC region than the other regions, and the further they go, the less acceptance one sees. In addition, the degree of acceptance and openness tends to differ between genders, where Qatari society still perceives women differently from men. Even accounting for gender differences, this newfound openness is not universal. Negative perceptions continue to linger and can be partially attributed to the purported adverse impacts of cross-national marriage on individuals, family, and society as a whole. Some of the interviewees have recalled past experiences, which demonstrate a negative perception of cross-national marriage that still persists in Qatari society.

Since marriage is regarded as an affair between families rather than merely a partnership between a man and a woman, family acceptance and consent is very important for a marriage to continue and succeed. However, the collective experience of the interviewees indicates that acceptance and consent is not expressed uniformly between families. Some families are more open and supportive of cross-national marriage while others express rejection and resentment that may or may not subside as time passes. Such family acceptance is also gendered as it was found that the reaction to marrying a non-Qatari spouse tended to be less severe towards Qatari men as opposed to the reaction towards Qatari women. This indicates a societal bias in the way genders are perceived. The qualitative results further identified a number of reasons that prompted interviewees to marry outside their nationality including the rising cost of marriage and *mahr*, background similarities, exposure to other cultures, personality traits, and an opposition to traditional marriage. Although cross-national marriages are on the rise in Qatar, statistical analysis revealed that such marriages are less stable and more prone to divorce than marriages between Qatari nationals. Contrastingly, results from the current qualitative study indicate that the majority of the participants have reported a high level of marital quality. Cross-national couples tend to face numerous challenges, mostly rooted in the couples' cultural differences and the unique dynamics embedded in that given context or interaction. Despite this, cross-national marriages come with a wide range of benefits for the people within these relationships. They help foster an openness and acceptance towards other cultures, encourage healthier children with fewer genetic disorders, and have less overall marriage costs.

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## APPENDIX 1: DATA AND METHODS

In this report, multiple data sources were used. Firstly, data from The State of Qatar's Annual Vital Statistics Bulletins were analyzed to document the changing trends and patterns of cross-national marriage among Qataris from 1985-2013. Said bulletins are available on the internet from the QSA for the years 1984–2015. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were calculated to document the trends and patterns of cross-national marriage amongst Qataris from 1985 up to 2015.

Secondly, cross-national marriage has been used interchangeably with other terms in the literature, such as interracial marriage, mixed marriage, intercultural or cross-cultural marriage, inter-faith marriage, exogamy, and inter-national marriage. Cross-national marriage is defined in this study as a marriage where one spouse is of a different nationality to the other, specifically one being a Qatari and the other a non-Qatari, and thereby excludes all marriages between two non-Qatari spouses in Qatar.

Thirdly, a phenomenological qualitative method with in-depth interviews was used to explore and better understand the lived experience of Qatari men and women in such marriages. To allow ease of communication, the interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. The interview questions covered the following issues:

Social acceptance of cross-national marriage

Reasons for marrying out

Marriage quality

Perceived benefits of cross-national marriages

Challenges confronted in these marriages and daily life

A total of twenty-six Qatari participants (N=26) who are married to non-Qatari spouses were recruited to participate in this study. They were identified through the snowball sampling method and the use of personal contacts, each participant having been requested to provide us with more possible participants. Given the logic of qualitative inquiry, it is typical that a research study would focus in depth on a small sample rather than broadly on a large sample as in quantitative studies. Therefore, generalization of the study's findings is often not the ultimate end. Focusing on a small sample allows the researcher to ask about selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance. The interviewees were comprised of 14 women and 12 men, all of whom were both born and raised in Qatar. Their ages ranged between 26 and 67 years old (M=45 years), each of them having been married anywhere from 1 to 36 years (M=13 years), while their age upon marriage ranged between 24 to 53 years (M=32 years). Most respondents were employed by the government at the time of interviewing (N=18), and most of them had reached an education level of either a bachelor's degree or higher (N=22). All participants currently live in Doha and have between 1 and 6 children (M=2 children). The majority of participants are married to a spouse from another country in the Arab region including neighboring GCC states (N=16 spouses), followed by non-Arab countries (N= 10 spouses).

Prior to taking part in the interviews all participants were first briefed about the study and signed a consent form. They were advised that they were free to refuse to participate, to refrain from answering some questions, or to withdraw from the interview entirely at any time without penalty. The participation was voluntary and all information was kept confidential. Interviews were performed in both English and Arabic, audiotaped and transcribed verbatim with all interviews conducted in Arabic being translated into English by the bilingual research team.

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The following general themes were generated by a system of inductive coding as informed by the logic of the phenomenological approach: social acceptance of cross-national marriage, reasons for marrying out, cross-national marriage instability and quality, and challenges and benefits of cross-national marriages.

While this research provides evidence-based results of cross-national marriage phenomenon in Qatar, it has limitations that need to be addressed. First, the Annual Vital Statistics Bulletins provide only a general picture of the trends and patterns of mixed marriage among Qataris but lack comprehensiveness. These take into account only legally married couples without including marriages outside Qatar or other types of marriages like *misyar*<sup>20</sup>/*urfi*<sup>21</sup> and 'summer marriages'<sup>22</sup>. Second, the definition of mixed marriage with reference only to spousal nationality is very narrow because it only gives us a partial view/perspective of the reality and does not take into account cultural, religious, and ethnic differences. Third, the data on nationality is not detailed. Finally, while the qualitative results have advanced our understanding of cross-national marriages in Qatar, such results cannot be generalized to the entire population.

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<sup>20</sup> *Misyar* is a marriage in which spouses grant each other companionship while forfeiting one or more rights (e.g. living under the same roof, financial maintenance, etc.)

<sup>21</sup> *Urfi* is a marriage that is not registered by the state.

<sup>22</sup> Summer marriage is a marriage contract for the express purpose of temporary companionship. Such marriage often occurs during the summer months.