

The Gender Divide in Qatar and the region: Analysis, Causes, and Effects

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Abstract

This research paper discusses and analyses the causes and effects of the gender divide in the Middle East (MENA) region with emphasis on the situation in Qatar and the GCC. Multiple economic, cultural, and political factors were analyzed to assess how they influenced the progression and evolution of gender roles in Qatar through examining numerous books and journals. It is concluded from this paper that Qatar continues to move in a positive direction in all factors to empower women and present them with equal opportunities to their male counterparts. However, our research shows that much work remains to be done to ultimately realize complete equality distribution between the two genders, with the foundations for such reforms already put in place to accomplish this in Qatar's 2030 vision.

Introduction:

The gender divide is a universal phenomenon present in almost all societies and cultures to varying degrees. The gender gap is present in both academic and professional settings and is a result of complex cultural and historical interactions. In some areas and regions, this divide is in favor of men; in others, it is in favor of women. For instance, women in Qatar lead in certain fields ahead of men, but lag behind their male counterparts in other areas. Due to Qatar's economy at the time (pre-oil discovery), Qatar's citizens neglected education and high skill labor in favor of hard labor such as farming for men and domestic affairs for women. Qatar's power was primarily dependent on males.

Qatar underwent a radical transformation in education after the discovery of oil. These reforms placed more importance on women's education; along with deeper and broader participation of women in the workforce. Qatar and Gulf region in general have made tremendous progress in various feeds, economic, political and cultural towards the realization of equal gender roles and an increasingly smaller gender divide. Economically, the oil boom and the constant improvement in the standards of living were found to have a positive impact on women's empowerment both educationally and professionally. Politically, the shift in policies regarding gender roles in education allowed women to enroll in women's schools and pursue higher education and therefore have better prospects in the job market. Culturally, Qatar has evolved drastically, with a growingly liberal approach to women's position in society, culture no longer hinders women significantly.

Literature Review and Analysis:

I. Gender Divide in Academic Settings:

Education in the past was seen solely as a process exclusively for males in society as nothing ever pointed to women's education being a necessity. There were no schools for women, and the status-quo of no education for women had no challenge or indication of changing anytime soon. That was the case until a former Qatari ruler (Sheikh Ali bin Jabr al-Thani) ordered a religious ruling encouraging educating females as it was proven not to be against Islamic religious beliefs, a widely spread misconception at the time. Women's education was seen in a negative light and was said to go against Islamic beliefs and traditions when in fact, it would only benefit women as learning to read the Quran would mean learning fundamental pillars of the religion and how to better interpret its teachings. In addition, Islam encourages looking for answers and developing and advancing knowledge in all fields for the benefit of humankind. Therefore, having educated women would only advance knowledge and satisfy Islamic teachings. This is how women's education started (not only in Qatar but most of the Arab region) and grew from that point to become as equally demanding as men's education.

Despite the late establishment of women's schools compared to men, surprisingly, Gulf and Qatari females outperform their male counterparts by a significant margin in Higher Education enrollment, especially in Liberal Arts programs. Most Qatari Male students do not pursue Higher Education degrees and instead opt to proceed to the job market after finishing their Secondary High School Certificate. (Ridge, 2014, p. 80)

Additionally, Female Qatari students have been higher achievers (consistently) compared to the Male students on all standardized tests in High School, Community College, and Universities. For instance, the mean overall score for females in the Qatari Senior School Certificate Scores between 2008 and 2009 was 883.8 compared to 862.4 for males. Women excelled in mathematics and physics in particular with 31% to 50% of females scoring high scores in these subjects compared to 12% to 36% for males. (Ridge, 2014, p. 84)

II. Gender Divide in Professional Settings:

Unlike academia, Males often lead in professional applications despite their lower academic performance. For instance, most of the governmental positions are held by Males, and some fields are exclusively Male dominated. Studies show that Qatari Males' job aspirations do not match the job market demands, with most of them preferring high paying government jobs or police/military positions. One of the biggest gender divides is the sheer way in which the modern nuclear family is recognized in Gulf States nowadays. Powers are extended to the head of the family; the man and "these powers include refusing to allow the wife to leave the home, travel or enter into employment" (Sonbol, 2012, p. 332) Thus, just through exercising this right over his wife and steering where she can work if at all is the one of the primary contributing factors to the gender divide in professional settings.

Another contributing factor to the gender divide is that there are still a disproportionate number of women in education, although this has significantly grown over recent years. Interestingly, pre-oil Gulf society has been described as a 'women society' (Sonbol, 2012, p. 24). Historically during a period of the year when the men were out pearl diving, the responsibility of running the house was left to the women thus making them the bread winners. Women's work was needed to support the family and in some instances, there are even interesting cases of women having to work as pearl divers (Sonbol, 2012, p. 154)

There was a wide spectrum of occupations that was exclusively for women. Hairdressers, female teachers, midwives and matchmakers. (Rihani 28) In Qatar the first kuttab for girls was established in Doha by a woman named Moza Selibikhin.

A number of references taken from Hoda El Saadis essay on "Women and the Economy" indicate that the participation of women in various medical fields "was never restricted, denied or conditioned" (Sonbol, 2012, p. 161)

A steadily growing number of organizations in Gulf Cooperation Council states are prioritizing gender diversity. Although many argue this will take years to close the gap, the reality is that the work to close this gap within the modern era has started and is rapidly making up for lost time. (Tari Ellis, 2015)

III. Driving Forces Between the Gender Divide in Qatar and the Region:

1. Culture, Religion, and Tradition:

Historically, gender attitudes in the Middle East have always attracted the attention of Western sociologists. There is a sentiment that women were subjugated within Qatar and the region and denied certain freedoms which women in the west enjoyed. There are a number of factors which have contributed towards the gender divide. With great emphasis placed upon men to be leaders and breadwinners, cultural attitudes dictated that Men were expected to go out and provide for their families; whereas it was the role of women to tend to the house and children and take care of the needs of their husbands. This way of thinking has largely remained the same in the Arab world whereas within the west the thinking has evolved over the past few decades. Arabs are proud of their traditions and feel that in order to preserve their identity they must maintain strong ties to their traditions which are intrinsically connected to their religion. Thus, these factors have also significantly contributed to the gender divide and often justified the existence and legitimacy of the divide.

In classical Islamic texts around jurisprudence, it can be insinuated that “inequality between men and women was the natural order of things” (Sonbol, 2012, p. 347) Thus religion primarily dictated that women had their role to play in society and men their role. This was the order and interconnected with cultural traditions which later became the norm.

“The female labour force participation rate is not a dire situation as increasing numbers of the younger generation of women are getting more involved. However, about 66 per cent of the Qatari workforce is male, and ideally that should be an even split.” (Toumi, 2014)

Many commentators have stated that the acute patriarchal system found within the Gulf region is the predominant reason as to the gender divide. Moreover, Ziba Mir-Hosseini in her essay Gender Rights and Islamic Legal Tradition, asserts that through the interpretation of Islamic texts, the gender divide is further exacerbated and used to legitimize the divide further “...and their consequent inability to have their voices heard and their interests reflected in law...the ways in which social norms, existing norms, marriage practices and gender ideologies were sanctified, and then turned into fixed entities in Fiqh. That is rather than considering them as social, and thus temporal, institutions and phenomena, the classical jurists treated them as ‘divinely ordained’, thus immutable” (Sonbol, 2012, p. 353)

Finally, although in the past women were not promoted to learn, with increasingly better living conditions; education is now an important aspect of their lives as they strive to further their knowledge. It grants them the power to become independent therefore becoming a better mother or even daughter who can work and help provide and support herself and family. Leaving women without the need of financial support from men ensures a safe, reliable future for them and even their families if needed without the need for women to be dependent on men or for men to be the sole breadwinners in the family.

2. Influence of Family and Society's Biases and Assumptions:

No one in the society acts freely without any restriction. Society restricts families and that forces individuals to act according to society's demands. That indicates that there is not enough room for individuals to be themselves or at least to act according to their personal convictions. Both society and family expect individuals to share their interpretations. Women in the past could not be active participants of their communities as they are now even if their families accept the idea they could not publicly approve of it. Additionally, there are families who believe that women can interact in society and influence it positively, but are waiting for the idea of feminism to be acceptable and mainstream as to not tarnish the image and reputation of the family.

In a survey we conducted, a slight majority of female participants suggested that at least some factor of disapproval or resistance was present from their families regarding their choice of study (Engineering). These results further reinforce society's role in setting up barriers that feed and support the present gender gap both academically and professionally. **[tentative results]**

3. Goal Perception Differences between Genders:

"Expectations of control put forth by societal norms impose a constant influence on goal perception." (Ottson, 2016). This quote indicates that personal goals are not truly dependent on the person. Various social factors play an important role on what is seen as taboo and what is allowed and accepted. Even visualizing the goal is limited by the collective vision of society. This is especially true for ladies in the past as they could not aspire and work towards a goal that is not acceptable by the society's norms. "A cultural life script is a culturally shared cognitive representation of the expected order and timing of important life events in a prototypical life, such as graduation, marriage, and childbirth." (Ottson, 2016) Qatar's society in the past commonly encouraged women at an early age to marry and that greatly affected the personal goals and aspirations of women. Most of Qatari women in the past needed to follow what their society and family demanded in order to avoid harsh criticism and judgement. However, in modern times, Qatar and the Arab region in general are becoming increasingly supportive of larger and more ambitious aspirations and goals set by women.

Conclusion:

Many complex factors influence and shape Qatar's (and the region's) current gender divide. In many ways, Qatar leads in terms of female participation in Higher Education institutions compared to their Male counterparts. However, much needs to be done to achieve higher female participation in the workforce beyond academia. In order to increase the figures of representation of female citizens in the workplace, understanding the reasons of the gender gap is essential to face social challenges. Making full use of Qatari citizens regardless to their gender is crucial for the country's evolution. According to human ethics both male and female should have equal opportunities in order to advance Qatari society. (Beyond Bias and Barriers: Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering, 2007, p. 218) Giving females chances to participate will give way to new ideas and variations of thinking that will help in diversifying and empowering Qatari culture and society.

The available literature around this topic, and especially about parental influence on the gender divide and career / goal perception is lacking. Further research needs to be conducted in the region and in the GCC in particular to further examine the complex cultural and societal factors that are unique to this region and culture. Much of the available literature, (including some of the literature used in this paper) can have a biased “whitewashed” representation of the region’s culture due to a lack of high quality local research. This is especially true for sources in English, as some sources in Arabic are available.

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