

Krystyna Urbisz Golkowska*

ARAB WOMEN IN THE GULF AND THE NARRATIVE OF CHANGE: THE CASE OF QATAR

ABSTRACT: The dramatic transformation of the Arabian Gulf since the discovery of petroleum resources has called for a new perspective on the situation of women in the region. Qatar is an example of fast-paced industrialization, modernization and profound socio-cultural changes. As the environment transforms literally from day to day, new identities are being forged and social roles re-negotiated. The leadership's vision for the country speaks of gender equality and opportunity for all. This article asks how young Qatari women's personal stories fit into the national narrative of change and what they see as the best path to agency and empowerment.

KEY WORDS: Arab women, stereotypes, Qatar, narrative, change, vision, education, employment, empowerment.

Recent years have seen a revision of the image of Arab women. Traditionally, the Western gaze pictured Middle Eastern females as either the exotic, eroticized "Other" or the embodiment of ignorance and poverty. However, the dramatic transformation of the Gulf region in the post-oil period, as well as the Islamic revival that began in the seventies, has called for a different perspective. Thus, while early feminist studies of the region focused on the oppression of women inherent in the patriarchal system and conservative interpretation of religion, contemporary scholars have begun to undermine the view of Muslim women as a homogenized group of passive victims.

* Pre-Medical Education, Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, P.O. Box 24144, Doha, Qatar. E-mail: krg2005@qatar-med.cornell.edu

The small but oil rich and strategically important country of Qatar is a fascinating example of changes in the Middle East. The pace of the country's modernization and industrialization is unprecedented and the ambitious plans for the future imply profound socio-cultural changes. In addition to being an important political player, Qatar wants to become a regional leader in education, scientific research and sports tourism. As the national narrative is being written, new identities are being forged and traditional social roles renegotiated. At the same time, this conservative, gender-segregated tribal society ruled by *sharia* law prides itself on keeping close links to its past. Branded as a place where tradition meets modernity and where the speed of change is fast, it is indeed a study in contrasts and a field rife for ethnographic research. A touristy gaze will focus on the veiled women in black *abayas* and men in white *thobes* driving the latest models of luxury cars or shopping in gigantic malls, where Western hit songs are interrupted by the call to prayer resounding over the city five times a day. A closer look will reveal a society in transition, trying to adjust to changing expectations, and, especially in the case of women, negotiating the dialectic of traditional and modern forces.

Like in the other GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) member nations, in Qatar the vision of the country is shaped by the elite. The official image for tourism, international relations and internal consumption is that of a modern country attempting to preserve the national heritage and Islamic art. Qataris are deservedly proud of their achievements and very sensitive about any implied criticism. The idealized, romanticized view of the past is evoked through pictures of Bedouin tents, camels, falcons and *dhow*s (traditional boats). On the other hand, the capital city, Doha, is advertised through its architecturally stunning skyscrapers or man-made islands. In addition, slogans such as "Qatar deserves the best" appeal to patriotism and national pride and prominently displayed signs "*Think. Wonder. Achieve. Create.*" exhort the youth to excel academically. Billboards, advertisements and commercials tell a similar story, featuring traditionally dressed but in every other aspect modern Qatari couples (usually with two children) usually as high-end consumers, investors or spectators at exclusive sport events. A conscious effort is also made in these images to present women on equal footing with their husbands.

The visibility of women in the public discourse reflects the country's official policy. The leadership's vision articulated in the

document *Qatar National Vision 2030* speaks of gender equality and individuals realizing their full potential. Specifically, it spells out the need to “enhance women’s capacities and empower them to participate fully in the political and economic spheres, especially in decision-making roles.” How do these themes resonate in the individual stories of young Qatari women? To what extent have they interiorized the national narrative of change and embraced the new social role? In their perception, how does their lived reality align with the officially sponsored vision? What follows is an attempt to answer these questions based on the information in the public domain and on surveys and semi-formal interviews with female nationals. The discussion will revolve around the issues of education, employment, political participation, and empowerment.

Education and Participation in the Labor Market

Not unlike in the Arab world in general, Qatar’s narrative of change is best exemplified in the new educational opportunities for its citizens. The first thing to point out is that in terms of education young Qatari females outnumber and outperform males. To fully understand the significance of the fact, one needs to bear in mind the country’s history of education.

In the pre-oil era education was synonymous with religious instruction. In *kuttabs*, informal classes held in mosques, boys were taught to recite and memorize the Koran; in some *kuttabs*, usually in larger towns, they also learned some arithmetic and acquired basic literacy skills. Meanwhile, girls received very rudimentary instruction in private homes. The beginning of modern education in Qatar can be traced back to the fifties. The first school opened in 1949. It was attended by 50 boys who were taught by one teacher. Although five years later there were already four public schools, with 26 teachers and 560 boys, opposition and distrust of education for females remained fierce. Even when it became acceptable for girls to receive religious instruction, some considered it dangerous to teach them to write, since it could enable them to communicate more freely and thus encourage immoral behavior. The first school for girls was established in 1956 only after an Islamic scholar Shaykh Muhammad bin Mani issued a fatwa (religious ruling) stating that the Koran did not forbid education for females (Sonbol 222-223).

Another milestone in the history of the educational system in the country was the establishment of Qatar Foundation and the development of the tertiary level of education under the sponsorship of the former Emir's wife, Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Misnad. The first university in the country, Qatar University, opened in 1973. In the following years, Qatar Foundation invited six prestigious American universities to open their branch institutions in Education City, Qatar Foundation campus. And thus Virginia Commonwealth University School of Arts in Qatar opened in 1998, followed by Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar in 2001, Texas A&M University at Qatar in 2003, Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar in 2004, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar in 2005, and Northwestern University in 2008. While all government schools and Qatar University were, and still are, gender segregated, Education City universities from the beginning offered co-educational education based on the Western style of teaching and learning.

These developments have greatly improved educational opportunities for all Qataris, but especially for women. While previously some men pursued post-secondary education in the West, it was extremely difficult for girls to get a college degree, since they were not allowed to travel without their families or husbands. Now, for the first time, it became possible to get high quality education without having to leave the country. It was not long before Qatari women began to outnumber and outperform men in all educational institutions. First of all, twice as many Qatari girls as boys are completing secondary school and pursuing post-secondary education (Planning Council 2005). In a 2010 paper titled "The Dearth of Qatari Men in Higher Education: Reasons and Implications," Sheikha Abdullah Al-Misnad points out the huge gender discrepancy at universities:

In fact, the gender ratio is so skewed that at Qatar University the 2008/2009 student body was 76% female. Incidentally, this trend of female domination at the university level has been going on since the inception of the University, although the ratio was slightly less skewed at 38% men and 62% women in 1973/1974. Even in terms of higher education scholarships, which include support for study at the Education City universities or abroad, the trend shows an increase in women who receive scholarships compared to men. In 2008/2009, 290 women enrolled compared to 170 men. (Al-Misnad 9)

In brief, female students' academic success has reversed traditional patterns in the area of education. While older Qatari men are better educated than older Qatari women, the opposite is true for Qataris younger than 40. To quote from the 2007 RAND report, "the educational attainment is trending in opposite directions for men and women, with women becoming better educated over time while men's level of education declines" (Stasz et al. 14-15).

Unfortunately, the high educational attainment of women has not translated into changing the traditional male dominance of the job market. Only three percent of Qatari female nationals are employed outside the home versus 63% of Qatari male nationals. Although the female employment rate of 36% is high compared to 17% in Saudi Arabia, 28% in the United Arab Emirates, 25% in Oman or 30% in Bahrain, it is still below the percentages of other developed, high-income countries. It is hard not to view the situation as paradoxical, since "throughout all cohorts of workers, Qatari male workers have an average 10.7 years education compared with 14.1 years for females—a difference of 3.4 years" (Planning Council, 2005, 13). The fact is also surprising because among GCE countries Qatar is arguably the best place for women who want to build professional careers. In addition to educational opportunities, Qatari women benefit from favorable legislation. For example, in 2001, the Civil Service Act (Law No. 1) and the regulations of the Council of Ministers (Order No. 13) laid ground for gender equality in the workforce, Law No. 24 of 2002 provided women with retirement benefits and allowed working women to combine their earnings and pension entitlement with those of a deceased spouse, and Labor Law enacted in 2004 (Law No. 14) established the principle of equality in pay, training opportunities, and job advancement. Moreover, like in other oil rich countries, in Qatar the cost or availability of childcare is not an issue. Domestic help is easily available and the ubiquitous presence of maids, nannies and chauffeurs is taken for granted. Overall, these favorable conditions appear to make it easier than ever or than anywhere for Qatari women to enter the labor force.¹

¹ Although it is still low, the female employment rate has been growing. Women's share in the total labor force more than doubled in the past 20 years. For example, it was only 14% in 1986, but already 27% in 2001, and 30% in 2003. In 2013, 26,992 females were employed compared to 55,609 males (Qatar Statistics Authority Website: Qatar Information Exchange, 2013). Moreover, according to the Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016, the figure is expected to rise to 42% by 2016.

Even a cursory look at the data will reveal yet another striking characteristic. Qatari women hold jobs that cluster mainly in education and health care (Planning Council, 2005); they are absent from many fields such as construction, trade, and manufacturing, and it is still considered inappropriate for Qatari women to work as actresses, flight attendants, hotel and hospitality workers or to serve as diplomats in the Foreign Service (Bahry and Marr 114).

To put things in perspective, male employment rates and job preferences are not much different. With the highest per capita GDP in the world, Qatari nationals make up only 11% of the total labor force. Thus, among the factors that influence women's choice of employment, the first one is economic in nature. Due to the high average Qatar family income and generous welfare system, women are not attracted to low paying or labor-intensive jobs. Furthermore, most of the Qataris who are employed, men and women alike, choose government jobs. The preference is easily understandable, since the public sector provides job security, better benefits, shorter working hours, and higher salaries without a performance review. The only significant differences between men and women in terms of bias against private sector jobs is that men are more concerned about low pay while women seek prestige and respect; a number of them also attach considerable importance to working in a single-gender work environment.

At the same time, there is no doubt that cultural factors also play a role in women's employment trends. Surveys have revealed that, regardless of sex, young Qataris value jobs allowing them to spend more time with the family. For a woman the primary role is still a domestic one, so the conflict between professional duties and finding sufficient time for spouses, extended family members, and social obligations is perceived as a very real one. Thus, considering the combination of the economic and cultural factors that play a de-motivating role in women's labor force participation, the female employment rate of 36% cannot come as a surprise and does in fact seem to reflect social readiness for change or growing acceptance of female presence in the public sphere.

Changing Social Attitudes

Young Qatari women are well aware of the main themes in the national narrative and their impact on social roles. First and foremost, now that the value of schooling has already been commonly acknowledged, girls know that their education is considered important and a college degree is seen as “normal” or sometimes even expected. Although religious beliefs and parental advice are still the two most important factors considered by high school female graduates in choosing their career paths, 88% of the girls who graduated in 2006 also considered it important to take into consideration their own personal interests (Stasz et al.). There is every reason to believe that this number is even higher nowadays.

Nowadays Qatari women also feel more comfortable working side by-side with men. According to Stasz et al., “although females who graduated in 1998 considered working in a single-gender work environment as relatively important, 95% of the female students graduating in 2006 had no reservations about working in a mixed-gender work environment.” Despite the fact that some employers and conservative members of society still express skepticism concerning women’s ability to balance family and work responsibilities, young women are more optimistic about their professional future and the possibility of gender equality in the workplace. Women are also attracted to entrepreneurial enterprises, and the establishment of the Qatari Businesswomen Association² in 2000 both reflected and nourished this development. Data obtained from the Qatar Chamber of Commerce show that 1,360 business licenses were issued to women from 2003 to 2005, and that women comprised almost 17% of active entrepreneurs in 2005. Since many Arab businesses are family businesses, which helps women blend the personal with the professional, this number is expected to grow steadily. The local press regularly showcases this type of achievement. Nevertheless, although the Qatari constitution stipulates equality, female nationals still live in a male-dominated society and attitudes towards working women are still split along gender lines. There are significant differences between men and women when it comes to rank. In 2009 only 3% of employed women were in a leadership posts. Ironically, when Qatari

² Also known as Qatari Business Women Association.

Businesswomen Association held its 3rd annual International Forum in Doha in 2012, the panel included 4 men but only one woman. Moreover, at a recent roundtable discussion, all of the women admitted that they struggled with negative stereotypes perpetuated by both men and women, and 85.5% said they were fighting to prove themselves.

While public discourse emphasizes the presence of celebrated role models, there is little, if any, discussion of issues that comprise a typical feminist agenda. It is not surprising that in a country under sharia law, many topics such as contraception, abortion, homosexuality or sex outside marriage are excluded from the public domain. There is also noticeable silence, at least in the English language Qatari media, regarding issues that cannot but be important to Qatari women: polygamy, arranged marriages, *misyar* marriages³ or domestic violence.

A high and rising rate of divorce does not fail to capture everyone's attention and is extensively reported by the press. According to 2013 statistics, 40% of marriages end in a divorce; the rate of the so-called pre-marriage divorce (unconsummated marriage) is also high. The main reason given for divorce is excessive consumerism leading to debt. According to one of the main English medium newspapers in the country, 40% of divorces are solely due to disputes over bank debt ("Money is a major cause of divorces" *The Peninsula*, November 27, 2013). The article states that Consequently, a pre-marriage counseling program targeting Qataris now offers money management in addition to stressing the importance of the family. Another reason for concern is the fact that the high cost of weddings and marriage contracts results in growing numbers of nationals marrying non-Qatari women. Moreover, although not discussed publicly, the practice of *misyar* marriages is on the rise. Last but not least, there are also many who think that the reversed trend in education and the rising female employment rate are key factors in the breakup of families. From their point of view, the presence of foreign nannies is no less threatening to tradition and national identity than Western experts and an army of cheap labor force from the poorest countries in the world. Overall, while the high divorce rate is not seen as a sign of Qatari women

³ Practiced in the Gulf, *misyar* marriage is a temporary arrangement, a religiously legitimate way for men to have affairs. The relationship is under the complete control of men.

moving away from the traditional importance of the extended family, it is regarded as troubling.⁴

Even more worrisome is the problem of domestic abuse. A recent study of female students at Qatar University (QU) reported that 23% of Qatari women and 22% of non-Qatari nationals attending QU experienced domestic violence (verbal and physical abuse and marital rape). Yet the study found a serious lack of legislation to protect victims of abuse (Al-Ghanim 80-93). Then there is the practice of penalizing sex outside marriage and single mothers. An unmarried woman giving birth to a child faces the threat of spending a year in jail. This policy is criticized by Western feminists, who are also concerned about some cases of sex trafficking and female domestic help abuse. In Reuter's 2013 poll Women's Rights in the Arab World, assessing the situation of women in the Arab World based on criteria, such as the right to divorce, education and employment options, reproductive rights, and domestic violence, Qatar came in fifth from top, behind Oman (2nd) and Kuwait (3rd), but ahead of the UAE (10th), Bahrain (12th), Saudi Arabia (20th) and Egypt (22nd place). Qatar scored poorly due mainly to women's limited participation in politics, with one woman on the Central Municipal Council out of 29 seats, and the first female judge appointed only in 2010. As summed up in "Factbox: Women's Rights in the Arab World," it appears that "Qatari women are active in business and higher education but face pressure to conform to traditional gender roles" (Kehoe). Evidently, more progress is still needed.

Doubtless, local attitudes have been changing, and will continue to change, due to increased exposure to international media, opportunities to travel abroad, and a large number of Western expatriates in Qatar. Even more important, however, is the support of the country's leadership and the appearance of well-known role models. The best known and most celebrated is Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Misnad. One can also point to other women who shape socio-cultural and economic policies: Sheikha Hanadi Al-Thani, a powerful businesswoman, Shaikha Abdullah Al Misnad, President of Qatar University and a member of the Supreme Educational Council, Shaikha Ghalia

⁴ In 2011 The Supreme Council of Family Affairs started pre-marriage counseling. In the period 2009-2012, 64.9% of those attending were women (*The Peninsula*, 27 November, 2013: 1).

Bint Mohamed bin Hamad Al Thani, member of the United Nations Child Rights Committee or Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of Qatar Museums Authority. As the number of both influential role models and ordinary working women increases, perceptions and conduct are bound to change. New views of women's roles have already manifested themselves in everyday life behavior:

Ten years ago, no respectable Qatari man would walk side by side with his wife; rather, he walked two or three steps ahead of her. These days men and women not only walk side by side; it is not unusual to see men and their veiled wives strolling together in Doha's fashionable City Center mall holding hands. Only a few years ago, this was considered '*shameful*.' (Bahry and Marr 114).

Qatari Women's Narratives

What the public discourse and personal stories of Qataris have in common is emphasis on change. Just like in the national narrative, and in the Arab news in general, education outranks other topics when young women reflect on their lives. Generally speaking, they measure themselves against the past generations of Qatari women or against the situation of women in countries like Saudi Arabia, and observe how much their lives have changed for the better. Thus, for example, in *Qatari Voices*, an anthology of personal essays, young women talk about school, family culture, marriage traditions, and women's personal strength in an upbeat tone. While they acknowledge initial challenges, such as adapting to the co-educational environment in Education City, or worry about the work-life balance issue, they are committed to their new roles. Anecdotal evidence and informal interviews with students in Education City further substantiate this sense of pride and optimism. The young women's comments show their awareness of having to negotiate different social worlds, but the process seems to them exciting rather than threatening. One could say that to some degree they have embraced the modern concept of the self as a design, the result of choosing from a set of available identities. However, they are careful to draw a distinction between modernization and Westernization. Feminism remains a controversial concept and few would identify with it. They see their identity as stable and

rooted in the family and Islam. Driven by the ambition to prove themselves and concerned with social status, they appreciate the educational and professional opportunities they have been offered. At the same time, they are not ready to give up the security or comfort of the customary ways that give them an exalted status combined with protection.

In many ways this attitude is typical of how contemporary Arab women deal with the dialectic of tradition and modernity. As it has been pointed out, “Muslim women may be modern in their thinking, seek to educate themselves to their fullest potential, and aspire to professions once dominated by men. However, they cannot embrace a modernism that elevates the individual above the family without compromising their identity as Muslims” (Al-Malki et al. 167).

It is important to emphasize that young Qatari women, like many of their Arab sisters, do not see themselves as passive or as victims in need of being saved. On the contrary, they consider themselves strong and able to find agency within the constraints of the patriarchal society. To give an example, it has become customary for women to write the permission to study, work or travel abroad into their marriage contracts. The *abaya* and *hijab* are still religious and ethnic signifiers, but as such they have been losing some of their rigidity. The so-called *new abaya* is no longer the shapeless garb it used to be; allowing for experimentation with the newest design, fabric, cut, and ornamentation, it can be a fashion statement. Similarly, the *burquini* (modest swimming attire) or sportswear following Islamic rules have recently enabled women to exercise and participate in some sports.⁵ Characteristically, any mention of unresolved issues meets with the response “in ten years.” Even more importantly, the remaining constraints are presented as mostly a matter of individual choice.

More research is needed before one can reach any meaningful conclusions about the lived reality of Arab women’s lives. Needless to say, the observations presented here have obvious limitations. The informants come from an elite, privileged group of highly educated young women. Consequently, it is hard to determine to what degree their opinions are representative of the

⁵ In 2012, for the first time ever, Qatar sent female athletes to the London Olympic Games. Four women participated in four events: athletics, shooting, swimming and table tennis.

community at large. In general, Qataris are sensitive to criticism and hesitant to speak on record. Among major problems facing Western researchers in the Middle East is not only the scarcity of available data but also the unreliability of surveys or interviews due to language and cultural barriers. There is also the issue of the researcher's bias. In reality, as indicated in the following quotation, one needs to negotiate between two conflicting discourses:

Arab Development reports tend to underplay the barrier of culture for Arab women. They too easily associate the rising economic empowerment of Arab women with a hoped-for social and political empowerment, and tend to pay lip service to cultural change without acknowledging the cultural forces of patriarchy an Arab woman must overcome in order to rise as a cultural agent. Human rights accounts from the West tend to overplay the restrictions of Arab cultures on women, sometimes going so far as to condemn Arab societies as irretrievably patriarchal and revive Western colonial myths. (Al-Malki et al. 235)

To gain true insight into Qatari women's perceptions of their reality we need to hear them answer questions that they themselves will ask.

Concluding Thoughts

Education does not mean secularization and, in any case, secularization does not necessarily mean empowerment of women. However, education definitely opens doors to professional careers and participation in political life. It also enables individuals to interrogate and reinterpret dominant narratives and write their own scripts. In addition to education and affirmative employment practices, Arab women need political power. That goal assumes more gender solidarity. Often those talking about women's rights are attacked by females defending both conservative interpretations of the Koran and what they believe to be their glorified status. If women are divided against themselves or choose ethnicity over gender, they are complicit in gender discrimination.

Arab feminists are wary of talking about the polarity of tradition and modernity. They do not believe that such a distinction is useful or neutral; they claim that the opposite is true:

It is oversimplistic to think that modernity and globalization are always women-friendly progressive forces and that tradition implies holding women back. Alexander and Hawkesworth's anthology contends that the tidy division of the world into "the modern" and "the traditional" (aka "the backward") is a division that serves the interests of modern champions of globalization (mainly the US and European governments). Yet this tidy division is neither a tidy nor a hard distinction. (Al-Malki et al. 246)

Looking both West and East, Qatari women seem to opt for gender equality within the framework of a benevolent theocratic patriarchy. In the eyes of many young Qataris, this approach avoids setting up painful dichotomies and promises a smooth path to empowerment.

Works Cited

- Al-Ghanim, K.A. "Violence Against Women in Qatari society." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no.1 (2009): 80-93.
- Al-Khouli, Ramadan. "Women and Education in the Gulf: Between the Modern and the Traditional." *Gulf Women*. Ed. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol. Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2012. 222-241.
- Al-Malki, Amal, David Kaufer, Suguru Ishizaki and Kira Dreher. *Arab Women in Arab News. Old Stereotypes and New Media*. Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2012.
- Al-Misnad, Sheikha. "The Dearth of Qatari Men in Higher Education: Reasons and Implications." *Middle East Institute Viewpoints: Higher Education and the Middle East*. (2010):6-11.
- , *The Development of Modern Education in the Gulf*. London: Ithaca Press, 1985.
- Bahry, Louay and Phebe Marr. "Qatari Women: A New Generation of Leaders?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol.XII, No.2, Summer 2005. 104-119.
- Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, (1971).
- Curley, Nina. "What Women Want at Work in Qatar: Conclusions from W4Women Doha." <http://www.wamda.com/2013>
- General Secretariat for Development and Planning. *Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016*. Web 5 January 2012. http://www.gsdp.gov.qa/gsdp_vision/docs/nds_en.pdf.
- Henderson, Carol and Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar. *Qatari Voices*. Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2010.
- Kehoe, Karrie. "Factbox: Women's Rights in the Arab World." Reuters Foundation, November 11 2013.www.reuter.com/article/2013/11/12/us-arab-women-factbox-idUSBRE9AB00120131112.
- Planning Council. Qatar Statistics Authority Website: Qatar Information Exchange.
- Sonbol, Amira El-Azhary. Ed. *Gulf Women*. Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2012.

Stasz, Cathleen, E.R. Eide, Martorell, F. et al. (2007). *Post-Secondary Education in Qatar:*

Employer Demands, Student Choice, and Options for Policy. RAND-Qatar Policy Institute. Web. 2 August 2013. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG644>.

The Peninsula. "Money is a Major Cause of Divorces." *The Peninsula*, Doha, Qatar. 27 November 27, 2013. P. 1. Print.