

Gulf Studies 11

Rabia Naguib *Editor*

Women's Empowerment and Public Policy in the Arab Gulf States

Exploring Challenges and Opportunities

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Rabia Naguib
Editor

Women's Empowerment and Public Policy in the Arab Gulf States

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”فاستجاب لهم ربهم اني لا اضيع عملا عامل من ذكر او انثى ۗ بعضكم من بعض“ (ال عمران، ١٩٥)

So their Lord responded to them, “Indeed, I will never cause to be lost the work of any doer among you, whether male or female, you are one of another” (Quran, AL-Imran, 3:195)

To fellow seekers of balance endeavoring to find and follow a middle path while avoiding the drawbacks of both excess and deficiency.

Foreword

When my dear colleague Dr. Rabia Naguib first spoke to me about the idea of the book, deep inside I had hoped for three things. For the book to avoid being a piece of Western activism, for the book to avoid being a diplomatic government report and finally for the book to actually look at the women's public policy nexus without being completely sucked into politicization. This last point in particular has been always a concern to me whenever the term public policy is combined with anything that has to do with the Arab region at large, given the fact that the demarcation between political analysis and policy analysis is most of the time non-existent. After getting the chance to take a glimpse at the book through the chapters' executive summary I was happy to see that there has been some sort of a telepathy with the authors who seemed keen to carve out a new approach to the topic.

In an attempt to contextualize the question, both the first and second chapters seem to complement each other to redefine the very concept of "Empowerment" instead of picking it off the shelf. Giving voice to the women themselves as in the first chapter is an important tool in redefining the concept, and offering a fine-grained and nuanced understanding based on local values, yet it needs to be further grounded in its context. Here comes the third chapter with the Islamic deep-rooted theory of Maqasid trying to anchor the concept and set some different criteria, offering a fresh look that is different from the approach and claim by gender-based analysis provided in most post-colonial accounts. The following chapters provide case studies from the public sector in the State of Qatar tackling two of the most pressing issues for women in the labor market; the sense of exclusion, and the work-family balance. One of the chapters on the other hand provides a comparative study of the six GCC countries looking into their women empowerment policies and the impact of the dominant global neoliberal values on these policies. I am still keen to read the full account and I wonder how much the contextualized framework set out in the first two chapters is actually utilized in the empirical analysis and to what extent it had an impact on the findings and more importantly in their interpretation.

I am hoping that this book will be the first in a series that tackles various public policy questions in the Gulf and hopefully the broader Arab region. I am also hoping that this book becomes available to Arabic speaking students, the Arabic literature is definitely in dire need of more and more data-driven case studies in the field.

Lolwah Rashid Alkhater
Minister of State for International
Cooperation, MOFA, Qatar

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My deepest gratitude goes to all the women and men who effectively participated in the interviews, particularly during the challenging period of Covid-19. Their considerable inputs to rich primary data gathering, and valuable insights have significantly contributed to our understanding of the complex topic under investigation, and have helped to shape the results presented in this book.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to HE Lolwah Alkhater (Minister of State for International Cooperation) for agreeing to write the foreword for this book. Her authenticity and unwavering commitment position her as a genuine role model for women's empowerment among Arab youth, serving as an inspiring exemplar.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the President of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (Prof. Abdelwahab El-Affendi) and to the Dean of the School

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About the Editor

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Chapter 1

Navigating Uncharted Waters: Women Empowerment and Public Policy in the Context of the Arab Gulf States



Rabia Naguib

Abstract This Open Access book offers a comprehensive examination of the various aspects of women’s empowerment and public policy in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a focus on Qatar. The GCC countries have made women’s empowerment a national priority and implemented policies in line with SDG5, which promotes gender equality. The book features qualitative research based on the experiences and perspectives of women, giving insight into how women’s empowerment is being envisioned and realized in the GCC context. The adopted context-driven approach considers local values and the Islamic worldview and highlights the ideological and epistemological challenges posed by the differences between Western and Majority-Muslim referential systems. This book provides a deeper and nuanced understanding of the complexities of promoting women’s empowerment in the GCC region and is a valuable resource for scholars and policymakers working on gender and empowerment, particularly in the Gulf and Arab world.

Keywords Women empowerment · Public policy · Sustainable development · Arab Gulf countries · GCC · Qatar · Islam

1.1 Gaining Clarity: A Context-Focused Journey to Empowerment

The term “empowerment” has become overused and may have lost its original meaning due to excessive use, to the point of suffering from a “semantic atrophy” (Sewell, 2002). Its use by political leaders and Western scholars often has an ideological basis, resulting in a vague and shallow understanding of the concept (Perkins, 2010). Women empowerment is not a singular state’s creation but rather a global shift in political practices and a main goal of sustainable development, with countries worldwide ratifying the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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in 2016. The Arab Gulf states have adopted policies aligned with these goals, to be achieved by 2030, showing progress in areas such as industry (SDG 9), sustainability (SDG 11), energy (SDG 7), and economic growth (SDG 8), but lagging in gender equality and women empowerment (SDG 5) (Balla & Mohamed, 2022). Thus, investigating the relationship between women empowerment and public policy in the Arab Gulf States and identifying related opportunities and challenges is timely and crucial.

A comprehensive data collection was conducted over three years as part of a research project funded by the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF) due to the lack of empirical studies on this topic in the GCC countries. The book draws upon this rich qualitative data, along with other research, to provide a deeper understanding of women empowerment and to build an evidence-based knowledge to inform policy-making. The book also aims to address gaps in the existing literature and to respond to calls for further exploration of this complex topic.

Women empowerment and gender equality have become part of the modern vocabulary of policymakers (Abu-Lughod, 2013), a development policy paradigm (Huelss, 2017), a tool for economic growth (Chant, 2016), an instrument of soft politics (Doumato, 2011), and even a tool of deflection, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Al-Hussain, 2022). However, globally and locally, the political and economic instrumentalization of empowerment has raised concerns about the genuine representation of women's voices, opinions, and experiences. It is crucial to question the stereotypes and essentialisms related to Arab women as oppressed victims of patriarchy and religion (Coleman, 2013) and to explore a more nuanced understanding of women's realities (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). In this regard, this book focuses on the Arab Gulf countries, with a special emphasis on Qatar, and adopts a contextual approach and conceptualization of empowerment, exploring the perceptions and realities of women to inform research and policy agendas.

1.2 Beyond the Trees: A Context-Driven Approach to Empowerment

Empowerment is a concept that lacks a clear definition in academia and among policymakers (Kabeer, 1999). Moseale (2015) highlights the lack of efforts to define empowerment in specific contexts. More recently, Ng et al. (2022) call for further research to better understand the complexities of empowerment in local contexts. Arab Gulf countries present an interesting and complex context, with contrasting perspectives on progress and tradition, and global and local pressures (Ennis, 2019). These countries also have unique demographic, geopolitical, and economic conditions, being home to some of the wealthiest economies in the region and seeking a transition to a knowledge-based economy. This study focuses on Qatar as a case study.

International agencies and institutions largely shape women's empowerment as a state policy. This approach is problematic, as it risks overlooking the local context

in developing countries like the Arab Gulf states, which must adopt policies and programs, regardless of their impact. It is important to define women's empowerment outside of orientalist and post-colonialist frameworks (Abu-Lughod, 2013). To understand the meaning of empowerment in this context, we must challenge the "coloniality of power" (Metcalf et al., 2022) and the stereotyping of women in the Global South (Chant, 2016) through "epistemic healing" (Khan & Naguib, 2019) to counter the prevailing "epistemic violence" (Dotson, 2011), which excludes certain groups from participating in the creation of social meanings (Fricker, 2013). The objective of this book is to restore women's voices as key touchstones (Batliwala, 2007; 2010) and present their contextual and local narratives of empowerment based on extensive primary data, particularly in Qatar.

Empowerment should begin with acknowledging Muslim women in Arab countries as producers of knowledge and giving them a legitimate voice in the cognitive process, rather than viewing them solely as victims of cultural practices. The policies of inclusion advocated by the "entrepreneurs of empowerment" may be based on the exclusion of many women in developing countries. Participants in this study, however, have proven to have the necessary cognitive resources and display impressive critical consciousness, analysis skills, education attainment, and a strong understanding of their religion and history. Their moral values emphasize justice and dignity, beyond just gender equality. They seek to be restored within the discourse and practice of empowerment.

1.3 Grounded Approach to Women's Empowerment: Understanding the Complexities

The concept of women's empowerment is complex and multi-faceted, making it difficult to reach a universal consensus on its definition (Ng et al., 2022). To understand it effectively, policymakers must consider the individual, sociocultural, and epistemological factors that influence how empowerment is perceived and interpreted. Despite a wealth of literature on the topic, many empirical studies do not fully examine the multiple components and interconnections that shape empowerment (Grabe, 2012). In response, *Rabia Naguib* in Chapter 2 aims to fill this gap by examining the multiple dimensions of empowerment, breaking down their interrelationships, and clarifying the roles they play. The author presents a grounded conceptual framework based on women's narratives, including nationals and expatriates as well as working and non-working women, offering a comprehensive and contextualized approach to empowerment that takes into account an Islamic worldview.

Empowerment is viewed as a continuous, evolving process that requires agency and decision-making power, both of which are influenced by a range of internal and external resources (psychological, political, economic, sociocultural, and spiritual). The availability of these resources and opportunities (such as self-motivation, skills,

education, and support from family and institutions) affects women's overall well-being and quality of life, which in turn affects their level of agency and motivation. Empowerment should not be viewed as a destination to be reached through specific programs, but as a journey where the pathways women take in their individual and collective experiences remain hidden (Cornwall, 2016). The meaning and understanding of empowerment in the Arab Gulf states is rooted in a collectivist context and Islamic worldview, which requires further exploration.

1.4 Re-Envisioning Women's Empowerment: A Maqasid Approach to Understanding Women's Status and Rights in Islam

The analysis of women's empowerment in the GCC is closely tied to cultural processes, including the influence of Islamic values that form a significant part of women's identities in the Gulf region. Western-led international perspectives on women's empowerment in Muslim countries often erroneously assume that Islamic Shari'a and governance are the primary obstacles to women's empowerment. This notion must be challenged. Researchers in the Middle East have called for a more comprehensive investigation of the role of religion in shaping women's subjectivity and agency (Metcalf et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2022; Salem & Yount, 2019). Our empirical study, outlined in Chapter 2, finds that participants view Islam as a catalyst for women's empowerment, not a barrier. They assert their rights and advocate for gender justice within the Islamic framework.

The neoliberal development policies promoted by international institutions often encourage a "rebellious promethean self," contrasting with the "collective subjectivity" and submission to God's will in the Islamic worldview. Therefore, it is crucial to understand empowerment through an Islamic lens, using the Shari'a, which translates to "the path to follow." The objectives (maqasid) of the Shari'a focus on maximizing public welfare and the common good, through promoting what is beneficial (manfaa') and avoiding what is harmful (madarra), while considering both the worldly and spiritual realms.

Policymakers in Arab Gulf countries often confront political and moral dilemmas, especially when they must ratify international conventions or adopt foreign policies that may conflict with their underlying belief system. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been ratified by most Muslim-majority countries with formal reservations, allowing them to exempt themselves from certain obligations. Given its critical importance, this topic is thoroughly explored in Chapter 3 by *Basma Abdelgaffar*, who adopts a Maqasid al Sharia's perspective to examine and contrast the moral assumptions and implications of women's empowerment from both a Western lens as represented by CEDAW and an Islamic perspective using a new Maqasid methodology (NMM).

1.5 Empowering Women Through Public Sector Employment: Challenges and Opportunities

The emphasis on women's economic empowerment in shaping gender policies globally has been primarily motivated by "efficiency imperatives" and the "economic utility of empowering women" (Chant, 2016, p. 5). This approach, enforced by international institutions on a global scale, raises concerns about the legitimacy of the policies and the moral authority underlying them. International organizations claim a universal morality and the right to define women's empowerment, often pressurizing local governments to adjust their policies accordingly. Consequently, women's wellbeing becomes linked to economic growth rather than true emancipation and an improved quality of life. In the context of the Arab Gulf states, the rentier governmentality has prioritized female empowerment for economic reasons (Karolak, 2013).

Women's engagement in the labor force in the GCC countries is not solely a consequence of poverty but rather a political priority within post-oil economic diversification strategies and an attempt to decrease dependence on foreign labor. This underscores the necessity of investigating women's labor force participation in a setting where they have the liberty to choose whether to join the workforce. Despite having high educational achievements, female labor force participation in the GCC nations ranks among the lowest worldwide, with a noticeable gender gap. Research in the region has primarily focused on female entrepreneurs and women in leadership roles, leaving women in lower to middle-level positions in the public sector and non-working women relatively unexplored. There are limited studies examining the institutional environments, sector contexts, and socio-material and religio-political practices that may influence women's employment prospects in the MENA region (Metcalf et al., 2022).

Rabia Naguib and *Ahmed Aref* in Chapter 4 tackle the challenges and opportunities of women's empowerment through employment in the public sector. Using a multi-level analysis that considers individual, organizational, and societal factors, the authors offer a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Importantly, they propose policy recommendations based on women's own suggestions and aspirations.

1.6 Balancing Act: The Importance of Family-Friendly Policies for Work-Life Harmony

Economic empowerment through participation in the labor force is often viewed as a means to provide women with increased income opportunities. However, in practice, this can lead to a "double burden" (Rowlands, 1995) or "triple burden" (Hussain & Jullandhry, 2020) instead of improving their situation. In GCC countries, which are family-focused and community-oriented, working women struggle to find a balance between their job duties and household responsibilities, often without the

necessary institutional support. Women's position in their communities and families continues to play a significant role in their identity and empowerment, including in the workplace. Women's employment decisions affect their families, making fertility a crucial factor in policies that link economic and sociocultural empowerment for women. Work-life balance and family-friendly policies are closely linked to women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf States (Nasser, 2018). It is therefore crucial for policymakers to create workplace policies that support women and promote work-life balance.

Julia Babar, Rabia Naguib, and Maysaa Abu Hilal in Chapter 5, address the challenge of work-life balance in the context of Qatar, exploring the human resource laws and regulations surrounding maternity leave, childcare, and flexible work arrangements. The authors use qualitative data to examine the factors that influence employment decisions for both working and non-working women. The chapter highlights the difficulties women face in balancing work and life, including the impact of COVID-19, the importance of part-time work and flexible schedules, and the need for family-friendly policies to support working women.

1.7 State Feminism and Women's Empowerment in the Arab Gulf: Examining the Gap

The Arab Gulf states have seen progress in women's empowerment through the implementation of state feminism (Doumato, 2011). Prager (2020) describes state feminism in the UAE as a one-way policy that depends on political will to enforce laws promoting gender equality. Allagui and Al-Najjar (2018) reveal how women's empowerment can be used as a government tool for national branding, using the case of the UAE. Sukarieh (2015) highlights the conflicting politics of women's empowerment in Arab governments influenced by external actors such as NGOs, international organizations, and Western states, leading to the adoption of neoliberal discourse and the portrayal of women in positions of power to indicate political shifts and convey progressiveness. Similarly, Karolak (2013) emphasizes the political nature of female empowerment in rentier states, specifically in the case of Bahrain, through the implementation of top-down initiatives. Alotaibi et al., (2021) examine the role of information technology, specifically e-government, in empowering women in Saudi Arabia by removing the requirement of male guardian permission for certain transactions such as renewing a passport, applying for a driving license, or seeking employment. Government's support appears to be a crucial factor in empowering women across the GCC countries. The role of political leadership in endorsing and supporting women's empowerment has been well documented, but there remains a gap between women's aspirations and the actualization of policies in this field.

Nada Fouad in Chapter 6 investigates this gap between public rhetoric and reality as perceived by women in the context of a welfare state. Through in-depth interviews

with 20 Qatari women, the author identifies four areas where women still face challenges, namely freedom of choice, legality, inclusivity, and representation. The findings emphasize the need for locally driven policies that support the organic growth of community networks to facilitate women's participation and expression.

1.8 Through the Eye of the Needle: A Regional Perspective

The economies and societies of the Gulf monarchies have undergone significant transformations due to their oil wealth, leading to a range of opportunities for their citizens, including education and healthcare services provided by welfare states. Women's empowerment research in the GCC is unique due to the context of high-income rentier states, with a distinct social contract, an economy closely tied to international migration and nationalization policies, and a "development paradox." These factors are considered barriers to female employment and career growth in the national workforce, along with other sociocultural variables (Ennis, 2019). Despite the similarities across the six GCC countries, the challenges and opportunities they face vary between states.

Melissa Langworthy and *Rabia Naguib* in Chapter 7 challenge the notion that the international agenda on women's empowerment and the "universalization" of this framework is the only way for states to achieve women's rights and legitimacy as modern states. Using a comparative analysis of public policies and gender data from the six Arab Gulf nations, the authors examine the circumstances of women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf policy space. They argue that the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalist frameworks and Western-defined human rights strategies have reinforced orientalist discourses and ignored the cultural differences in the Arab Gulf region. The authors suggest that the international women's agenda, which emphasizes neoliberal ideals, has overlooked the importance of the family and household in women's economic pursuits. Instead, they present Arab Gulf policy frameworks as valuable strategies that prioritize care responsibilities, work-life reconciliation, and allow women to measure their life achievements outside of neoliberal terms.

1.9 Driving Change: Pathways, Challenges, and Recommendations for Women's Empowerment in the Arab Gulf States

In the concluding chapter of this book, **Ahmed Aref** and **Angela Fallentine** offer valuable insights into women's empowerment and public policy, based on the evidence presented throughout the book. They summarize the book's main conceptual

and empirical contributions and emphasize the importance of evidence-based policies that reflect local values, collaboration between stakeholders, and gender-specific research to achieve sustainable progress in women's empowerment.

The chapter explores different pathways for increasing women's empowerment, identifies the challenges that must be addressed, and provides recommendations for sustained engagement to promote women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf States. Overall, the chapter highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach that addresses the social, economic, and political dimensions of women's empowerment and recognizes the role of diverse actors in driving change.

1.10 Epilogue—Epistemic Healing: Reclaiming Women's Empowerment in Islamic Sources

While many in the West view religion as a barrier to women's empowerment, with religious institutions and teachings often accused of perpetuating patriarchal attitudes and practices, the situation is different in many Muslim-majority countries. In these countries, Islamic teachings are often seen as a catalyst for women's empowerment, emphasizing the equal worth and dignity of all human beings regardless of race and gender. In the Arab Gulf states, Islam serves as a source of identity and a referential system that provides a framework for understanding and addressing social, political, and cultural issues. It shapes how Muslims interact with others, promotes values of compassion, justice, and dignity, and provides guidance on women's rights and responsibilities. El Mandjra, a futurist, economist, and sociologist, has thoroughly written about the challenges of reconciling Western and Islamic values. He argues that the West's cultural and political dominance over the Islamic world has resulted in a clash of values and a sense of cultural alienation among many Muslims who struggle to reconcile their religious and cultural heritage with the demands of modernity. Unlike Huntington's conception of a "clash of civilizations," El Mandjra advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and political dynamics at play and promotes dialogue and understanding between different civilizations.

In the epilogue, **Rabia Naguib** advocates for a model of women's empowerment grounded in Islamic values and traditions. She stresses the importance of policy learning over policy borrowing and the need to recognize the unique cultural, institutional, and moral frameworks of the local context. The author suggests exploring the source of Islamic principles, Sharia'a, to gain a deeper understanding of women's empowerment and develop pathways rooted in local values and traditions. She seeks to reconcile the cultural and epistemological tensions in the discourse on women's empowerment and promote inclusiveness in policy-making through "epistemic healing" that empowers local women and men as agents of change capable of producing knowledge that is relevant and aligned with their worldview.

1.11 Overview and Future Directions

The book provides a comprehensive overview of the current academic research and governmental policies on women's empowerment in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a specific focus on Qatar. It aims to present a nuanced understanding of women's empowerment by including the perspectives of women themselves and examining the role of the public sector in empowering women. It also seeks to highlight the intersectionality between gender, religion, and identity, and how it affects the experiences and empowerment of women in the region. The authors conducted a mixed-methods empirical study using surveys and in-depth interviews with public servants and women from diverse backgrounds. Although the study mainly focuses on qualitative data, the authors recognize the importance of further research using quantitative data. They also acknowledge the need for similar research in other GCC states and comparisons with other regions to capture the contextual specifics of women's empowerment in the Gulf states. Furthermore, the authors emphasize the need for evaluations of the programs and policies related to women's empowerment in the GCC, as well as the development of regional indicators to accurately measure progress. Longitudinal studies tracking women's empowerment over time are also crucial in assessing the impact of policies and interventions. Ultimately, the authors stress the importance of collaboration between researchers and policy-makers to ensure that research findings are translated into practical solutions that can improve women's empowerment in the GCC and beyond.

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Chapter 2

Grounded Approach to Women's Empowerment: Understanding the Complexities



Rabia Naguib

Abstract The Middle East has undergone profound social, political, and economic changes over time, leading to reconfiguration of the positions and status of Arab men and women in relation to the state and the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Arab Spring, and the 2008 financial crisis have all had significant impacts, particularly on Arab women, who have become the focus of policies aimed at “empowering” them. Before exploring the relationship between women’s empowerment and public policy, it is crucial to understand the concept of empowerment within its context, through the perspectives and narratives of women themselves. This chapter examines the concept of women’s empowerment in the context of Arab Gulf states, with a specific focus on Qatar, by exploring the meaning and perceptions of working and non-working women and the role of religious beliefs, moral values, and family. A holistic and dialectical approach is used to understand the complex and multidimensional nature of women’s empowerment and to highlight the intersectionality between gender, religion, and identity in the region. A deductive and inductive logic is adopted, drawing on both theoretical literature and practical interviews to offer a conceptual and empirical contribution to the field of women’s empowerment.

Keywords Women empowerment · Arab Gulf states · Holistic approach · Public policy · Empirical study

2.1 Introduction

Women empowerment has become a global issue involving a shift in political practices and the deployment of a set of policy apparatuses across nations. Hence, it is important to trace the development of this concept, understand its meaning, and contextualize its conception and implications. From this perspective, this chapter

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will focus on the regional representation of women empowerment within the Arab Gulf states, with a focus on Qatar as a case study.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states share similar characteristics, including a common language, religion, history, and culture. They also face similar issues, including patriarchal social structures (Sholkamy, 2010). The GCC countries are distinct from other MENA countries due to their wealth and abundance of hydrocarbon resources, as well as their reliance on international migrant workers in the private sector (Young, 2016). The resource wealth of the GCC countries, in comparison to other MENA counterparts like Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt, sets apart the socio-economic structure and priorities of the GCC.

To become self-sufficient and reduce dependence on oil revenue and expatriate workers, the GCC countries have adopted long-term strategic policies and visions to transform their economies and the role of citizens. This has resulted in rapid social, cultural, political, and economic development throughout the twenty-first century, with women's visibility and position in the public eye being a key indicator and driver of change. To maximize human capital potential, the national strategies and visions of many GCC countries prioritize reforming women's status and empowering them.

Despite having higher levels of female education, the GCC countries still have the lowest percentage of women in the workforce in the region (Hendy, 2016; Naguib & Jamali, 2015). Although policies promote women's access to higher education and the workforce, there is still a discrepancy between education attainment and labor force participation (Young, 2017). This inconsistency challenges the concept of women's empowerment, which emphasizes assets and opportunity structures (Cornwall, 2016). Women's economic inclusion and labor force participation are thus crucial to the discourse of women's empowerment in the GCC.

Scholarship on women's empowerment in the GCC often focuses on national women's career paths, managerial positions, and female entrepreneurship. However, this framework tends to have a Western-centric bias (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013). Before examining policies and practices related to women's empowerment, it is necessary to define and understand the concept in its specific context.

This chapter provides an overview of the development of the concept of women's empowerment, followed by a deeper analysis using empirical data and a conceptual framework based on working and non-working women's own perceptions of empowerment in the Qatari context, with a focus on local values stemming from an Islamic worldview.

2.2 Historical Overview of Women Empowerment: A Retrospective Analysis

The term "women empowerment" has been widely used by academics and policy-makers, but its meaning has evolved over time. Initially rooted in feminist literature from the Global South in the 1960s and 1970s and later embraced by North

American radical activists in the 1980s, the concept of empowerment was adopted by development organizations and governments in the 1990s. Following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, it was incorporated into policy vocabulary as a progressive approach to gender. However, the principles of grass-roots political mobilization and social transformation were diluted, and the concept became infused with principles of profit-making and competitiveness (Batliwala, 2007; Calvès, 2009). As noted by Sardenberg (2008), the meaning of empowerment changed from “liberating” to a “liberal” concept that aimed to maximize individual interests and promote economic growth. Furthermore, Engvall (2017) identified colonial practices in UN Women’s discourse on empowerment, which put a strong emphasis on economic growth and individual pursuits rather than collective empowerment and social transformation (Rowlands, 1995).

According to Huelss (2019), the Western approach to empowering women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, specifically through EU initiatives, focuses on economic empowerment that reinforces dominant norms of a market-driven society, perpetuating domination and economic exploitation. The meaning of “women empowerment” has become vague and influenced by neoliberal ideology on a global level, resulting in a lack of cultural specificity and political content (Batliwala, 2007). Furthermore, Cornwall and Brock (2005) suggest that the terms used in policies are never neutral and acquire meaning through usage. Kabeer (2005) criticizes the perception of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) related to gender equality and women’s empowerment as an end in itself, rather than a means to achieve higher goals.

Due to this, there are various definitions and indicators for women’s empowerment in academia (Sewell, 2002). For some, it is reflected through economic participation, with female labor force participation rates as the key development indicator, while for others, political participation through women in elected offices and legal reforms benefiting women’s personhood and agency are the preferred indicators. Zuhur (2003) defines empowerment as “a condition where women have or are working towards obtaining equal educational, legal, and political rights compared to male citizens”. Moghadam and Senftova (2005) concentrate on structural empowerment and examine women’s rights as equal citizens and their ability to participate in crucial social domains such as education, employment, and political representation.

The concept of empowerment is often perceived as synonymous with gender equality and feminism. During the twentieth century, the growth of internationalism and the institutionalization of universal human rights gave rise to global feminist movements. Nussbaum (1996) analyzed the impact of feminist internationalism on regional movements, particularly in the Arab world. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted in 1979 as a key international standard on women’s empowerment, calls for states to take action against gender discrimination in legal, social, political, and economic areas. Nussbaum (1996: 207) observed that despite being widely ratified by states in the Global South, the adoption of CEDAW was subject to many “formal reservations” by states seeking to modify their obligations under the treaty. Typically, states that refused to fully implement CEDAW did so on religious and cultural grounds,

claiming that family and marital relations should be governed by Islamic Shari'a rather than the convention.

Strobl (2010) succinctly highlights that an insightful analysis of women's empowerment in the GCC must not overlook cultural and religious processes, especially since Islamic values play a significant role in women's identities in the Gulf. Unfortunately, Western-led international perspectives on women's empowerment in the Global South, particularly in Muslim countries, often rest on the assumption that Islamic culture and tradition primarily hinder women from reaching their full potential. Hatem (2002) encourages scholars, in a report on the gender dynamics of Islamism, to move away from the "presumed passivity" of Muslim women in Islamic cultural hegemonies and examine how women are "redefining their relationship" with culture and tradition. In this vein, Mahmood (2011) provides a case study in her essay on Islamic piety and gender, wherein gender segregation in Egyptian mosques creates opportunities for women in various occupations and roles, expanding their power, influence, and authority. By doing so, she amplifies "the lost voices of those written out of hegemonic feminist narratives" and refuses "to recuperate the members of the mosque movement either as subaltern feminists or as the fundamentalists others of feminism's progressive agenda" (Mahmood, 2011: 154).

The concept of women's empowerment faces resistance in the Arab world, as noted by Abu-Lughod (2009) in her critique of the 2005 Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR). The report claims to be a comprehensive analysis of development deficits in the region, specifically in regard to women's empowerment. Despite its influence on future scholarship, both Abu-Lughod and Hasso (2009) have raised concerns about the report's framing. The AHDR defines empowerment based on education attainment, access to economic opportunities, and differentiation from family, aligning with a UN developmental framework. Hasso argues that this reinforces existing governance, Western interests, and neoliberalism. Abu-Lughod (2009) focuses on what is missing from the AHDR's analysis, such as lower-class and rural women's empowerment. In contrast, Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as access to choices previously denied to a group and presents a three-dimensional model including agency, resources, and achievements. Kabeer emphasizes that relying solely on results and outcomes does not fully capture the choices available to most women. Empowerment is a circumstantial concept that operates within the structures that shape informed choice.

It is crucial to approach the study of women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf contextually and avoid pitfalls that view disempowerment as solely a product of culture and tradition. Empowerment must be defined as an institutionally embedded concept, examined and understood in its cultural and historical context.

To summarize, the concept of women's empowerment has been the subject of debate among scholars and advocates, who aim to retain its versatility while defining and measuring it. Without considering its institutional, cultural, and historical contexts, empowerment can be seen as a vague term. Thus, when studying empowerment in regions such as the Arab Gulf, it is important to avoid common pitfalls in research that depict disempowerment of women as a result of religion and

traditional culture and empowerment as a departure from these cultures. It is crucial to understand empowerment as a concept deeply embedded in institutions and to examine it from a contextual point of view.

2.3 Women Empowerment in Context: An Introspective Analysis

When exploring the conception and development of women's empowerment, it is necessary to consider the cultural context and the status of women in society (Huis et al., 2017), assess both its objective and subjective aspects (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007), and engage with culturally ingrained normative beliefs (Cornwall, 2016). Women's empowerment entails the integration of feminist insights into policy discourse (Kabeer, 2001). To do this effectively, it is important to give women the opportunity to express their views and perceptions, consider their values and perspectives, and gain a deeper understanding of what is most important to them (Batliwala, 2007; Cornwall, 2016). As emphasized by Hunt and Samman (2016), it is vital to prioritize women's voices in order to comprehend empowerment. With this in mind, in the following section, we describe the methods used to gain insights from women's experiences and perspectives and to define empowerment based on their own understanding and interpretation.

2.3.1 Methodology

Quantification and measurement are important considerations in policy-making. Cornwall (2016) points out that there is an excessive focus on quantifying impact and a disregard for cultural factors in the current literature on empowerment. Jäger and Rohwer (2009) evaluate commonly used gender indices such as the Inequality Index, Gender-related Development Index (GDI), Gender Empowerment Index (GEM), and the Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) introduced by the World Economic Forum. They find that while these indicators provide valuable information for policy-making, there are limitations in their calculation and interpretation. They recommend developing separate indices for developed and developing countries to provide a more comprehensive analysis of gender inequalities. Kabeer (2001) stresses the need for a more nuanced understanding of empowerment. In this chapter, we provide a comprehensive examination of the empowerment process using a qualitative method and a systematic approach.

For that purpose, deep semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of women ($N = 26$) including Qatari ($N = 17$) and Arab migrant ($N = 9$) participants. For a better understanding of empowerment from different perspectives and backgrounds, and beyond the economic domain, the sample included both Qatari/Arab

migrant women who are not currently employed ($N = 11$) and Qatari/Arab migrant women working in the public sector ($N = 15$). Table 2.1 presents the sample's description and demographics.

Interviews were conducted in-person (with only 2 being via Zoom), 20 in Arabic and 6 in English. Each participant gave consent to participate and all interviews were audio recorded. Two bilingual translators translated the Arabic transcripts into English for data analysis using Nvivo software. To avoid misinterpretations, the original Arabic text was continuously consulted during analysis. When themes and related quotes were identified, both the English and Arabic texts were placed together for further review and verification of translation accuracy, with some words retained in Arabic if their meaning would be lost in translation.

The transcripts were coded through an iterative process and multiple reviews for each question. The analysis primarily followed an inductive approach, coding themes as they emerged in the transcripts, but also incorporated themes already identified in literature through a deductive approach. The goal was to capture new themes while also understanding how women's experiences relate to existing factors in the literature. Differences in responses between working and non-working women and between Qatari and migrant women were also noted during analysis. Interviews were coded based on chronological order, interviewee nationality, and status (Qatari working [QW], Qatari non-working [QN], Migrant working [MW], Migrant non-working [MNW]). The frequency of themes was determined using Nvivo to understand and visualize differences between groups and classify themes and priorities.

In conclusion, this chapter follows a holistic and dialectical approach to empowerment, combining both deductive and inductive logic, and drawing from both literature and interview analysis.

2.3.2 Women Empowerment: A Grounded Conceptual Framework

The concept of women's empowerment is complex and influenced by cultural and ideological factors. According to Batliwala (2007), it should be applied contextually, and as suggested by Huis et al. (2017), research should be sensitive to cultural contexts. A contextualized approach was therefore adopted in this study, allowing insights to be gained from the perceptions and experiences of women based on their local perspectives. To further understand the concept of empowerment, a conceptual framework was developed based on how women themselves conceive and frame it in the context of an Arab Gulf state.

Table 2.1 Female respondents demographics

Person	Nationality	Age	Education/degree	Marital status	No of children	Employment status
Interview 1 QW	Qatari	42	Bachelor of Radio and Television	Married	2	Working (Al Jazeera Media Network)
Interview 2 QW	Qatari	40	Bachelor's in computer science	Divorced	5	Working (Supreme committee for delivery and legacy)
Interview 3 QW	Qatari	30	Bachelor's in social services	Married	2	Working (Qatar University)
Interview 4 QW	Qatari	32	Bachelor's in Law, Master's in Public Policy	Married	3	Working (Ministry of Administrative Development and Labor)
Interview 5 QW	Qatari	32	Bachelor's in Marketing, Master's in Islamic Finance	Divorced	N/A	Working (Qatar University)
Interview 6 QW	Qatari	33	Bachelor's in business administration, Master's in conflict management	Single	N/A	Working (Ministry of Awqaf)
Interview 7 QW	Qatari	40	Master's in Public Health policy	Married	2	Working (Ministry of Health)
Interview 8 QW	Qatari	36	Bachelor's in computer science—certified health coach	Married	2	Working (Self-employed/ Freelance)
Interview 9 QW	Qatari	35	Bachelor's in urban planning, Master's in public administration	Single	N/A	Working (Ministry of Municipal Affairs)
Interview 10 QW	Qatari	33	Bachelor's in media & PR, Master's in executive leadership	Married	2	Working (Ministry of Defense)
Interview 11 QW	Qatari	37	Bachelor's in urban planning, Master's in public policy	Divorced	1	Working (Ministry of Transportation)

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Person	Nationality	Age	Education/degree	Marital status	No of children	Employment status
Interview 12 QNW	Qatari	35	Bachelor's in marketing, high diploma in Quran teaching	Married	5	Not working
Interview 13 QNW	Qatari	54	PhD in educational psychology	Married	4	Working (Resigned)
Interview 14 QNW	Qatari	33	Bachelor's degree in marketing	Married	4	Not working
Interview 15 QNW	Q atari	46	Bachelor's in Accounting and Master's in human resources	Married	3	Not working
Interview 16 MNW	Migrant (Syrian)	32	Bachelor's in business administration, Master's in politics and international relations	Married	1	Not working
Interview 17 MW	Migrant (Jordanian)	42	Bachelor's in business administration	Married	4	Working (Higher education)
Interview 18 MNW	Migrant (Palestinian Canadian)	53	Bachelor's in English literature	Married	3	Not working
Interview 19 QW	Qatari	52	Bachelor's in medicine, Master's and PhD in public health	Married	3	Not Working (Resigned)
Interview 20 MNW	Migrant (Tunisian)	41	Master's in Arts	Married	3	Not working
Interview 21 MW	Migrant (Palestinian)	36	Master's in business administration	Married	2	Working (Education, semi-governmental)
Interview 22 MNW	Migrant (Syrian)	42	Master's in business administration	Married	2	Not working

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Person	Nationality	Age	Education/degree	Marital status	No of children	Employment status
Interview 23 MW	Migrant (Palestinian British)	32	Master’s in politics	Married	1	Working (Higher Education)
Interview 24 MNW	Migrant (Palestinian)	30	Bachelor’s in urban planning & minor in science	Married	0	Not working
Interview 25 MW	Migrant (Yemeni)	43	PhD in Dentistry	Married	2	Working (Education, public sector)
Interview 26 QW	Qatari	48	PhD in Pediatric dentistry, PhD in community health and primary care	Married	2	Working (Primary Health Care Cooperation)

Through direct and indirect questioning, women were asked to define empowerment from their own perspectives. The data analysis showed a strong emphasis on making one’s own decisions (60%), contributing to society and enhancing one’s capabilities (54%), having support and laws to help achieve life goals (45%), balancing family and employment needs (43%), equality in rights and duties (38%), and enhancing well-being (40%). Access to leadership roles (35%) and justice (30%) were also mentioned, while only a few referred to financial independence (15%). The data is summarized in Exhibit 2.1.

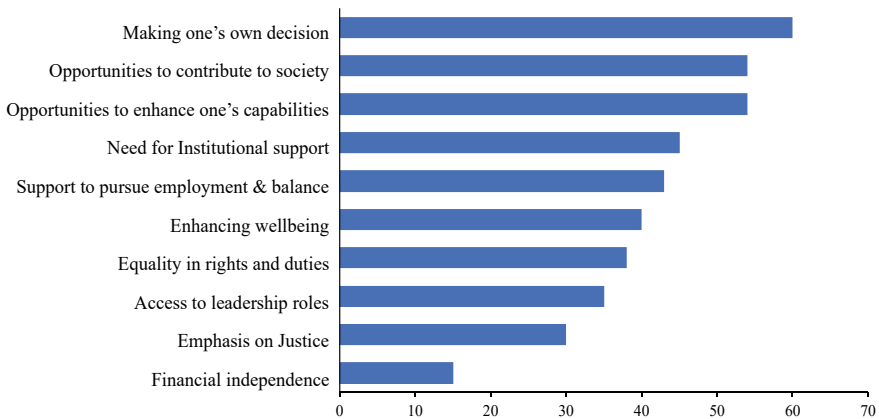


Exhibit 2.1 Major themes related to the conception of women’s empowerment

The results of the study revealed several recurring themes and some new ones. The findings support the dominant definition of empowerment, which is the ability to make independent choices. They align with Kabeer's model (1999), which has three dimensions that correspond to the identified themes:

- Agency: the ability to choose and make decisions, access to leadership roles
- Resources: provision of support and opportunities, state support for employment and laws catering to mothers, financial independence
- Outcomes: improved well-being, enhanced quality of life, positive change

These dimensions are considered prerequisites or enabling factors for empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). However, they can also be viewed as different components of a dynamic process, corresponding and responding to the “what”, “how”, and “why” related to empowerment. To better understand and clearly define empowerment, according to women's own perspectives, the authors used Rudyard Kipling's mnemonic technique. In his Nobel Prize-winning poem, Kipling (1902) stated that he had “six honest serving men” who taught him all he knew, “named what, how, why, where, when, and who”. The author used this approach to capture all aspects and components of empowerment, which is defined as follows:

- What: predominantly refers to Agency and involves choice and decision-making
- How: corresponds to the resources and pre-conditions necessary for empowerment
- Why: represents the outcomes of being empowered, including change and well-being at the individual and collective levels
- Where: highlights the context of the Arab Gulf state of Qatar and its Islamic worldview
- Who: the narratives of Qatari and Arab migrant women participants from various backgrounds and domains, who represent the subject of empowerment
- When: post-Covid-19 period from February to May 2022.

To gain a clearer definition of empowerment, women were separately asked to define what empowerment is and is not, as well as the factors that foster it and the barriers that disempower them. The analysis process was challenging as we had to extract the different dimensions and levels from their responses and insights.

Drawing on Kabeer's model (1999), we developed a conceptual framework that reflects the participants' perception of empowerment, taking into account various dimensions, multiple levels, and different domains. This framework adopts an ecological approach, as recommended by Perkins (2010), considering empowerment as a multi-level, context-dependent, and dynamic process. The framework highlights the role of context, institutions, worldview, and belief systems in shaping the perception and actualization of empowerment. Additionally, it places values at the center of the process and sheds light on the moral and ethical dimensions of empowerment.

Our grounded model, as presented in Fig. 2.1, captures the cyclical and dynamic nature of empowerment and offers a holistic perspective, combining inductive and deductive methods to represent the voices and narratives of the interviewed women. The following sections will present the different dimensions of this model (agency,

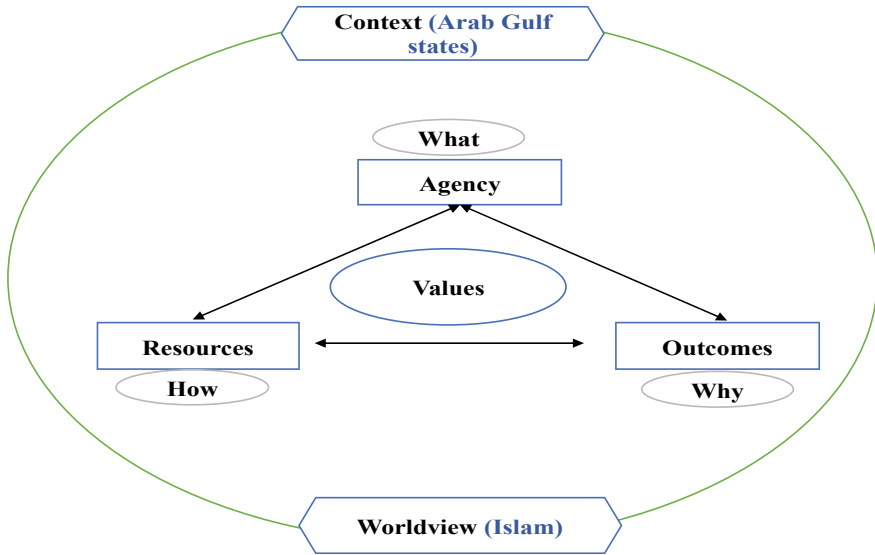


Fig. 2.1 Empowerment conceptual framework: a grounded model

resources, and outcomes), as perceived by the participants, along with their underlying values and the Islamic worldview that influences them. To enhance the readability of the paper, quotes from the participants are presented in Table 2.2, along with a summary of the identified themes and related factors.

2.3.2.1 What Is Empowerment: Focus on Agency

Agency is a prevalent concept in the literature on empowerment, as noted by Ibrahim and Alkire (2007). It holds a significant place in both policy and theoretical discussions on women’s empowerment. Rowlands (1995) defines agency as the power to make decisions and act upon them, granting women autonomy and freedom to choose, participate in decision-making, and have their voices heard in the pursuit of change. Moreover, agency is connected to access to leadership, allowing women to effectively make decisions. It’s important to note, as pointed out by Mahmood (2011), that there are multiple forms of agency that exist beyond the confines of a liberal progressive imagination.

According to the results from interviews with 26 women (15 working, 11 not working, 17 Qatari, and 9 migrants), empowerment is seen as the ability to choose one’s own life goals, make independent decisions, contribute to society, and access leadership. The women participants provided intuitive expressions of agency.

Table 2.2 Three dimensions of women empowerment

	Themes	Perceived influencing factors	Respondents' quotes
Agency	Decision-making	Ability to choose and freedom to make decisions	<p>“Women’s empowerment in my opinion is basically giving a woman the choice to make decisions about herself without any kind of external factors affecting her abilities and decision-making” (#23, MW)</p> <p>“Empowerment is the freedom to make decisions, regardless of the type of decision” (#7, QW)</p> <p>“As long as a woman is able to choose what she wants and direct her life in her own way, she is empowered” (#16, QNW)</p>
	Access to leadership	Ability to participate in decision-making and in policy-making	<p>“When I hear the term women empowerment, it means that the woman can be in a leadership role, she can make decisions on her own” (#21, MW)</p> <p>“It will be good if women are involved in decision-making, and in policies in every area, so that their voice can be heard” (#25, MW)</p>
Resources	Skills development and self-motivation	Personal traits: self-confidence, self-encouragement, self-reliant, motivation, and efficacy	<p>“Self-encouragement and motivation make a woman feel empowered. I think it is internal” (#10, QW)</p> <p>“For me, empowerment is linked to confidence, self-reliance, having specific abilities and life experience” (#2, QW)</p>
	Institutional support (society/ state)	Support and encouragement from family and husband	<p>“Empowerment starts with the family” (#13, QW)</p> <p>“Empowerment requires “support” from parents” (#7, QW)</p> <p>“I see empowerment when the husband and parents help and support in empowering the woman. When I was studying and working my mother used to take care of the kids. If these elements were not there, I would not have been able to feel empowered” (#4, QW)</p>

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

Themes	Perceived influencing factors	Respondents’ quotes
	<p>Availability of opportunities including access to education and employment opportunities</p>	<p>“My understanding of woman’s empowerment is that society or the state provide her with the tools and environment that she needs to achieve her goals and live the life that she chooses in its best form” (#12, QNW)</p> <p>“Empowerment is providing opportunities for women to be able to be themselves and to uphold themselves in the way they see fit to have a real role whether as a student, a worker, a mother or a wife, all that serves to be able to perform her role correctly starting from the family and including the state and the laws” (#13, QW)</p>
	<p>Good workplace/Work-life balance: National and organizational policies and practices that ensure work-life balance</p>	<p>“Create a kind of balance between family and home and remove organizational obstacles related to the workplace” (#14, QNW)</p> <p>“Empowerment is anything that the state does that builds character, capabilities, and provides suitable jobs and suitable workplaces” (#10, QW)</p>
	<p>Financial Independence Wish/need to participate in household expenses</p>	<p>“Providing a woman with the circumstances that assist her in obtaining her own source of income or to be able to depend on herself whether through her own income from her work or through an agreement with her spouse that she is to have her own amount of money set aside if she doesn’t work” (#8, QW)</p>

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

	Themes	Perceived influencing factors	Respondents' quotes
	Role models/Representation	Agents of social change and progress and have a crucial social influence and impact on promoting education, art, and overall, female empowerment and the role of females in society and in leadership	<p>“The presence of HH <i>Sheikha Moza</i> and other women leaders showcase the interest of the state in empowering women” (#13, QW)</p> <p>“The Qatari government is paving the way for women to work in all state institutions. It allocates leadership positions for them and seats in the Shura Council” (#18, MNW)</p> <p>“The government gave women the right to be employed in various sectors, notably in the political domain. He gave her the right to run for elections and be in the Shura Council. They set examples of successful women like HE <i>Lolwah Al-Khater</i> who is considered as a role model. Many girls want to reach international positions, not just local ones” (#17, MW)</p> <p>“Seeing women as ministers, this is starting to be a really good step for women’s empowerment” (#21, MW)</p>
Outcomes	Enhancing well-being	Better quality of life, sense of fulfillment, self-esteem, satisfaction, and happiness	<p>“Generally speaking, the empowerment of woman makes her able to prove herself while doing her other responsibilities and be happy” (#22, MNW)</p> <p>“Empowerment for me is linked to the level of satisfaction with the quality of life” (#2, QW)</p> <p>“From my perspective, women’s empowerment is anything that eases and improves a woman’s life, anything that enables her capabilities to engage in society, so anything that makes her feel internal self-esteem” (#10, QW)</p>

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

Themes	Perceived influencing factors	Respondents’ quotes
<p>Making change/Participating in society</p>	<p>Positive impact and changes</p>	<p>“Women are half of society and raise the other half. Women, in leadership positions, have the ability and the power to make changes” (#22, MNW) “I do not think of leadership positions as much as I think of influence, meaning I care more about the positive impact that I leave behind, whether it is a job, project, or hobby. I don’t care about a position, authority or power, as much as I care about positive impact” (#14, QNW)</p>
<p>Engaging in collective action/ Advocacy</p>	<p>Driving change and ensuring females’ voices are heard Influencing a larger audience and ensuring more ideas and voices are reached</p>	<p>“Women have the ability to make changes but if they are aware of their abilities. Women represent a large part of the public sector and a large part of the workers in the education sector, meaning they can put pressure if they want by joining their hands and believing in their power to influence” (#14, QNW) “Women are naturally inclined to be social and collaborate in groups. As a result, when women engage in conversations and exchange ideas with other women in their network, their sphere of influence expands. Through personal and direct communication, their voices and ideas can resonate with these groups and potentially inspire meaningful dialogue, support, and discussion” (#12, QNW)</p>
<p>Participating to society’s development/Focus on family</p>	<p>Raise and influence future generations to be agents of positive change and progress</p>	<p>“The influence of women is important in society. If the woman has a positive impact on her children, and if they are brought up correctly, we will have a healthy society, because they are the basic building blocks” (#4, QW) “Women are half of society and raise the other half. So, they have the ability to make changes” (#22, MNW)</p>

Decision-Making

Most women interviewed (60%) equally split between working and not working, identified freedom of choice and decision-making as the essence of empowerment. They emphasized that this includes the ability to choose their own life goals and path, and to make decisions without external pressures. This means women can decide for themselves whether to work or stay at home and care for their family.

At the individual level, the participants in the study defined empowerment as the ability to choose and make decisions freely. When asked about what they considered as non-empowering, 65% of respondents pointed to marginalization, deprivation, control, and loss of rights. These factors were seen as hindrances to empowerment, as they restrict freedom of choice and decision-making. When asked if they felt empowered, 58% of women answered positively or reported feeling empowered to some extent. They cited autonomy, freedom to make decisions, and having their voices heard as evidence of their empowerment. However, individual and generational differences in the understanding of empowerment were noted, as some participants emphasized the autonomy to choose their career path, while others focused on the freedom to choose their spouse and make decisions for themselves, their family, and children.

Non-working women described empowerment as the freedom to choose and make decisions, with a focus on having the ability to allocate more time to themselves and their family. They felt empowered by the autonomy to make the choice to stop or continue working without outside pressure. Respondents explained that having the freedom to choose what suits them best, such as staying at home instead of working, empowers them to prioritize their health, well-being, home, family, children, hobbies, and personal interests and projects.

Access to Leadership

The literature typically views leadership as a demonstration of agency and associates it with the capacity to effect change by attaining higher positions and participating in governance and decision-making. Perkins (2010) emphasizes that leadership and empowerment are interdependent. Among the women participants (30%), some linked leadership and empowerment directly.

Despite this correlation, when asked about their interest in leadership positions, 40% of the respondents—mostly working women—said they were not interested, while 56% expressed interest. Women who didn't show interest in leadership roles viewed them as formalities with added responsibilities and potential for work-life imbalance. They cited personal factors like an unsuitable personality, lack of ability to handle pressure, a preference for behind-the-scenes work, prioritizing family over work, and a desire to avoid a heavy workload and burnout. Some also mentioned organizational factors such as tokenism, a lack of supportive work environment, a complex institutional system, and a lack of decision-making authority as reasons for disinterest. Those who aspired to leadership positions highlighted the importance

of self-confidence, motivation, professional skills, and the desire to make a positive impact on society. They saw reaching senior and leadership positions as empowering, as it gave them the ability to participate in decision-making and policy-making, thus making a difference and having their voices heard.

Overall, we defined empowerment and identified its core concepts, centered around the capacity to choose, the freedom of decision-making, and the opportunity to participate and have an impact in society. In the next section, we will delve into how agency is exercised and analyze the resources needed.

2.3.2.2 How/Pre-conditions for Empowerment: Required Resources

Empowerment is centered on agency, but it is impacted by various internal and external factors. The literature defines empowerment as the material, social, and institutional conditions necessary to exert agency (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Women need resources and assets, such as monetary resources, education, skills development, social capital, and organizational capacity-building (Kabeer, 1999), to be empowered through agency. To evaluate the enabling and inhibiting factors of empowerment, participants were asked about the conditions that foster and hinder their empowerment. 43% of respondents emphasized the crucial role of institutional support from society and state. 54% also stressed the significance of skill development and self-motivation. Interestingly, only 15% of interviewees in the Qatari context cited material resources and financial independence as factors for women's empowerment.

Skills Development and Self-Motivation

Literature presents awareness and capacity-building as crucial elements of empowerment that lead to free participation in the community and aid in exercising power and control toward transformative action (Jäger & Rohwer, 2009). Many participants emphasized the psychological and individual aspects as prerequisites for women's empowerment, and considered them to drive the internal aspect of this process.

Interviewees cited that the availability of opportunities and their ability to seize them empowers them by providing experience and developing skills and capabilities. They emphasized the importance of personal traits such as self-confidence, self-motivation, self-reliance, and efficacy for women's empowerment. However, some respondents pointed out that feeling unsafe and weak can undermine motivation and result in disempowerment.

Institutional Support (Society/State)

Institutions play a crucial role in determining the empowerment resources, as they establish the norms and regulations governing activities within the organizational and social systems (Kabeer, 1999). Institutions encompass socio-cultural norms,

traditions, and familial ties, as well as laws, policies, juridical systems, and education systems that impact the opportunities available.

A majority of participants (69%) emphasized the importance of family/husband support, while 45% cited state support through employment opportunities, 40% highlighted access to education, 35% mentioned adequate workplaces, and 30% noted the role of local role models as enabling factors for women's empowerment.

a. Support and Encouragement from Family/Husband

Scholars have shown that spouses and family members play a positive and vital role in supporting and empowering women (Alwahaibi, 2020; Shaya & Khait, 2017). In this research, both working and non-working women emphasized the significance of family and spouse support in empowering them. They explained that family and spouse encouragement and openness allowed them to achieve their personal and professional aspirations through support in education and career choices and assistance in domestic and familial duties.

b. Access to Education/Availability of Opportunities

The state plays a major role in shaping social policies and legislation and in empowering women through education and employment opportunities (Prager, 2020; Wood et al., 2021). Education lays the foundation for women's participation in decision-making and policy formulation, creating opportunities that better serve them as highlighted in the literature and by the participants.

Noticeably, all participants in this research benefited from access to high-level education and emphasized its positive impact on empowering women. They explained that education provided them with knowledge, expertise, and skills that enabled their employment and career progression, expanded their opportunities, and empowered them to achieve their goals and live the life they desire. While non-working participants did not necessarily see a connection between women's education and employment, viewing it as a personal choice, other interviewees viewed education as an important investment for the country that enhances women's empowerment through employment. Some respondents highlighted education as a key aspect of Qatar National Vision 2030 and the value of legislation and policies that support and guarantee equal rights, particularly through educational opportunities.

c. Good Workplace/Work-Family Balance

The literature on women empowerment focuses on the economic domain that encourages females to join the workforce and considers it as a precondition to their empowerment. In this regard, empowerment is perceived as "a paradigm of development policy" (Huelss, 2019: 4). Women's labor force participation in conjunction with higher education attainment has emerged as one of the chief ways in which empowerment is imagined in the Middle East.

Both working and non-working participants emphasized the need for supportive state policies and workplace regulations for a positive work-life balance, as this impacts their sense of empowerment. Many participants based their employment decisions on the availability of work-life balance programs and benefits, with some expressing a preference for working in the public sector due to these offerings.

d. **Role Models/Representation**

Female role models and representation play a crucial role in inspiring women to participate in social transformation and progress (Cornwall, 2016). Lari (2019) noted the presence of supportive female role models in Qatar and the support of the ruling family.

Participants in this study emphasized the impact of female leaders and public role models in promoting women's empowerment through their support of empowering decisions. They praised the Qatari government's efforts to increase the number of working women and grant leadership positions to women in the Shura Council and ministerial positions. They also acknowledged the significant impact of female members of the Qatari Royal Family on promoting education, art, and overall female empowerment in society and leadership.

Financial Independence

According to the research findings, financial need is not a primary motivation for women to work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region (Prager, 2020). Only a small portion of participants (15%) cited financial resources as their reason for seeking employment. This is partly due to the high household income in Qatar that enables most families to live comfortably on one income, based on mutual agreement between partners. However, some participants emphasized the importance of financial independence, particularly among divorced and migrant women, as a driving factor behind their employment. They highlighted their desire to contribute to household expenses and attain financial security.

2.3.2.3 Why Empowerment: Expected Outcomes

Few studies have explored the reasons and desired outcomes of women empowerment. Empowerment is often seen as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Conventionally, the success of empowerment is measured through indicators such as labor participation rates, increased income, and education access. However, Moghadam and Senftova (2005) define empowerment as "achievement of basic capabilities, legal rights, and participation in key social, economic, and political domains". Perkins (2010) notes that empowerment leads to greater health, well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness, and contributes to improving communities and building a just society.

According to the study's respondents, the outcomes of empowerment focus on enhancing women's well-being and quality of life, but also involve making positive changes at the social level by prioritizing the role of family and collective growth over individual growth. Meanwhile, some participants criticized the use of international statistics to assess empowerment as they find them irrelevant or inaccurate for the

Qatari context, where women empowerment is assessed by the high number of female graduates and increasing female participation in the workforce.

Enhancing Well-Being

The link between empowerment and well-being has been widely discussed in the literature, with studies showing that empowerment is a key factor in enhancing personal well-being (Drydyk, 2013; Perkins, 2010). Women participants in these studies spoke to the idea that being empowered leads to a better quality of life, increased fulfillment, elevated self-esteem, greater satisfaction, and overall happiness. They described well-being as a subjective experience that stems from having the power to make choices and live a life that is authentic to them.

The participants also highlighted the importance of collective well-being, which encompasses the well-being of not only the individual but also their family and society. They emphasized that empowering women has the potential to positively impact not only the individual but also their wider community, leading to a more harmonious and thriving society. Overall, the study participants emphasized that well-being is a crucial outcome of empowerment, and one that is deeply intertwined with both personal and collective well-being.

Making Change/Participation in Society

Research evidence has shown that women's empowerment can result in transformative change through collective solidarity and action (Kabeer, 1999). As noted by ElMandjra (1990), change is crucial for a better future and women play a vital role, being half of society. Participants in these studies echoed this sentiment, stating that empowerment translates to the ability of women to positively contribute to society and drive change.

The participants emphasized that women do not need to occupy senior or leadership positions to make a positive impact and drive change in their communities and society. Women's empowerment empowers them to have a positive influence, regardless of their position or role. However, the role of women leaders should not be underestimated. Women leaders have the authority and power to drive positive change, and the constant evolution of laws and policies supporting and empowering women provides more opportunities for women to have a stronger influence and lead change and improvement.

Engaging in Collective Action/Advocacy

Studies have shown that increased solidarity among women leads to significant benefits in various aspects of their lives, including improved quality of life and heightened self-esteem (Cornwall, 2016). The participants in these studies emphasized the

importance of advocacy, collective action, and mutual support and solidarity among women in driving change and making their voices heard. These actions and practices are not only important factors in promoting change, but also outcomes of women's empowerment.

The participants also emphasized the significance of social dialogue in shaping public opinion and engaging a wider audience. Discussions and social groups provide a platform for more ideas and perspectives to be shared and heard, ultimately leading to a greater understanding and appreciation of women's issues. Thus, enhancing solidarity among women is a key factor in promoting women's empowerment and improving their overall well-being. Through collective action, advocacy, mutual support, and social dialogue, women can drive change and make their voices heard, leading to a better quality of life and increased self-esteem.

Participating in Society's Development/Focus on Family

The participants' views align with the findings of Wood et al. (2021: 15), who emphasize that effective measures of women's empowerment must reflect their individual aspirations and goals and what they consider meaningful to feel empowered. The participants stress the vital role that women play in society, specifically in their role as care providers and educators of future generations. They acknowledge mothers as a key group of women who hold a crucial responsibility to act as empowering role models for their families and communities, ultimately driving positive change and fostering a more advanced and dynamic society. These perspectives highlight the importance of considering women's personal goals and experiences when evaluating the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives.

2.3.3 *Values Related to Empowerment*

The concept of empowerment is value-laden, leading to potential problems with policy borrowing and emulation. The literature highlights the impact of neoliberal ideology (Calvès, 2009; Huelss, 2019) and the dominance of liberal values such as democracy, human rights, secularism, and the individualistic logic of modernization (Kumar, 2017). As such, the concept of empowerment must consider the values embedded in the institutional context (Kabeer, 2001). It is important to understand the values and perspectives of women themselves, rather than imposing external models. International models and practices may not be effective in different settings, taking into account cultural norms and values. The women interviewed in the study raised this issue, emphasizing the moral values associated with empowerment, such as justice, dignity, responsibility, and equality. They also stressed the importance of a consultative and collaborative approach to decision-making, rather than an individualistic and competitive one. Table 2.3 summarizes the highlighted values and their perception by the women interviewed, along with some selected quotes.

Table 2.3 Values related to women empowerment

Values	Themes	Respondents' perceptions	Respondents' quotes
Equality in rights and duties	Justice	Equal treatment and opportunities without gender-based curtailments, biases, and/or discrimination	<p>“Empowerment is about equality of opportunities, fairness and absence of discrimination based on gender” (#9, QW)</p> <p>“Empowerment at work relates to providing opportunities for an individual to get the job based on merit and competency, regardless of gender” (#11, QW)</p>
Justice	Justice	Opportunities are provided based on the differences between men and women	<p>“Empowerment is the ability to understand women’s nature, so that there is no equality with men. I am not looking for equality as much as I’m looking for an understanding of the nature of a woman, her physiology, her life’s nature as a mother, in order to achieve justice between the sexes. But if we talk about equality as a mere concept, it will be unfair for both women and men. I don’t need someone to empower me, but I rather need someone who understands my nature as a female and as a mother in the first place” (#3, QW)</p>
Consultation in decision-making	Consultation in decision-making	Participating in family decisions and discussions in a collaborative way	<p>“I think that big decisions are not the role of one person to make, so it is between me and my husband. We always discuss these matters. I mean family/household, it is not my opinion and his opinion, it is a mutual/joint opinion” (#14, QNW)</p> <p>“I do feel empowered because in our family we don’t take decisions alone, we kind of make them together and we discuss them and we see what is best for our family and that’s what guides our decision-making process” (#23, MW)</p>
Family cohesion, complementarity, and cooperation	Family cohesion, complementarity, and cooperation	Reciprocity and complementarity based on differences in rights and duties between men and women	<p>“To empower women, it is important to create cohesion in the family which represents the whole society and by extension affects the whole country” (#4, QW)</p> <p>“I believe that within the household the roles of women and men are complementary. There are roles a woman performs and roles a man performs, and with cooperation it helps in their integration between the two of them so that the family is happy and stable and functional” (#14, QNW)</p>

2.3.3.1 Equality in Rights and Duties

According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5, gender equality and women empowerment are closely interconnected. However, there is a lack of consensus on the meaning and understanding of this relationship. Many interviewed women (38%) emphasized the importance of equality as a cornerstone of their empowerment. They defined empowerment as equal treatment without any gender-based limitations, biases, or discrimination. This includes equal access to education, employment, and the exercise of rights and responsibilities in both personal and professional life. The participants emphasized the importance of equality in creating a level playing field for women in society.

2.3.3.2 Justice

While equality was considered important by some participants, others (30%) emphasized the need for a stronger focus on justice. Equality defends equal rights and opportunities, but justice ensures impartial treatment and addresses legal aspects. Some participants believed that equality was not necessarily fair, while justice accounts for differences between men and women and recognizes women's roles as wives, mothers, and professionals. They argued that justice involves laws and regulations that ensure equal and fair opportunities for women in areas such as education, employment, promotions, salaries, and activities such as driving and traveling. These participants believed that justice, not just equality, is necessary to ensure women's empowerment.

2.3.3.3 Consultation (*Shura*) in Decision-Making

Wood et al. (2021) emphasize the significance of considering the institutional context in which empowerment is studied, particularly in collectivist societies given that the prevalent interpretations are largely influenced by individualist cultural norms and values rooted in neoliberal traditions. Yen Ng et al. (2022) explain that in the UAE, which is a collectivist society, the empowerment of the individual also leads to the empowerment of the collective and that people seek change through consultation.

This is reflected in this study, where 60% of the interviewed women reported that major family decisions were made after consultation with their husband and other family members. These women believed that these decisions should be made collectively, not individually. Some participants felt empowered by participating in these decisions and discussions, while others preferred to consult with their husband before making a decision, even if they had the ability to act individually. Overall, most participants emphasized the importance of joint consultation and decision-making within a family.

2.3.3.4 Family Cohesion, Complementarity, and Cooperation

According to Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), individuals experience the greatest level of autonomy when they act in accordance with their deeply held values. This is echoed by the opinions of many of the women participants (52%) in this study, who emphasized the importance of family unity and the importance of having relationships between men and women that are based on cooperation and complementarity, rather than competition and power dynamics. These participants believed that gender roles should be clearly defined and respected, with differences in rights and responsibilities between men and women being reciprocal and complementary. They emphasized the need for cooperation and mutual support in relationships, rather than power struggles.

2.4 Conception of Empowerment from an Islamic Perspective

The framework of women's empowerment derived from this study may align with those used by international organizations in terms of key terms and processes (such as agency, resources, outcomes, women's rights, and equality). However, the underlying ontological and epistemological differences provide a nuanced understanding of the concept of empowerment. The Western framework is influenced by liberal values and a neoliberal ideology, whereas in Arab Gulf states, the understanding of empowerment is rooted in religion, specifically Islam, which serves as a system of reference and source of moral values. Religion is a deeply ingrained institution in human beings (as noted by Weber, 1922) and in the Arab region, it is a prevailing force, with a common adherence to Islam shaping political, cultural, and social spheres (Sholkamy, 2010). Thus, it is essential to grasp the religious subjective meaning of empowerment for individuals given the impact of religion on their worldview. Table 2.4 summarizes the themes of women's empowerment in the Islamic worldview, based on selected excerpts from participants' interviews.

2.4.1 Role of the Religion/Islam in Women Empowerment: A Barrier or a Catalyst?

Religion plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's worldview and perceptions. To understand how religion affects the empowerment of women, it is important to consider individuals' perspectives based on their religious beliefs. In this study, the majority of participants (85%) believed that religion/Islam acts as a catalyst for women's empowerment. They referred to Islamic traditions and the examples set by the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and his companions, who provided inspiration through the involvement of women in various aspects of society. The participants

Table 2.4 Islamic worldview related to women empowerment

Themes	Respondents’ quotes
Islam as a catalyst	<p>“Far from being an obstacle, I view Islam as a catalyst to women’s empowerment. In the Holy Qur’an, there is no mention of restrictions or abasement of woman. On the contrary, religion dignifies women. The first revealed verse of the Qur’an was: “Read, in the Name of your Lord Who created humans from a clinging clot” (96:1). That means that a human must be educated whether a woman or a man. Also, we see from the prophetic biography/tradition that the first wife of the Prophet <i>Muhammed Khadija</i> used to work and was a businesswoman. So, we do not see anything from the aspect of women’s oppression or that a woman is not allowed to work. Before Islam, female infanticide was a common practice, and Islam prohibited it. So, I see that anything in the Qur’an and Sunnah supports women’s empowerment” (#10, QW)</p> <p>“I see religion/Islam as a strong catalyst in the matter of empowering women. The Holy Qur’an refers to the life of Prophet <i>Mohammed</i> (peace be upon him) as a role model. There are many lessons to draw from the life of the prophet and his companions related to empowering women or motivating them to participate in the community. Men have specific roles and women as well. But, there is an intersection space. Though battlefields are the area of men, women used to participate to wars. It is reported that a woman (<i>Naseebah</i>) defended the prophet who praised her rather than blaming her for entering men’s field. <i>Khadija</i>, the prophet’s wife and the first woman in Islam was a businesswoman. Also, during the era of <i>Omar Ibn Al-Khattab</i>, he nominated a woman (<i>Shifa’a</i>) to be in charge of “Hesba” (Markets’ management/equivalent to the actual Ministry of Commerce). Also, women participated in setting a long-term strategic decision, which is the achievement of the <i>Hudaibiya</i> Peace Treaty, through <i>Umm Salamah</i>’s advice to the Prophet (pbuh)” (#11, QW)</p> <p>“I definitely see religion as a catalyst. During the time of the Prophet (pbuh), women used to go out, they used to go to the market, and engage in business, there was no problem. The Prophet pbuh used to meet the female friends of <i>Sayyida Khadija</i>, he would sit with them and talk to them, and they will exchange news together. So, religion is not an obstacle. Women were not prevented from going to the mosque and praying with men. Islam is not against women going out, it is the opposite” (#20, MNW)</p>

(continued)

Table 2.4 (continued)

Themes	Respondents' quotes
Agency and self-actualization within Islamic framework	<p>“There is nothing in Islam that stops women from doing what they want, as long as it is within what is religiously acceptable. If you have a look at the <i>Seerah</i> (the life of the prophet) for example, women had a really prominent role in society and in decision-making. In the <i>Quran</i>, there is a whole <i>Surah</i> on <i>Women</i> and another named after a woman (<i>Mariam</i>). So, I find it really hard to believe that religion hinders women’s empowerment, it rather encourages and empowers women” (I#23, MW)</p> <p>“Women were empowered in the time of the Messenger and Companions and they achieved self-actualization and reached levels where they were competing with senior scholars without having to lose their identities nor their religion” (I#12, QNW)</p>
Innate Equality/Role of viceroys	<p>“If we take for instance the biography of the Prophet (pbuh), we see that he encourages, and laid down the principles of equality between men and women. His wife <i>Sayyida Khadija</i> was a merchant, he helped her and enabled her, while she also strongly supported him. So, it is assumed that we follow our Messenger’s steps, who supported his wife in her path. So, we also must encourage men to support women’s work, whether they work in commercial activities, or in public jobs” (I#4, QW)</p> <p>“Let’s mention for example, the prophet’s companions who used to return to Aisha to seek knowledge. They did not say, we shouldn’t get the truth from a woman. She was the one who kept the secret of the Prophet and held all the information about him, and she was the one who narrated most of the biography in his house and with his family. At the end of the day, from religious perspective, there is no difference between a man and a woman in seeking knowledge” (I#7, QW)</p> <p>“Islam has never been an obstacle. If we go back to history and see the example, notably of <i>Khadija</i> and others. Islam gives equal opportunities to men and women, and if we really follow Islam, empowerment will come easily and simply” (I#15, QNW)</p> <p>“Humans’ mission on earth is to build and populate it (عمار الأرض). It’s not exclusive to males nor to females. If a woman sees that she has certain capabilities and abilities she cannot put to use except outside the house, then her place is outside her house. There are people whose abilities, their happiness, and all their gifts are given to those around them in the house and those around them. So, each woman should follow her path based on her abilities and skills to rebuild and repopulate the land” (I#16, MNW)</p>

(continued)

Table 2.4 (continued)

Themes	Respondents’ quotes
Social norms vs religious precepts	<p>“For me, religion can never be an obstacle to women’s empowerment, but the wrong comprehension of religion is what can be a barrier” (#13, QW)</p> <p>“Religion, as revealed by God Almighty, is not an obstacle. Religion, as people understand it, and apply it in our societies, might be an obstacle” (#14, QNW)</p> <p>“The problem is not the religion. But, the problem is with people and how they understand and apply religion” (#22, MNW)</p> <p>“Women’s empowerment can be restricted, not because of the religion, but due to societal customs, traditions, and society’s ideas. Sometimes, some conservative families are using customs, traditions in a way that can restrict women’s empowerment” (#17, MW)</p> <p>“In the story of <i>Umm Salamah</i>, related to her counsel to the Messenger, and <i>Aisha</i> with men coming to learn from her knowledge, there is empowerment. But we do not look at these examples. We look at reality that has been mixed up with customs and traditions with people no longer being able to differentiate between them and religion” (#12, QNW)</p>

(continued)

Table 2.4 (continued)

Themes	Respondents' quotes
<p>Concept of Quiwama Verse (Women, 3:34) Male breadwinner role/Guardianship</p>	<p>“Men’s <i>quiwama</i> is linked to spending, and this is an honor and a privilege for women, that God made men in charge of providing for them. Thus, a woman has the freedom of choice to stay home or work outside the home without the pressures that force her to accept some offers that do not respect her dignity just because she needs money to support herself and her family” (#18, MNW)</p> <p>“This verse means that the woman has the right not to work if she wants, and that the man should work and spend on the family. So, this is one of her rights, and a duty on men to spend on his family. If she wants to work, that’s her right as well. This verse is about the duties of the man towards the woman. If the woman works, her earnings are her own” (#20, MNW)</p> <p>“The interpretation of this verse is that a man should bear all family expenses and that a woman can contribute willingly without being forced to” (#21, FMW)</p> <p>“A woman helps in spending by choice, it is not compulsory for her nor a legal requirement. It is not permissible to force a woman to support in spending” (#4, FQW)</p>
<p>Concept of Quiwama Leadership role/Stewardship</p>	<p>“<i>Quiwama</i> is related to male’s responsibility to secure housing, food, and be in charge of his family. These are his basic responsibilities according to the Sharia’. The verse is also related to leadership. But it doesn’t suppress the role of women as partners. It is imperative to have one leader within a family, and the leader, God Almighty said that it is the man, and it does not say that a woman does not have a leadership role. For example, <i>Khadija</i> had a remarkable leadership role that even the Prophet, when he doubted his prophecy, she told him that God would never disgrace him, and she was the one who motivated him and stood by his side. She led the matter at some point, and the same thing about <i>Umm Salamah</i> during the Truce of <i>Hudaibiya</i>. So, the issue of leadership never contradicts the issue of partnership, it is simply an organizational matter” (#11, QW)</p> <p>“My interpretation of this verse is the role of supporter and enabler of men being a source of protection. Men and women have different physiological roles and they are complementing each other” (#2, QW)</p>

cited examples such as Khadija in business, Aisha in knowledge and education, Um-Salama in advising, Shifa in auditing and commerce, and Naseebah on the battle-field, as evidence of women enacting agency within the confines of their religious framework and worldview.¹

Many participants reported that they see religion/Islam as a motivator for promoting equality and women's rights. They don't view it as a barrier to empowerment, but rather as a driver. They cited verses from the Qur'an and sayings from Sunnah to support women's empowerment and highlighted key female role models from the time of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). These women's voices challenge the view that Muslim women need to be saved from an oppressive religion, as described by Abu-Lughod (2013). Instead, they assert their agency and self-actualization within the Islamic framework and emphasize the important role women play in society and decision-making, as demonstrated by the female companions of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh).

According to the women participants, the Sharia'a upholds their right to individual income and property and gives them the autonomy to manage their finances as they see fit. They emphasized that Islam grants women personal and financial freedom. Some participants cited the example of Khadija, the wife of the Prophet, who was a successful and respected businesswoman, and other female companions who were empowering figures and served as role models for women in the community. These women emphasized that the principles of Islam support women's financial independence and empowerment.

2.4.2 Barriers to Women Empowerment: Social Norms vs Religious Precepts

Salem and Yount (2019) call for research that distinguishes the principles of Islam from the social norms in which it is intertwined. This study meets that call by collecting the perspectives and experiences of women participants, 60% of whom reported instances of religion being misused or misunderstood to limit their freedom. The respondents emphasized the prevalence of certain ideological interpretations of

¹ *Khadija*, the first wife of the prophet (pbuh), was a successful and respectful businesswoman. *Aisha*, the prophet's wife, was an expert of interpretation and commentary due to her close association with the prophet (pbuh). She narrated 2,210 hadiths. She was well versed in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and law of inheritance. *Um-Salamah*, the prophet's wife, was a wise and educated woman. She is known for the truce of *Hudaibiya* incident when the prophet pbuh gave an order to the companions and they did not comply. So, she advised him to lead by example and that they will follow him and that what happened. *Shifa* was a literate companion and the Caliph *Omar* gave her the responsibility of running the affairs of state related to trade and commerce, and he used to consult her on political matters. *Naseebah* is reported to have participated in the battle of Uhud and shielded the prophet (pbuh) with her body. (Ghadanfar, M.H. "Great Women of Islam", Darussalam publishers, Riyadh, SA, 268p.)

religious prescriptions and the confusion between social customs, traditions, religion, and legal issues.

They emphasized that the restriction of women's freedom stems from societal norms and practices rather than religious beliefs, and that misinterpretations of religion by certain groups within society are the main problem. These women pointed out the importance of distinguishing between societal rituals and religion and noted that certain conservative groups adhere to traditional practices but that these do not necessarily reflect religious mandates. For example, the ban on women driving in some societies is a cultural practice that uses religious legitimacy, but its lift is evidence of the distinction between what is socially and what is religiously (un)acceptable.

Al-Asfour et al. (2017) also found that Islam does not represent a barrier to women's career advancement in Saudi Arabia, as participants were able to distinguish between Islamic prescriptions and socio-cultural norms and gender expectations. This study confirms that it is necessary to differentiate between religious principles and societal norms in order to have a deeper understanding of Islam and its impact on women's empowerment.

The responses of some participants in our study conveyed the core beliefs and Islamic ontology regarding the relationship with God and the creation. They referred to the ultimate human mission of populating the earth and worshiping its Creator, which involves complementary and equal roles for both genders. Several references were made to the role of Khalifa (viceroy, successive authority) on earth, which is granted to both men and women equally, and the related responsibilities that both will be held accountable for in this world and the next. The participants emphasized that seeking God's pleasure and happiness in both worlds was a key criterion and outcome of empowerment.

2.4.3 Women Empowerment and the Concept of "Quiwama"

Much of the disempowerment of women in the Arab world is still justified with religious explanations. The concept of *quiwama*² continues to cause controversy as it questions its compatibility with the Western understanding of equality. Critics argue that *quiwama* "gives men full control and support of the family in return for women's obedience" (Bouzghaia, 2014: 34) and is "seen as a justification for male authority over women in all decision-making related to the public sphere" (Metcalf, 2011: 133). Some believe that the verse (Women, 4:34) related to *quiwama*, which is

² Given the difficulty to etymologically translate the term "quiwama", we will keep it in Arabic. The word "Quawwam" has been translated by different scholars as: "guardian", "honest custodian", "responsible for protection, supervision, provision", "responsible for safety and security", "protector and maintainer", "caretaker and leader", "ruler", "governor, director and manager", "functional head", "to guard, maintain and take care in a proper and fair manner", "be in the service of". Interestingly, the same word used in another verse (An-Nisa': 135): "يَأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ" (O you who believe, Stand out firmly for justice), is commonly translated as "standing firm" or "to uphold".

wrongly interpreted as “God gave men more capabilities than women”, is presented as “a quranically justified argument against empowerment of women” (Masoud et al., 2016: 15).

To better understand this argument, we asked participants to share their own interpretations of this verse. The majority (70%) stated that the verse implies that men have a financial responsibility. They emphasized that this does not contradict gender equality, women's rights, or their ability to make decisions. Some participants noted that men's *quiwama* role is not a privilege but a responsibility and a right for women. More non-working women stressed that this responsibility comes with accountability, while working women noted that the verse does not take away women's rights but holds men financially responsible for their families.

2.4.3.1 “Male Breadwinner” Role

The concept of *quiwama* is linked to the idea of the “male breadwinner family”. This model, where the male is seen as the head of the household and primary provider for his wife and children, has been a topic of discussion in Western countries due to the growing number of women in the workforce (Janssens, 1997). Hardcore feminists have challenged this paradigm and called for an equal “female breadwinner” model. However, according to the women we interviewed, *quiwama* pertains to men's financial obligations and duties toward their family, not a privilege. In their view, it is a privilege for women, as it frees them from financial burdens and places responsibilities on men. *Quiwama* does not restrict women from working or contributing to their family expenses, but simply gives men the primary financial responsibility.

2.4.3.2 Leadership Role

Quiwama, as derived from the cited verse (Women, 4:34), is perceived by women as a responsibility for men, rather than as a means to exert authority or a privilege. It outlines the duties, responsibilities, and relationships within a family. The concept is therefore linked to leadership, partnership, and collaboration, which are essential in any organization, including the family. The majority of respondents emphasized the important role of leadership in the success of a family and noted that leadership is a responsibility, not an authority. It involves partnership, teamwork, and complementary roles between equal partners who are mutual protectors. The Prophet Mohammed's example was cited as evidence of his inclusive leadership style, in which he consulted with and included his wives in major decisions. such as the case of Umm Salama who was consulted in a critical situation (Treaty of Hudaibiya).

The findings of this research emphasize the importance of respecting Muslim women's beliefs and values in any empowerment process. Imposing Western norms on these women goes against the principles of empowering them, as highlighted by Kabeer (2012) and denounced by Abu-Lughod (2013). Mahmood (2011) showed

that women can exert agency through conformity to their beliefs, highlighting the need for empowerment processes to align with their religious and moral values. Policymakers in the Arab Gulf states should address the concerns of Muslim women by taking into account both global and local pressures and striving to empower them in a way that does not compromise their beliefs. A nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics involved in women's empowerment is crucial to achieving this goal.

2.5 Women Empowerment: An Exogenous Model

The concept of women's empowerment, as conveyed by international entities like CEDAW and its universal legal mandate for gender equality, has drawn criticism for its underlying ideology and assumptions. The idea of women's empowerment as a global solution to societal problems has been seen as a "neoliberal instrument" (Huelss, 2019) and a "capitalist venture" (Bhandar & Ferreira da Silva, 2013) that disregards local knowledge and practices (Huis et al., 2017). Abu-Lughod (2002) highlights that the discourse on equality, freedom, and rights in contemporary society resonates with the colonial and missionary rhetoric on Muslim women in the past. The rhetoric of "saving" Muslim women, driven by religion, carries a stance of superiority and is rooted in orientalist and "imperial feminist" perspectives (Kumar, 2017).

From a political standpoint, Ross (2008) argues that oil, not Islam, is the main reason for the slow progress in gender equality in the Middle East. He claims that women's disempowerment is caused by the reliance on oil rents, which has led to a concentration of male workers in the non-traded sector and heavy industry, at the expense of the export-oriented manufacturing sector, a significant employer of women. This argument, which supports a globalized capitalist economic system, puts pressure on women to leave their homes to work in factories for the sake of national development. It implies that empowering women requires investment in labor-intensive industries and creating factory jobs for women to serve the market, rather than allowing them to take care of their families or pursue their own interests. As such, the rhetoric of empowerment primarily focuses on "the economic optimization of women as a paradigm of policy development" (Huelss, 2019: 4).

Historically, with men going to the battlefields during the world wars, factories taped on women to keep them running, and to actively serve the system of production and promote consumerism. Consequently, one of the casualties of this worldview was motherhood being considered as an impediment to women's career progress and financial independence (Ghilan, 2018). Ironically, even when they reach leadership positions, women are still criticized or blamed for being mothers. Abdulkader and Muller (2020: 19) refer to one considered issue of a female leader in the UAE, being "still described as a mother who maintains her duties as a primary caregiver". Such discourse illustrates the underlying logic and value system of modern capitalism, based on individualistic and self-interest assumptions and postulates meant to be

universal and excluding the interest of others. This ideology obviously contrasts with the predominant philosophy in the Arab world where family is paramount and collectivist values are predominant. Even in that case, as mentioned by Kabeer (2001: 459), women's altruism and tendency to put the needs of others in the family before their own, is interpreted as "evidence of the internalization of their own subordinate status".

The voices of the women interviewed in this research strongly emphasize the sanctity of motherhood and the centrality of the family in their lives. Many choose to be stay-at-home mothers, while working women advocate for family-friendly policies to balance work and family and to drive positive change. The respondents uniformly view the family as the basic unit of society and their ultimate goal is to contribute to its well-being. Non-working women also saw their role as beyond the labor market and prioritized family care over work.

The women also have a clear understanding and acceptance of the concept of *quiwama*, where men support and enable women while holding financial responsibility. A recent survey of 34 countries found that men have more influence in household financial decisions, while women have more influence in child-rearing.³ Most Western countries view men as having a better life than women, while Tunisia is the only country where more people think women are better off than men.⁴ As noted by Foss et al. (2019), feminist perspectives in literature often focus on female participation in the workforce without prioritizing their well-being.

The term "empowerment" has become controversial in the region due to its association with feminism, which is viewed negatively. Participants noted that women's empowerment was a popular label in the 2000s, but has since become problematic due to the negative connotations and fear it instills in women that they must abandon their families to work. The use of foreign models of empowerment does not align with the cultural norms and traditions of the Arab world, particularly in Qatar. This has led to criticism of women seeking their rights, who are seen as a threat to socio-cultural values.

The concept of empowerment needs to be redefined and adapted to local socio-cultural norms and traditions, rather than being imposed from an external perspective. Interviewed women displayed a high level of critical consciousness and knowledge of their cultural and religious background, and emphasized the need for empowerment to be driven by institutions that account for these factors. They demand a voice in decision- and policy-making while rejecting a top-down, external approach to empowerment. The quotes summarized in Table 2.5 reflect the respondents' views of women's empowerment as an exogenous model.

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/30/worldwide-optimism-about-future-of-gender-equality-even-as-many-see-advantages-for-men/>.

⁴ https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/30/worldwide-optimism-about-future-of-gender-equality-even-as-many-see-advantages-for-men/pg_2020-04-30_global-gender-equality_0-12/.

Table 2.5 Women empowerment as an exogeneous model

Themes	Respondents' quotes
Centrality of the family	<p>“We have a role that is not limited to the labor market as a woman and a man.(...) the building of an institution [should] not contradict nor conflict with the building of the family” (I#11, QNW)</p> <p>“to empower women, it is important to create cohesion in the family which represents the whole society and by extension affects the whole country” (I#4, QW)</p>
Negative connotation of feminism	<p>“Women’s empowerment” was the top label in the 2000s. Currently, people are sensitive to this term because of the spread of a negative connotation of the concept of feminism, and out of fear that women will leave their families (reference made to some incidences)” (I#14, QNW)</p> <p>“Some groups within the society would accuse any woman asking for her rights, or writing on Twitter certain comments to be “a feminist” and encouraging moral deviance among their daughters. They link the issue of gender equality with the feminist movement, although this movement has various schools of thought” (I#9, QW)</p>
Negative perception of empowerment	<p>“First, the use of normative models of empowerment from external/ foreign societies that do not suit our society. Second, people’s negative perceptions, assumptions and fear of the word “empowerment” (I#12, QNW)</p>
Need for local adaption	<p>“The definition of empowerment and our view of empowerment I believe should be changed. First, not to give a mould/template (one size fits all). Secondly, to take into account the needs of women in society and not to say: “come I will empower you do these one two three four things so that you can be considered empowered. This is not what women need or want” (I#13, QNW)</p>

2.6 Women Empowerment: A Top-Down Approach

Governments in Arab Gulf states have prioritized women’s empowerment as part of their policy agendas and national development and adopted the Millennium Development Goals MDGs and subsequently the SDGs. Progress has been made in education and employment for women, however, this top-down approach to women’s empowerment through government policies, laws, and regulations is criticized as “State feminism” (Prager, 2020), depending exclusively on governments’ authority.

Despite this criticism, many women participants have a positive view of the government’s empowerment initiatives and praise the role of the political leadership, particularly Sheikha Moza, in promoting education and opportunities for women. The leadership is credited with raising awareness, leading progress, creating a balanced society, and implementing policies and legislation to support female empowerment.

However, the model of women’s empowerment in the Arab Gulf states has faced criticism from some female participants, who perceive it as a foreign intervention that mainly benefits the elite and has limited impact on the daily lives of ordinary women. This negative perception is also due to the association of the model with Western

ideas of equality. These criticisms are consistent with the findings of Sholkamy (2010). Interviewed women have criticized the model as being selective and elitist, neglecting their needs and catering to a specific group or society. They also feel that the rights of the general public are often overlooked in this process. Some have criticized the model as Western-oriented and exploitative, granting women titles and positions without real authority or power. The gap between rhetoric and reality, as well as the selective nature of empowering women, has also been raised as a concern. These women believe the focus on meeting external expectations and international indicators is misguided, and that the process is incompatible with local cultural norms and values.

Furthermore, participants effectively portrayed the dilemmas faced by women in balancing conflicting views on empowerment, due to a divide between conservative and progressive views on empowerment. On one hand, traditionalists are skeptical and resist change, while on the other hand, progressists advocate for Western-inspired models. This creates a struggle for women to find a middle path that accommodates both views and upholds their moral and religious principles. The importance of moderation (*Wasatiya*/Middle path) and justice as a guiding principle is emphasized, as women's empowerment must shift away from external perspectives and be re-framed with an indigenous understanding of justice, equity, and dignity. The themes covered in this discussion are summarized in Table 2.6, with quotes from interviewed women.

2.7 Conclusion: Laying the Groundwork for Further Exploration

This chapter explores the concept of women's empowerment from a first-hand perspective in the context of an Arab Gulf state, using Qatar as a case study. By adopting a combination of theoretical and empirical approaches, with a focus on the latter, the chapter aims to construct a comprehensive conceptual framework for women's empowerment. Through inductive and deductive analyses, women's empowerment is defined as "a dynamic, multi-faceted process grounded in local values, empowering women to act, and supported by the availability of resources, resulting in improved well-being and positive changes at both individual and societal levels". This definition is consistent with Kabeer's (1999) definition and widely accepted by researchers in the field of development. However, this specific conceptualization was obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a sample of women, providing a unique, empirically driven understanding of women's empowerment in the context of Qatar. Although methodologically challenging, this approach proved to be both conceptually and empirically enlightening. The rich data collected allowed for a nuanced and holistic understanding of a complex and multidimensional process and provided answers to many questions, while also raising new ones that will be addressed in subsequent chapters of this book.

Table 2.6 Women empowerment as a top-down approach

Themes	Respondents' quotes
Political Leadership/ "State feminism"	<p>"If you think about when "women's empowerment" did appear in our society, and when it did spread out, it is linked to <i>Sheikha Moza</i> when she began to appear in the media and began to positively affect society by founding Qatar Foundation, and branches of international universities. So, when decision-makers decide that they want to pave the way to empower women or change decisions, legislations, and laws (for example, allowing women to work in sectors that they desire and studying in areas they want), they just put it in a package and advertise it in a certain way, they will not face resistance from society" (I#14, QNW)</p> <p>"The government plays a positive role as a result of the leadership's awareness. But if the matter was left to the society, it would have needed a longer time to reach what the state has reached, because we are talking about a Gulf society that has a Bedouin nature and is a patriarchal/Masculine society. But the political leadership was conscious and set feminist models as a role model for Qatari women. The state really succeeded in putting women in the right place and taking on tasks and positions as they deserve" (I#18, MNW)</p> <p>"The impact of societal culture on women empowerment depends to a great extent on the level of its awareness. Unfortunately, we find that patriarchal authoritarianism is still widespread in societies in the Gulf region, notably in the Qatari society. Here was the awareness of the Qatari leadership to create a balanced society in which women fulfil their role alongside men" (I#23, MNW)</p>
Elitist and Selective process	<p>"Although empowerment exists, people and society do not believe in the model because they cannot project it onto their lives as if it were something for a particular group of society or an elite" (I#15, QNW)</p> <p>"The government is projecting some personalities and figures on the grounds as an illustration of empowerment. It is a certain elite that is being showcased. But the rights of the general public are disregarded in some aspects" (I#9, QW)</p>
Western model/ Policy emulation	<p>"Unfortunately, the empowerment that they are now trying to implement is not compatible with our society. It is a Western image of empowerment that policy-makers are trying to copy-paste" (I#19, QW)</p> <p>"When we do not observe society's cultures and particularities and the individuals' desires and aspirations, we have failed in empowerment and all what we did is copy-paste from different contexts. We have a large percentage of women employed but in terms of indicators, it is very low. For me, it is not equality nor justice" (I#13, QNW)</p>

(continued)

Table 2.6 (continued)

Themes	Respondents' quotes
Gap between rhetoric and actualization	<p>“There is a lot of discussion regarding women's empowerment, but it is frankly just a talk and a very selective marketing and commercial speech. A certain category of people projects this image of women's empowerment as part of the agenda that as a society there is women empowerment. But, in fact for women who are working on the ground in various fields, there is no actual empowerment” (I#6, QW)</p> <p>“Based on the media and different agendas, empowerment is being actualized for let us say people who want to achieve it for the purpose of marking points and ticking boxes. But, in terms of women being comfortable in society and achieving the goals they are pursuing in their lives, then I do not see this empowerment happening” (I#16, QNW)</p>
Need for a middle path (wasatiya)	<p>“There are two extremes, conservative/traditional people who are afraid of any change and anything new, and progressist/liberal people who have brought Western ideas and ideals to implement without any considerations of them being suitable to the nature of our societies and women's lives. So, there is a push and a pull between these forces and women are caught in the middle” (I#12, QNW)</p>

The voices of the women who participated in the research were remarkable for their maturity and critical consciousness. Their introspective views and insightful reflections contributed to the formation of a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of empowerment. The participants were able to effectively identify various components and aspects of empowerment through their spontaneous and interactive discussions, demonstrating their self-expression skills and intuitive understanding of a concept often considered vague and ambiguous in the literature (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). This approach supports Perkins' (2010) argument that qualitative knowledge about empowerment can enhance the practical and conceptual relevance of the field. The use of deep semi-structured interviews in this research proved to be a valuable and instructive approach, allowing us to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of empowerment. The insights gathered through this process helped to unravel the multiple dimensions of empowerment, clarify its various components, and provide a clearer, holistic view and a contextually informed framework.

Moreover, this research sheds light on the impact of worldview on the understanding of empowerment among women in a Muslim Arab Gulf state. The voices of interviewed women highlight common terms and dimensions related to empowerment, such as agency, decision-making, freedom, rights, equality, and change. However, these concepts must be contextualized within the local socio-cultural and religious framework. It is crucial to acknowledge the differences between Western secular and religious perspectives on women's empowerment. Women in this Arab Gulf state associate empowerment with the capacity to make decisions, impact society positively, and achieve happiness, while balancing both the worldly life and spiritual well-being, with access to the necessary resources. Empowerment should not be imposed by external organizations or governments, but rather involve active

participation in decision-making and freedom of choice, including the choice to work and determine life priorities.

To conclude, empowering women in the Arab Gulf states is a complex issue that requires a nuanced and culturally sensitive approach. The government must work hand in hand with women and civil society to ensure that empowerment initiatives are inclusive, culturally relevant, and effective in meeting the diverse needs of all women in the society. Hence, this research suggests several policy implications based on its findings and analysis. These include redefining the concept of empowerment to align with local norms and traditions, empowering women through institutions and decision-making, implementing family-friendly policies to balance work and family, rejecting neoliberal and imperial feminist perspectives, embracing cultural norms and traditions, focusing on well-being, prioritizing local knowledge and practices, re-evaluating top-down approaches, bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality, and balancing conflicting views to redefine women's empowerment according to indigenous principles of justice, equity, and dignity.

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Chapter 3

Re-envisioning Women’s Empowerment: A Maqasid Approach to Understanding Women’s Status and Rights in Islam



Basma I. Abdelgafar

Abstract Like other human rights treatises, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has elicited moral-religious responses from both state and non-state actors, especially in predominantly Muslim societies. The reactions are divided, with supporters and opponents using selective traditional arguments. This paper suggests that the Islamic response lacks a comprehensive approach and is fragmented, relying on partialistic views of the Shariah and offers to adopt a new maqasid methodology (NMM) to examine the status and rights of women in Islam. The paper challenges the focus on inequality as the main cause of injustice and argues that empowering women involves recognizing their relationship with their Creator as well as their relationships to their own selves, other individuals and groups, and all other creatures. The dominance of two policy positions (full acceptance or acceptance with reservations) that assume or neglect these deeper issues is inadequate and does not reflect the potential of an Islamic perspective. The Islamic perspective has yet to be fully explored and cannot endorse positions that view women in conflict with men or that are based on false premises.

Keywords Women empowerment · Islamic perspective · *Sharī’ah* · *Fiqh* · CEDAW · New *maqasid* methodology · Equality · Policy · Governance

3.1 Introduction

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) prompts religious-moral arguments, despite being rarely used to influence public policy in other areas. This creates a space for dialogue, but a genuine Islamic response has been lacking. States and non-state actors use traditional *fiqh* (jurisprudence)—incorrectly referred to as the Shariah—to either accept or reject the treaty. However, this approach neglects the purposeful, connected, and holistic nature of

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Revelation including its sensitivity to diverse contexts and its guidance pertaining to the advancement of women's interests in today's world.

The author aims to come to a view on the correct approach to women's position and rights in Islam, upon which policy can then be formulated, using the new maqasid methodology (NMM).¹ This chapter argues for a specific answer to that question and sets out tentative conclusions. The religious-moral question of women's treatment cannot be subject to political calculations and historical compromises with traditional religious bodies. A genuine Islamic response is both practical and future-oriented, committed to rectifying women's rights, which may or may not involve ratification and implementation of CEDAW, while working toward a future that may render the treaty obsolete.

The paper proposes a transcendent and holistic alternative to the current policy paradigm, calling for fundamental changes in the approach to women's rights, both for those referencing Islam and for those who seek to understand and respect the views of a significant portion of women, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The assessment and response to CEDAW must take into account major governance questions, including market organization, while recognizing the treaty's potential short-term usefulness. Within the Islamic policy paradigm, women's rights, and human rights more broadly, are not considered purely objective rights that are commanded in a clearly articulated text nor are they subjective rights to be determined and applied by society or even those who are entitled to benefit from them. Instead, such rights are framed within a paradigm that is both fixed and dynamic. The fixed dimension ensures the continuation of a moral and material order that is needed for people and the planet to flourish while the dynamic dimension continually exhorts individuals and groups to respond to context in ways that address emerging challenges and improve the human condition. It is in this latter dimension that the CEDAW may offer temporary relief given the immediate realities with which women must cope. The paper ends with a discussion of policy progress and lessons for maqasidi scholars and practitioners.

3.2 CEDAW: History, Ratifications, and Reservations

The CEDAW is often claimed to be the most far reaching global instrument for addressing the "gender gap" and thereby achieving women's rights and empowerment. Adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, the treaty is based on the work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) whose aim is to ensure that the principle of equality between men and women is implemented. The CEDAW effectively represents the CSW's effort to combine the rights that had been previously elaborated in the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957), the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1962), the

¹ A brief account of the New Maqasid Methodology will be discussed later.

Recommendation on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1965) and the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1967). Through laborious efforts during the 1970s, the latter declaration would be transformed into the binding instrument that we know today as CEDAW. Its main idea was to surpass the general human rights regime that had not served women well. By 2022, 189 states had ratified or acceded to CEDAW.

The sheer number of state memberships is testament to the inbuilt flexibility of the treaty. In recognition of the legal, political, and cultural challenges that may compromise States parties' participation and adoption of CEDAW, the international treaty system permits such parties to enter a unilateral statement or reservation that excludes or amends certain provisions. A reservation by a state party is permitted by Article 19 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties at the time of ratification or accession when the state party wishes to "exclude or to modify the legal effect of certain provisions of the treaty in their application to that State". This allowance, however, is not intended to nullify the basic aim of a treaty but rather to allow states a certain measure of flexibility due to diverse contexts that may ease accession and subsequent compliance. Thus, a reservation is not permitted if it is "incompatible with the object and purpose of the treaty". CEDAW reinforces this prohibition in Article 28(2) that states: "A reservation incompatible with the object and purpose of the present Convention shall not be permitted". In response to reservations, other member states may submit objections if in their view the reservation is incompatible with the object and purpose of the treaty (Article 20–23, Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties). Generally, the resort to reservations is highly discouraged by supporters of the international human rights regime in order to avoid a watering down or complete abrogation of certain fundamental rights (Beijing Declaration & Platform for Action, 1995, para. 218). When reservations are unavoidable, the CEDAW Committee recommends that they be kept to a minimum, that they are well defined, and that they do not dilute or negate the object or purpose of the treaty (Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1994, paras. 3–7).

CEDAW requires States parties to submit a report to the Secretary-General on the legislative, judicial, administrative, or other measures that they have adopted to comply with the Convention within a year of accession and subsequently every four years or at the request of CEDAW. The CEDAW Committee then examines and questions the reports with the aim of providing comments and recommendations to support compliance with the Convention. Although critiques are divided on the value of ratification given the entry of reservations, many still highlight the importance of *dialogue* on key challenges when States parties are willing to engage (Freeman, 2009). Entering reservations based on Shariah incompatibility, the main concern of this chapter, is a legal action even if it is not accurate or genuine. In fact, CEDAW is the most extensively reserved human rights agreement on religious grounds (Raday, 2012, p. 516).

Although all Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region states have ratified the CEDAW, both the extent and nature of reservations have led many observers to question the potential of the treaty's efficacy in protecting women's rights. Disagreement continues regarding all or parts of Article 2 (obligation to change constitutions

and laws), Article 5 (elimination of discriminatory customs, practices, and family obligations); Article 7 (participation in political and public life); Article 9 (nationality); Article 15 (legal capacity, property, movement, living arrangements); Article 16 (equality in marriage and family); and Article 29 (negotiation and arbitration). While some countries provided no justifications at all, others base their reservations or declarations on conflict with national legislation and constitutions and/or incompatibility with the Islamic Shariah. Those who contest based on reference to the Shariah argue that implementation of CEDAW's provisions on marriage and family would compromise basic Islamic values and injunctions.

3.3 The Limits of Interventions Based on Traditionalist Arguments

3.3.1 *Shariah Versus Fiqh*

Reference to the Shariah is essentially reference to some body of *fiqh* or jurisprudence and at the state level this is usually limited to one of the major schools of law including Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali, Zaidi, Jafari, and Zahiri, among others. Before proceeding then, it is important to correct the inaccurate conflation of Shariah with *fiqh*. The Shariah is the ordinance or higher law established by God and conveyed by means of the Revelation, which encompasses the Quran and authentic Sunnah; it represents the righteous path derived from the Revelation, whether pursued by individuals or nations, given the incalculable parameters of life at any given moment. The Shariah can only be understood through a thorough investigation of the truths that God has revealed in written and non-written forms. The productions of this process nevertheless can only ever constitute *fiqh*, literally meaning an understanding, not the Shariah itself whose laws are unchanging and to which the potential application of intellectual effort is infinite.

3.3.2 *Fiqh and State Policy*

Reference to the Shariah especially as it pertains to women in modern state policies has a complex and disappointing history. Although the politicization of the Shariah can be traced back to the introduction of dynastic rule in Islam, it is the colonial era that created a crucible of policy inputs that would shape the lives of Muslim women until today. Indeed, as Sonbol (2009) argues, the personal status laws which encompass marriage, divorce, guardianship, custody, inheritance, and adoption, "are a combination (*talfiq*) of *fiqh* rules, traditions (*urf*), and nineteenth century philosophy toward gender relations" (p.180). This philosophy was reflective of Victorian values and European laws that spread through European conquest, particularly

England and France. In many areas of the Muslim world, colonial rule enforced a preference for male dominance in family matters including primogeniture models of inheritance that negated female shares mandated by Islam, while also tolerating domestic abuse (Ha-Redeye, 2009). This is not to say that the selective retention of *fiqhi* opinions in marriage, divorce, and family balanced colonial interventions, to the contrary, it tended to reinforce its negative implications for women.

According to Ha-Redeye (2009), “the enormous breadth of shari’ah has been neglected since the time of colonialism, when many Muslim regions regressed in the area of gender equity by adopting European paternalistic norms” (p. 29). Those aspects of traditionalism that were retained were not reflective of the flexibilities that were exercised before colonialism (Sonbol, 2009). The rigidity that emerged in terms of subordinating the life and rights of women in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres is the result of a confluence of factors, including foreign intervention; political, and largely authoritarian, compromises with a dominant and vocal brand of traditionalism; and the acquiescence of women through coercion and/or complicity.

Similarly, today’s governments of predominantly Muslim societies often resort to traditional *fiqh* in order to reject or limit women’s rights. Those holding reservations to CEDAW choose *fiqhi* positions that demonstrate incompatibility with the treaty and only ratified the treaty with the guarantee of this prerogative. Yet, the fact that “no two states dispute the same sections of CEDAW in the same way or for the same reasons, ... firmly disproves the existence of a universal form of Islamic law that can be interpreted in only one way” (Dissanayake, 2011, p.12). This reflects the fact that the choice of edicts and associated legal theories reinforced through state policy is a discretionary matter. *Fiqhi* opinions, especially in the past, were considered of equal validity and hence the choice of opinion tended to be based on contextual factors. This complex and rich legacy has the potential to admit a diversity of perspectives. Not surprisingly, but perhaps to the confusion of many, some CEDAW supporters also draw on traditional *fiqh* and other aspects of Muslim history to demonstrate Islam’s compatibility with the treaty. As Mir-Hosseini (2009) observes, those who argue for or against CEDAW, “can and do provide textual support for their arguments, though commonly taking it out of context in both cases” (p. 28).

Resorting to traditional *fiqh* has the potential to sway public opinion because of its continued influence on scholars and lay people. Moosa (2017) argues that it is common for Muslims to “feel so beholden to these ancient [*fiqh*] books that they cannot move beyond those contributions to fresher understandings of what tradition, in the present, ought to look like” (p. 6). Yet the scholars of the past who interpreted religious texts never claimed that they offered the only or best perspective, but rather only one alternative that was certainly open to change and questioning. Those who reject CEDAW based on tradition tend to neglect the very real challenges that women face on a daily basis given contemporary contexts while those who support it offer little in the way of serious critique of the *real* sources of such challenges. Both do not consider the actual breadth of the Shariah and thus engage in the discourse on women within the narrow confines set by global counterparts. Relatedly, few consider the necessity of rethinking fundamental questions—not about women in isolation but about the world within which women are struggling to survive and flourish.

3.4 The Problematic Status of the Global Discourse on Women

CEDAW is premised on the idea that the root cause of injustice in the lives of women stems from systematic discrimination “which keeps them subordinated to the ‘tyranny’ of men, an oppression made possible by an order of society sanctioning male domination and qualified as ‘patriarchal’” (Abul-Fadl, 1993, p.29). Accordingly, the treaty’s primary aim is to achieve de jure and de facto equality with men through the imposition of obligations on States parties. Despite this narrow focus, the treaty is presented as comprehensive and encompassing of women’s lives in politics, economics, education, health, personal affairs, and security leading many to uncritically accept the CEDAW as the “yardstick to appraise all sorts of discrimination against women on the basis of gender” (Cheema et al., 2020, p. 166). This view is not defensible from an Islamic perspective. For my own part, I simply do not know whether to accept that the CEDAW has value in the current global context, whether it is accepted fully or partially. Other things being equal, it is a worse world especially for women if they are discriminated against, but this could be explained by many more diverse and complex factors. Ultimately, CEDAW emanates from and responds to the broader policy paradigm of which it is part. Ideas related to how public concerns can be addressed spring from the possibilities that such paradigms offer. If we are genuinely interested in the position and rights of women, then the orientation and assumptions of the neoliberal paradigm that currently shapes policy at the global level, including the human rights regime must not only be made explicit, but it must also be seriously questioned.

3.4.1 *The Challenge of Neoliberalism*

The first principles of neoliberalism are not something that we revisit every time we deal with a policy issue and in fact tend to be taken for granted by many of those involved in the global debate. This may be acceptable for those actors sharing similar beliefs and background assumptions because it shapes the nature and limits of what they not only think is achievable but even more what is desirable. In light of this, CEDAW is not only a product of neoliberalism, it also actively promotes its tenets. In this paradigm, women, like men, are defined as individual consumers who exercise likes and dislikes through market behavior and whose ultimate state of felicity is found in independence and freedom that is most fulfillable in the context of *free* markets. **Unbridled market competition is considered the best system for reward and punishment shifting the natural place of men and women from family and community to the labor force.** Limiting freedom in any way distorts market outcomes. Thus, neoliberalism is a global ideology that denies social equity manifested in safety nets, poverty alleviation, employment programs, labor rights,

and wealth redistribution from rich to poor. This is perhaps why some critics mistakenly believe that CEDAW counters the violence of neoliberalism. According to Raday (2012), “the substantive equality provisions of CEDAW provide theoretical and normative tools to contend with the growing challenges ... of neoliberal exploitation of women” (p. 512). By focalizing discourse and efforts almost exclusively on women as opposed to the importance of mutual relationships between men and women including the *duties and responsibilities of both toward each other, in cooperative and mutually supportive cultures*, however, CEDAW serves to reinforce systems of female oppression and isolation.

Although quite tragic, the findings of the most recent study by UNODC and UN Women that more than five girls or women were killed by a family member every hour in 2021 are not surprising. The report showed that 56% of all girls and women are killed by “intimate partners” or other family members in comparison to 11% for boys and men in the same sphere. According to UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous, “behind every femicide statistic is the story of an *individual* [emphasis added] woman or girl who has been failed” (UN Women, 2022). Actually, there is a story of a family, a community, and a social system that has failed by conditioning its males (and females) to abdicate not only their duties toward women, but the very basis of human relations, namely, mercy, as will be discussed later. The assertion by UNODC Executive Director Ghada Waly that “no woman or girl should fear for her life because of *who she is* [emphasis added]” (UN Women, 2022) only feeds into the individualist, isolated and socially fragmented paradigm of neoliberalism. No woman or girl should fear for her life because of her familial/communal relationships and especially who her male relatives are. Such fear cannot be framed in the context of a false independence but rather that of unavoidable and existential intra and interdependencies. The fact of who she is and who those around her are only reinforces this perspective. Resorting to criminal justice and public policy will not be sufficient in a world where these measures deny or neglect fundamental questions about women's welfare within the context not only of the communities in which they live, but also the nature of their creation and essential needs. A closer look at CEDAW's positions on key issues further reveals the problematic status of the global discourse on women.

Consider the example of substantive equality given in a video presented by IWRAP Asia Pacific, UN Women Fund for Gender Equality, and the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (now Global Affairs Canada). In the video we are presented with the following scenario: A factory allows men and women to take night shifts but the factory is not well lit and this can lead to assaults, which may discourage women from doing night shifts. In the *protectionist approach*, we are told, women are considered vulnerable and so they would be prohibited from participation in certain activities. To protect women from assault, the company would not hire them for the night shift. This does not address the problem, the narrative continues, and denies women a source of income. In the *corrective approach* emphasized by the proponents of substantive equality, the environment ought to be fixed to help men and women equally. In this case, the factory could install more lights and

provide transportation for women in order to “create a safe and enabling environment” for them to work night shifts (CEDAW, 2014). Revealingly, there is no questioning of why women have to work night shifts and how this affects their personal well-being. The only objective is to facilitate work throughout the night providing a source of income but more likely a source of profits for the factory owner and its shareholders. There is no challenge to the actual conditions that compel women to leave their homes and families, abandoning their need for rest and the reassurance of the well-being of those they leave behind every night as they struggle to survive.

Another stark, and perhaps more insidious example, is CEDAW’s requirement that its understanding of women’s equality override traditionalist culture and what it deems as religious discriminatory norms. In effect, the treaty usurps the right of women to choose when such choice betrays its neoliberal value system. Thus, while it works hard to pressure governments to outlaw practices it considers injurious to women like polygamy, it not only refrains from demanding an end to prostitution or “sex work”, it also insists that governments ensure suitable environments for the *trade*. Thus, *CEDAW: The Smart Sex Workers Guide to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* which “advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination and self-determination for sex workers” (GNSWP, 2018, p. 2) is considered a tool in actualizing human rights in the lives of women. Yet, such actualization and self-determination in a legal marital relationship that has as its foundation, at the very least, protection from this world of licentiousness and prostitution is rejected as a *bona fide* choice that women might actually choose to make.

3.4.2 *Revisiting First Principles*

A return to first principles demonstrates that this is nothing more than an imposition of a cultural orientation that best serves the neoliberal system and highlights the transcendental void that has characterized policy paradigms in the post-Reformation and Enlightenment period. Injustice cannot be perceived as lack of access to oppressive, corrupt, and unjust *opportunities*. As poignantly observed by the late Mona Abul-Fadl (1993), “rarely, has it been thought that in taking the laws and mores in their hands and legislating for themselves in the light of a world reconstructed along the lines of a much vaunted but steadily blurring feminist consciousness, women might instead quite unwittingly be contributing to their own afflictions” (p. 36). Using a *tawhidi* episteme, she argued that while injustice can be met with the concept of *zulm* in Islam, such a conception neither carries the same intent as its secular counterpart nor is it confined to the same parameters. In particular, *zulm* encompasses self-inflicted injustice or *zulm-al-nafs*.

Consequently, the fundamental questions that concern us in the above-mentioned scenarios are not about uncritically creating safe and enabling environments in the labor force but rather why women are placed in iniquitous positions in the first place. What real economic and social forces drive them to compromise their dignity, health,

family, and homes to earn “extra” income? For whom is this environment ultimately being created and what shares do they have in the potential benefits that result? Why would we strive to recognize differences among men and women but then place women in the exact same situation that these differences are intended to alter? What “playing field” is being leveled and who are the hidden stakeholders? Why are we shifting obligations and duties toward women from their immediate environments to ambiguous and unpredictable actors? Who is deciding that man-made laws in this regard are preferable to those sourced from Revelation? These questions are at the very heart of a genuine discourse on the position and rights of women—even if they are beyond our immediate scope.

3.5 The Shariah and Policy Debates: The Equality Conundrum

When first principles are revisited, as they must in a treaty that has existential implications, it becomes manifestly clear that the nature of injustice suffered by women is not primarily on account of their lack of equality with men, which without a judgment of value is not possible under any circumstances. Rather, equality becomes the illusion, the disguise of much deeper social ills that are more intractable but patently obvious in terms of their impact on the position and rights of women. Equality is perhaps one of the most contentious issues in the debates surrounding CEDAW. The notion that the injustices suffered by women are on account of their inequality with men is pivotal for proponents of the treaty, including Islamic scholars, and those arguing for human rights more broadly. In fact, equality has come to be seen as a defining feature of justice.

In contrast, and despite such efforts, many Islamic (predominantly male) scholars contend that equality is not possible between men and women. This is evident, they argue, from women's subordinate position to men in the Quran and *hadith* and it is further evidenced by the volumes of traditionalist literature on the subject. These scholars believe, whether explicitly or tacitly that Revelation is directed at them, and that only they have the capacity to properly understand it and consequently to direct women's lives. This position, no matter how much history and scholarship are marshalled to support it, is just as fallacious as that of the first camp that insists that equality is intrinsic to Islamic justice.

3.5.1 *Quranic Position on Equality*

The Quran does not take an unequivocal position on equality, except to negate its possibility. Inequality is not only a condition that characterizes differences between and among men and women, but also a universal law that is manifest in all creation. As

a universal law, inequality has *sultan* or is an authoritative truth that has purpose. The key then is to understand why and in turn to address reality, not to negate a universal law and then strive with futility to change it. A major response to the question of *why inequality* can be found in three other universal laws, including (1) the necessity of balance; (2) the mutual benefit and inter-dependence of all created matter; and (3) the measure of worth of all creation in relation to its responsiveness, whether voluntarily or by decree, to its Creator and not in relation to the mutual equivalence of any of its dimensions. Inequality is neither negative nor discriminatory in the divine scheme. In its infinite manifestations, it is a mercy that allows creation to exist in synergy. How then can we understand human relations if not through a certainty of equality?

The Quran tells us that it is not certainty of equality that ought to shape human relations but rather ignorance of worth. It states:

Oh you who believe, let not one people belittle another people, perhaps they may be better than them or women toward women, that perhaps they are better than them. And do not insult one another and do not offend each other with labels. Horrible is the designation of immorality after belief, and whoever does not repent then they are the unjust.

Oh you who believe, avoid most assumption, truly some of it is sin. And do not spy and do not backbite each other. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it. And heed Allah, indeed, Allah is accepting of repentance and giver of mercy.

Oh you people, truly We created you from male and female and made you ethnicities and tribes to know one another. Indeed, the most dignified of you with Allah is the most heedful. Indeed, Allah is Knowing, Proficient. (Al-Hujuraat 49:11–13)

Explaining these verses requires much more detail than we can afford in this paper, though we can highlight some important implications. First, equality is neither pre-ordained nor is it the foundation for action. Rather, it is the lack of knowledge of a person's or group's worth in the eyes of God that ought to motivate the believer in their worldly dealings. There is no distinction between men and women in this regard as divine worth is not something revealed to us in this life except as the Quran has expressed. To bolster the emphasis on our **ignorance of worth**, we are told to avoid assumptions about each other and not to pursue acts that would in any way compromise **mutual respect** or at the very least, neutrality. We ultimately emanate from the same source of male and female. Our differences or inequalities are not a source of discrimination but rather an invitation to knowledge and exchange. This is binding on men, women, communities, and on our relationships with other creatures.

3.5.2 Ignorance of Worth and Human Dignity

Because our primary relationship and worth are with God, it follows that the most dignified in the sight of God are the most heedful or those who are most responsive to divine imperatives. Dignity (*karama*) and heedfulness (*taqwa*) are inseparable. When the Quran states: “*And Indeed, We have dignified the children of Adam and carried them in the land and the sea; and granted them from all that is good and fair; and favoured them over much of what We created with notable favour*” (Al Isra’

17:70), it is drawing attention to the priority and necessity of human dignity. The fourfold favor that is unraveled in this verse sums up the elements that are required for the attainment of human dignity and hence welfare. These elements ought to be the foundations of a robust policy paradigm. The grant of dignity emanates from the provision of a moral code that individuals and communities are exhorted to recognize in order to flourish in harmony with, not subjugation of, one another and other living things. The code is required to benefit from the opportunities for livelihood that God has provided in land and sea and to mitigate corruption that will inevitably arise. The moral order is also necessary to recognize that it is God who has given humanity all that is good and wholesome with no one being deprived except to the extent that this order is betrayed. Upholding this order, however, does not grant humans definite superiority since we are only preferred above much, not all, of creation. This qualification is intended to instill a sense of humility and again, widen the scope of our ignorance of worth to promote the guardianship of all life.

The duties and responsibilities of men and women are therefore not framed in terms of equality because they are not intended to achieve equality among each other, but rather to achieve heedfulness or obedience toward God and in turn mutual provision of dignity. We are, as believers, in our moral-religious conviction servants of God (*'abad Allah*) irrespective of our divinely determined sex. The latter being one among many factors that are reflective of the purposefulness of everything in nature. Men and women are expected to contribute to a moral and material order where they dignify each other through divine guidance. *"Blessed is He in whose hand is the dominion and He is over all things capable; Who created death and life to try you as to who is the best in works and He is the Endearing, the Forgiving"* (*Al-Mulk 67:2*). The guidance is from God and the accountability is ultimately to Him.

By shifting the source and motivation of human relationships to God irrespective of worldly manifestations, the Quran assures women (and men) of their unique purposefulness, their connectivity and the ultimate wholeness which emerges on account of their choices. The exchange of mutual obligations in this worldview is not discriminatory, rather it is part of a balanced and immutable moral order that ensures human flourishing. Although it is possible to imagine a world with well-defined and implementable substantive equality measures that "empower" women to do exactly what men do, the question would still remain whether this was preferable, even correct, in the religious-moral sense. In essence, we can envision many substantive equality policies that yield important benefits in today's world, yet is this fragmented and competitive view of humans with each other and humans with nature accurate, however much that would "empower" women? Even if equality of women and men, as conceived in mainstream discourse, could be achieved, this does not settle the question of whether it is the best path for women, humanity, and collective flourishing. Conversely, if it can be demonstrated that the secular conception of equality is not intrinsic to conceptions of justice in the divine scheme of earthly life, then pursuing this path is not only socially problematic, but also wrong in the religious-moral sense.

3.6 Maqasid as an Alternative: An Ecology of Compassion

We need to examine the position and rights of women, not from the vantage of a grievance or ideologically constricted approach, but rather from the perspective of a divinely inspired order that is based on the purposefulness, connectivity, and holism of all created matter. Within this approach women must be recognized as autonomous agents and subjects of the Revelation who are critical participants in the regeneration of life, not only as mothers, but as the many diverse manifestations they express throughout life transitions. The new maqasid methodology (NMM) focalizes Revelation, comprised of the Quran and Sunnah (traditions of Prophet Muhammad), guiding our study of these texts in such a way that emphasizes these and other universal truths. According to Jasser Auda, a leading authority in maqasid studies and principal theoretician of the NMM, “the Maqasid Methodology allows us to re-orient our awareness of reality as follows: (1) to situate Islam as the gage of advancement or regression in human history, (2) to perceive complexity of the current reality accurately, and (3) to unravel divine criteria necessary for future visioning” (Auda, 2021, p.85). The NMM entails the construction of composite frameworks that examine key concepts, objectives, values, rules, universal laws, parties, and proofs (COVRUPP) that are expressed throughout the texts concerning a specific subject, theme, or phenomenon. Essentially, these elements combine in dynamic and connected patterns or webs to express revelational meanings that are intended to guide real world experience. In conformance with its revelational source, the NMM is not intended to catalyze an all-out break with reality. Where it can, it will reinforce positive and beneficial aspects of contemporary life. But it will also, unapologetically, aim to prohibit and reform harmful impulses, whatever cloak of civility neoliberalism may have obscured them in.

In the Quran and Sunnah, women are neither defined nor constrained by their biological nature nor are they cast out as market actors or commodities. The Revelation is, in fact, reflective of the complexity of the lives of women. From the orphan girl to the head of empire, the lives of women are portrayed in a magnificent array of roles. They are contextualized within intricate relationships demonstrating purpose and connection that give rise to holistic meanings which ultimately shape communal life and history. This presentation *of* women, however, must not obscure the Revelation’s, and in particular the Quran’s, presentation *for* women. Both the narratives about women in the Quran and the webs of meaning relating to the position and rights of women in the divine scheme based on detailed analysis of COVRUPP are intended for women as active participants and women as subjects, just as it deals with men and other social groups. Even in its presentation of women as subjects, the texts do not command passivity but rather serve to inform women of the obligations that have been placed on men to assure them of their position and rights with God and to empower them to demand such rights. In other words, the Quran calls them to witness and then to actively guard their status and rights.

3.6.1 Purpose

Thus, the *first source of a woman's empowerment* is her relationship with God and her knowledge of the moral and material order, both its fixed and dynamic aspects, that He has put in place for the achievement of her dignity. The Revelation explicitly and intentionally positions women in direct communication with God. In this two-way communication process, the Quran gives a woman the choice and guidance to position her life's purpose in relation to her Creator and then to vigorously pursue the paths that best meet her needs and aspirations through her knowledge of the divine order. This is a relationship with oneself as much as it is with God and His creation. Every example of heedful women in the Quran from before Prophet Muhammad up to the Revelation he received, demonstrates how women, whose lives ranged from ordinary to extra-ordinary, utilized this confidence in their direct relationship with God to navigate personal and public challenges. The exposition of intervening factors like circumstances of birth, social context, or conditions and events associated with connections like family, community (friends and neighbors), and government (society, market, and state) serve to show women, and others, how empowering her primary relationship with God is intended to be. Her purpose, and the purposeful paths she chooses, are necessarily bound by these connections and circumstances for better or worse but are not necessarily determined by them.

3.6.2 Connection

The second source of a woman's empowerment is the understanding of her position among and relationship to close connections including both men and women and the diverse institutions in which all take part. Well before the expression of her needs and possibly extension of her hand to the state—an impersonal, unpredictable, and politically motivated institution—a woman is owed, just as she owes, care by her immediate relatives. Beyond her exclusively dependent connection with God, she is empowered by intra-dependent connections with believers. The dominant and misguided assumption that the connection of women to men is one of servitude in exchange for in-kind and financial support is the wrong interpretation of Quranic guidance and is not reflective of Quranic narratives or of the life of Prophet Muhammad. The lives of the women in the Quran are characterized by sanctity, autonomy, liberty, capacity to command good and prohibit evil, to flourish and support the flourishing of others, and the possession of dignity. The idea of “freedom from”, *muharah* in Arabic, actually occurs once in the Quran in the context of Maryam's birth and life (*Al-Imran* 3:35). Even with the acknowledgment, though not in any derogatory sense, by her mother that females are *not* like males, our first and only encounter of genuine liberation is experienced in the life of a girl. What did this liberation entail? First, a beautiful acceptance by God with all of His blessings. Second, the provision of a healthy and contented upbringing that is expressed in terms of the propagation of a plant. Third,

facilitation of care and protection by a capable male relative expressed in the word *kafalah* and entailing the provision of all needs. Indeed, there was a competition among the males of the family regarding who would make such a provision for this young girl. In the Quran, the provider of such comforts is not superior or authoritarian. Rather, the undertaking is depicted as a privilege that brings the caregiver and care receiver closer to God. Finally, her liberty would not have been complete without the opportunity to self-actualize through unobstructed developmental paths. Indeed, Maryam would go on to live a life free from all matters that hindered her divinely chosen path.

This is the fundamental essence of an intra-dependency based on heedfulness or *taqwa*. The *qiwama* or reinforcement of women by men that is mentioned in the Quran can only be understood in this light as it is qualified by “with what Allah has favoured some over others and with what they spend of their wealth” (*An-Nisaa* 4:34). This expresses the divine command that men are to respond with what women actually need, not just material supports. The idea is for men to give of that which they have been granted in abundance whether in relation to other men or in relation to women as a reinforcement of women in their individual aspirations and paths toward God. This is not limited to personal and family matters but extends to all domains that women can and wish to contribute. Nor does it preclude an order where women are righteous, devout, and guarding what is manifest and hidden as God commands, but it demonstrates that the reinforcement of women morally, intellectually, spiritually, and materially, are divinely ordained commands that contribute to this order. It is as such that the Quran explains how believers, men and women, are literally members one of another, *ba’dukum min ba’d* (*Al-Imran* 3: 195, *An-Nisaa* 4:25) and in another instance guardians of one another, *ba’duhum awliya’ ba’d* (*At-Tauba* 9:71). On a personal level, this dual relationship is described in terms of unity in creation where partners/spouses are literally of each other and are a *locus* of dwelling in security where friendship and mercy have been placed by God (*Ar-Rum* 30:21), and further, each is garment for the other (*Al-Baqara* 2:187). On the level of humanity, the Quran states that men and women were created from one being or *nafs* that comprehensively expresses the moral and material imperative of mercy (*An-Nisaa* 4:1). This *intra*-dependence gives its hue to the designation of women in the Quran as wives, daughters, aunts, sisters, etc., of men; not as competitive and conflictual counterparts or subservient recipients but as right-holders and full-fledged agents, themselves, entrusted with God’s command and the governance of worldly affairs.

3.6.3 *Holism*

Holism, thus, completes the foundational triangle of the NMM of purpose and connection, by situating women, as it does all other creation, in this complex web of life. This is *the third, and final, source of empowerment of women*. Here, women cannot be isolated, independently struggling beings, without agency, but rather are perceived and treated as purposeful and connected individuals acting and being acted

upon by diverse and complex relationships not only with other people but also with animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and all such beings that make up our universe and inform our experiences within it. Holism exhorts us to see the connectivity between our welfare and that of other creation, in recollection of the Quranic command to learn from their nature and respect their purposeful paths. Their purposes and connections are not all that different from ours (Al-An'am 6:38) and it is only through understanding our mutual inter-dependence that appreciation for the whole emerges. As Abul-Fadl (1993) rightly observes:

[...] women can only be validly addressed within the perspective of a holistic conception. They are never isolates; they are always part of a field of relationships and integral affinities such that there can be none of the empty subjectivity that is the hallmark of modernity, or even more of post-modernity. Even where they might have gender specific concerns and interests which are clearly legitimate and which are duly acknowledged in valorizing difference where the need and situation arise, they, women, as much as 'men' are part of a whole. (p. 40)

When women situate themselves within this purposeful, connected, and holistic envisioning or *tasawwur*, every subsequent concern, including policy initiatives, must yield to its universality. The partial, particular, or historically determined, cannot supersede the universals of the divine order. Understanding the fixed and dynamic dimensions of this order establishes the stability required for the dignified regeneration of life—all life—and the change required to deal with immediate conditions and future aspirations.

How we are to develop policies that take such complexities into account, including the responsibility of men within a society, maybe the subject of debate and will likely be contested on grounds that have little to do with divine guidance. This is where our struggle must focus and where we can demonstrate and better understand the real issues impacting the welfare of girls and women and their treatment at the global and local levels.

3.7 Progress in Policy

In the present context, the approach to the position and rights of women can be distinguished into three positions. First, there are the proponents of CEDAW, seeking to justify its provisions through the traditionalist toolkit with some referring to the classical maqasid, hoping to win over conservative communities. Governments of predominantly Muslim societies are criticized for slow progress toward eliminating discrimination against women and achieving "gender equality". State reservations are seen to defy women's rights. Thus, while some measures have been taken, they are considered far from sufficient. Second, there are those who reject the CEDAW, with or without justifications. When justifications to reject are provided, it is, like the former group, achieved through traditionalist arguments. Third, there are those who feel that the position and rights of women must be reframed to acknowledge a fundamental order as well as a greater understanding of the complexity of their lives. Of these groups, the first finds their views most prominently reflected at the global

level, and international treaties and debates. But still, partially as a result of the force of the second group accommodations are being made—if only with a transitory temperament. In essence, legislators and activists have taken the second group’s willingness to engage, despite the reservations, as a step in the right direction, with the express aim of eventual withdrawal of the reservations. They are essentially seeking an “overlapping consensus” in the words of John Rawls (1993). Think of ongoing States parties’ changes to national constitutions, laws, and programs concerning women. Although these changes may not fully satisfy proponents of CEDAW, they are, nevertheless, efforts in the evolutionary process they are aiming for. There is broad agreement on the potential of the international human rights regime to achieve “transformative equality” and in particular CEDAW 5(a) by many writers (Raday, 2012, p. 514). At the same time, those who have resorted to *fiqh* to reject or amend certain provisions have collectively given a voice to the *Shariah*. In general, they can participate in the international debate while not giving up very much. Hence, if we limit ourselves to these two positions there would appear to be progress in public policy but with important concessions around key provisions. Both groups would argue that there is much work to be done.

This is not to say that the third alternative with its radical proposals is impossible. As Abou El Fadl (2009) asserts: “in principle, doctrinal potentialities exist in a dormant state until they are co-opted and directed by a systematic thought, supported by cumulative social practices, towards a culture that honours and promotes human rights” (p. 115). When drawing on a *maqasid* approach to the position of women and their rights, we must not fall into the traps of traditionalism, modernism, or feminism. To start from the Revelation is to challenge the ideas and pivots around which this discourse has unfolded. We cannot endorse positions that view women in perpetual conflict with men or that start from false premises. A revelational perspective would no doubt strive to correct injustice and corruption, but this cannot monopolize the starting point of inquiry and effort. The pivot of injustice represents a misunderstanding of the challenge and an abdication of responsibility for the status quo. In the Islamic *tasawwur* men and women take a collective stand to re-establish a divine order that distinguishes between right and wrong and between fixed and changeable. This cannot simply be borne out of a prejudicial and imposed sense of injustice but must be rooted in a broad understanding of purpose, connection, and holism. The position and rights of women will not be secured in a world where men are not viewed and treated as supporters, partners, friends, sons, and loved ones; nor will it be possible in a world where connections to all sources of life have been compromised and subordinated to human interests and greed. The social and cultural consciousness of Muslims may not be ready for these connections but the status of women and their rights will not be found on biased or untruthful grounds.

Younger generations are seeking to make connections and find meaning. In light of this, as Brooks (2002) observes, “[...] at a moment when left wing politics, feminism, and liberalism are all floundering, unable any longer to persuade or inspire a new generation that worries about wars and jobs and the environment, the discourse of international human rights offers us a new and potentially transformative way to conceptualise the world’s many injustices” (p. 361). Even this discourse is unlikely

to fulfill its promise as it too remains partialistic, fragmented, and in denial of a fundamental order that guarantees the flourishing of all life not just humans.

The current human rights regime, including women's rights, may only provide temporary relief due to its tendency to adopt the same systems it aims to change. The complexity of challenging the dominant neoliberal paradigm makes it difficult to effectively address these issues through policy and practice. While CEDAW may provide some relief for some women in specific contexts, it is neither a universal nor comprehensive solution. The best approach is to undertake research that explains the purposefulness of creation, highlights its interconnectedness, and demonstrates how it interacts (or ought to interact) to support women and their communities. Such research can support a better understanding of the implications of current policy choices for women given the diverse worlds in which they are inextricably rooted.

3.8 Conclusion: Lessons for Maqasidi Scholars and Practitioners

This chapter has hopefully illustrated that approaching public policy problems by means of the Shariah demands a robust and suitable methodology that does not yield to diametrically opposed positions. Although that has been what we have seen in current public policy debates resorting to the traditionalist menu of alternatives, it has been confusing, disjointed, and a disservice to the purposefulness, connectivity, and holism that characterizes the Shariah and in turn what it has to offer women and humanity. In terms of value added or a future vision, current responses offer very little. The value of Islamic scholarship cannot be constrained to the political project of ending women's subordination especially as it has been articulated in human rights instruments like the CEDAW. In particular, the maqasid approach does not limit itself to locating the status of women in society or in defining and promoting their rights as isolated in an otherwise interconnected reality. Instead, it problematizes the general misperception of the nature of oppression and injustice by emphasizing neoliberalism's corruptive impact on the fundamental order while emphasizing the purposefulness, connectivity, and holism of creation. The Revelation's comprehensive approach to the lives of women—both as moral agents who receive, question, synthesize, and adopt the message but also as distinctive subjects, like other individuals and groups with special significance, of that message—means that the pivot of injustice especially as it is reduced to the equality of women with men, is a prejudicial approach to studying divine guidance while unduly restricting response to human rights treaties, like the CEDAW, especially in the longer term.

The methodology outlined in this paper suggests that when considering issues with existential implications, it is necessary to start by exploring the Revelation with a focus on purpose. This involves asking questions such as: What guidance is available in the Revelation for our current context? What are the divine objectives revealed to us? How can we promote individual and collective well-being? And how can

these insights inform public policy? Maqasid scholars are well-equipped to analyze objectives, gather evidence, contextualize discussions, and provide comprehensive conclusions, but they must first become immersed in the Revelation and experts in the topic they want to address.

People who bring the Shariah into public debates often lack a deep understanding of how it supports their positions and may cause confusion, distortion, and anxiety for those trying to understand its implications for women's rights and status. The maqasid approach, as applied to women's rights and status, offers a comprehensive, critical, and forward-looking perspective that emphasizes dignity, equity, and justice in policy development. It also presents a vision of society based on compassion, where individuals recognize their dependence on God, intra-dependence on each other, and inter-dependence with the rest of creation.

In conclusion, the analysis presented in the chapter suggests several policy implications related to the position and rights of women in Muslim-majority societies. These include the need to acknowledge the complexity of the issue and to promote an overlapping consensus that balances the rights and well-being of women with cultural, religious, and social norms. Research-based policy-making can help to support women and their communities, and it is necessary to rethink the limitations of current human rights regimes. Finally, adopting a revelational perspective that avoids the traps of traditionalism, modernism, and feminism can help to correct injustice and corruption, based on a nuanced understanding of the multiple perspectives and interpretations at play.

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Chapter 4

Empowering Women Through Public Sector Employment in Qatar: Challenges and Opportunities



Rabia Naguib and Ahmed Aref

Abstract Integrating women into the workforce is considered as part of the economic progress formula and modernization process leading to women's empowerment. While this process has been internally driven in Western societies, it is globally imposed through policy diffusion, raising challenges for policy-makers to adapt the prevailing models to local cultures. Given the dearth of empirical studies in the context of Arab Gulf countries, this chapter offers compelling insights and qualitative evidence of women's employment in Qatar. It focuses on the public sector as it represents the main employer of women providing many benefits and opportunities while presenting some constraints and challenges. Using an integrative multi-level lens and a culturally sensitive approach results from 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with civil servants are analyzed to identify factors affecting women's economic empowerment. The findings highlight the complexity of determining specific factors and provide policy recommendations based on women's opinions and conveyed voices.

Keywords Public sector · Women empowerment · Economic empowerment · Female employment · Labor policies · Opportunities · Challenges · Multi-level perspective · Qatar

4.1 Introduction

Women's empowerment is a top priority for all Arab Gulf countries, including Qatar, where it is a pillar of the National Vision 2030 strategy. In this chapter, empowerment is defined as "a dynamic, context-based process that involves agency and requires

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access to resources for individual and social well-being”. This definition emphasizes the importance of local values and cultural practices. Through the voices of interviewed women, it is evident that Arab Gulf countries, including Qatar, have a unique conception of empowerment rooted in their culture and religion, while transnational organizations promote, through their mechanisms of policy diffusion, a westernized version dominated by liberal and capitalist values.

Women’s empowerment through gender equality is a key focus of global development initiatives, such as UN Women and the World Bank. The UN Beijing conference led to a commitment to empower women, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a goal (SDG5) to achieve gender equality. Consequently, policy-makers in the context of Arab Gulf countries face a political dilemma and a moral conundrum to balance global pressures with local demands and values while promoting women’s empowerment. They have to adopt and comply with the borrowed policies and exogenous models of development.¹ In the meantime, they need to adapt to the internal requirements and respect the local values and preserve the national identity. As highlighted by Tok et al. (2016), Qatari policy-makers are struggling to achieve a balance between Islam, social traditions, and modernity. Qatar’s National Vision 2030 seeks to preserve Arab and Islamic values and identity while empowering women in political and economic decision-making roles. The national vision balances empowerment through agency and resources with the context of Arab identity and Islamic values.

However, the focus of women’s empowerment outcomes remains largely on economic indicators such as income and female labor force participation, neglecting overall well-being, and turning actually the means to becoming an end. The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) measures long-term progress based on standard of living, lifespan, and educational attainment, but does not fully capture empowerment or inequalities (UNDP, 2021).² There is a need for subjective indicators of well-being to better understand multiple domains of people’s lives (Diener et al., 2009), as cultural norms can influence these indicators (Miranti et al., 2017). The importance of subjective indicators³ is highlighted by the limitations of objective measures like the HDI.

The Qatari government prioritizes families as a key part of society and the basis of the nation, as outlined in the National Vision 2030 and the Qatari Constitution (2003). To support women’s empowerment, the government provides education and employment opportunities, particularly in the public sector, which is the main employer for

¹ The government has to provide every 5 years a national report on “the complete and effective implementation of Beijing Declaration” related to gender equality and women’s empowerment. The last report covered the period (2014–2019). https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Qatar_en.pdf.

² UNDP (2021). Human Development reports. Retrieved from: <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#/countries/QAT>. Accessed on Nov 25, 2022.

³ Subjective indicators can only be measured by asking a person to self-rate their experiences, and examine a person’s feelings and experiences (e.g., level of satisfaction with life, happiness, or satisfaction with a range of aspects of life such as their relationships, security, sense of personal safety, and having strong social connections) (Miranti et al., 2017, p. 11).

nationals. With 92% of female nationals employed in the public sector, Qatar leads the GCC in terms of economically active women (Planning & Statistics Authority, 2020a, 2020b). However, various factors impact women's employment, including macro-level factors such as oil wealth (Ross, 2008), cultural norms (Masoud et al., 2016; Metcalfe, 2011; Moghadam, 2004), and workplace practices and individual attitudes (Haghighat, 2013; Lari, 2016). To account for these multiple factors, this study uses an integrative multi-level research lens (Naguib, 2022; Naguib & Jamali, 2015), drawing on findings from in-depth interviews with 50 males and females in the public sector.

This chapter provides qualitative evidence on women's empowerment in the Qatari public sector. It begins with a review of contextual factors at the macro level, including legislative frameworks, to understand the local context. The chapter then presents the results of the empirical research exploring the factors that promote or hinder women's empowerment in the Qatari public sector. A critical and culturally sensitive discussion follows, and the chapter concludes with policy recommendations based on the opinions and voices of the participants interviewed.

4.2 Background: Contextual Challenges and Policy Frameworks

Qatar is a rapidly transforming state undergoing fast economic and societal change (Tok et al., 2016). It has a rich natural gas reserve and has invested its rent revenues in development, turning from a traditional society into a modern and technologically advanced one (Al-Ansari, 2020). The government has increased women's participation in education, healthcare, and the workforce, and Qatar is classified as a very high human development country (UNDP, 2021), with the fourth highest GDP per capita income (World Bank, 2021), and a ranking of 29th most competitive nation (World Economic Forum, 2019).⁴ Yet, there are complex challenges and legal frameworks to consider in understanding the need for adapted policies for women's employment and economic empowerment in this context.

⁴ The Global Competitiveness Index includes 98 variables organized into twelve pillars: institutions; infrastructure; ICT adoption; macroeconomic stability; health; skills; product market; labor market; financial system; market size; business dynamism; and innovation capability. It emphasizes the role of human capital, innovation, resilience, and agility as drivers of economic success (<https://tradingeconomics.com/qatar/competitiveness-rank>).

4.2.1 Contextual Challenges Affecting Women's Employment in Qatar

Women's labor force participation has been a central topic of discussion in literature on women's economic empowerment in the GCC region (Young, 2016). The inclusion of women in the workforce in the GCC countries presents unique policy challenges due to the political and economic context. However, data on women's labor force participation in the GCC countries is inconsistent with existing research on women in the Middle East (Buttorff et al., 2018). This inconsistency is attributed to situational factors and specific characteristics associated with the national labor market and local context, which will be briefly discussed in the following section.

a. Demographic Imbalance

The population of Qatar is estimated to be 2.9 million in 2021 (World Bank, 2022a). The population has grown fourfold since the start of the millennium, primarily due to an increase in foreign workers, reflecting Qatar's rapid development and major projects (Fig. 4.1). This has resulted in a significant imbalance in the demographic composition between Qatari citizens and expatriates from other countries who now make up the majority of the population. According to a 2014 report, only 14% of the population in the country are Qataris (Madar Research and Development, 2014). Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have the greatest imbalance between nationals and expatriates among the GCC states.

Additionally, due to the high influx of male workers, women make up only a quarter of the total population. The sex ratio of the total population is 3.150 (3,150 males per 1,000 females), which is significantly higher compared to the global sex ratio of 1.016 in 2021. Among GCC countries, Qatar has the lowest proportion of female population compared to the OECD members (Fig. 4.2). The demographic

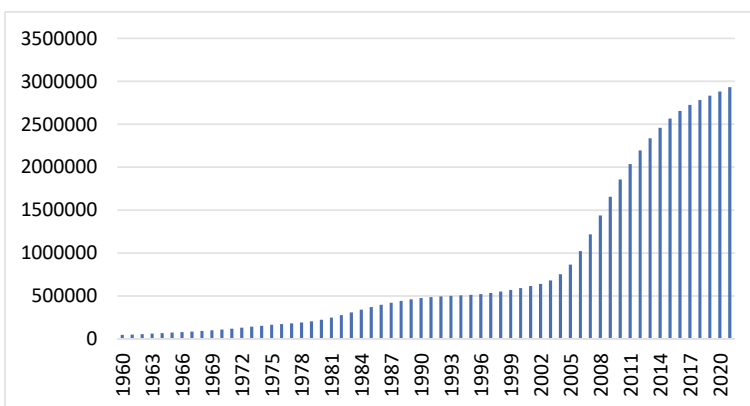


Fig. 4.1 Qatar population (1960–2021) (Source <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS>. Accessed December 6, 2022)

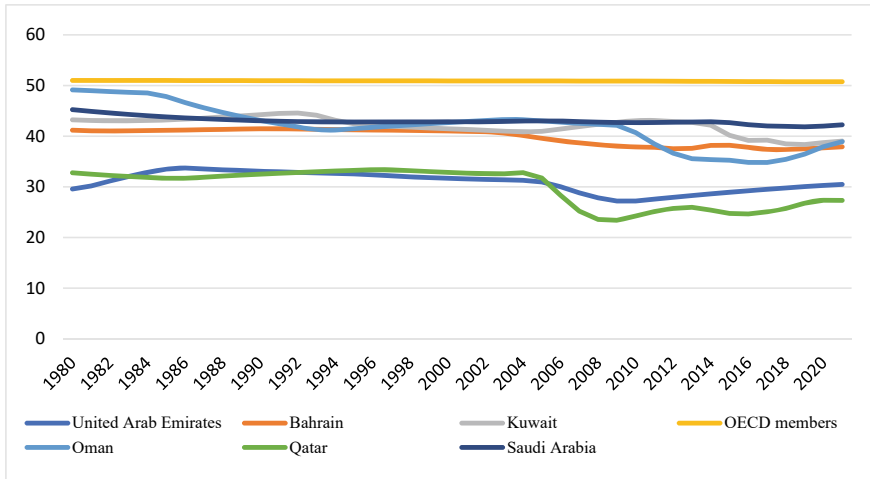


Fig. 4.2 GCC female population (% of total population) (1980–2021) (Source <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=QA>. Accessed December 6, 2022)

imbalance, with males accounting for 76% of the population, results in a higher rate of male labor force participation and a persistent gender gap. Young (2016) highlights the role of migrant labor in perpetuating gender inequality in GCC countries.

b. Declining Fertility Rates

Samari (2020) found that in the context of Egypt, higher education attainment is associated with a lower fertility rate and a more egalitarian attitude toward gender norms, leading to fewer children and easier entry into the labor force. Meanwhile, Qatar boasts one of the highest rates of female education in the region but also faces one of the steepest declines in fertility among GCC countries. The fertility rate in Qatar dropped from 6.9 in the 1960s to 1.8 in 2020, comparable to the rate in OECD countries (Fig. 4.3). According to national statistics, the fertility rate among Qatari women only fell from 4.5 in 1997 to 2.6 in 2019 (PSA, 2020a).

The declining fertility rates present a security threat to the sustainability of Gulf societies and pose a challenge for policy-makers who must balance empowering women through education and economic participation with the need to maintain and grow the local population. A population projection (2020–2100) shows a severe decline in growth starting from 2030,⁵ requiring policy-makers to set strategic priorities adapted to their local context.

c. Concentration of Women in Specific Sectors

A challenge in empowering women in Qatar is the local economic activity structure, which emphasizes non-traded sectors and heavy industries with a concentration of male-dominant foreign labor force. As a result, Qatari women are mostly employed

⁵ <https://countrymeters.info/en/Qatar>.

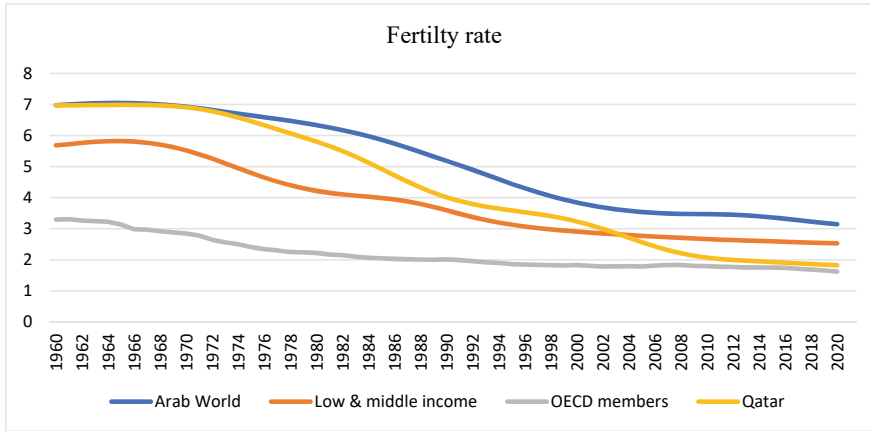


Fig. 4.3 Qatar fertility rate (1960–2021) (Source World Development Indicators [2022]. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/WLD/world/fertility-rate>. Accessed December 6, 2022)

in professional roles (46%) and administrative positions (30%), while Qatari men are more prevalent in craft and trade professions (38%) (PSA, 2020b). The majority of Qatari citizens, both male and female, are employed in the public sector with 81.7% of females and 81% of males being economically active. However, when compared to the total number of workers in this sector, women make up only 20% compared to 9.8% for men (Ministry of Administrative Development, Labor and Social Affairs (MADLSA, 2019).

The concentration of Qatari women in government agencies and institutions can be attributed to job stability, retirement benefits, reduced working hours, stable wages, and social status. However, the majority of unemployed Qatari women (83.2%) are not willing to work in the private sector compared to just 16.8% of unemployed men (PSA, 2022). Conversely, the majority of non-Qatari men work in the private sector (85%), while the majority of foreign female workers, primarily from Asia, are employed in the domestic sector (38.9%) (PSA, 2020a). This highlights the “heavy reliance of many families on domestic workers” as noted in the second National Development Strategy (2018–2022) (PSA, 2019, p. 221).

4.2.1.1 Education and Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP)

Qatar has made great achievements in the field of education. The literacy rate, representing a key indicator in the field of human development, reached 99.3% for females and 99.1% for males indicating a gender equity and good access to educational opportunities for all (PSA, 2020b). Theoretically, the higher the female educational level, the higher the female labor force participation. However, this relationship is different in Qatar and most GCC countries. According to Hendy (2016), even though the educational attainment level of women is higher than men in Qatar and other Gulf

states, their involvement in the labor force remains the lowest in the region. However, as observed by Buttorff et al. (2018), measuring female economic participation in the GCC states as a percentage of the total labor force is not accurate given the high demographic imbalances and the large share of migrant male labor. In addition to the gender imbalance in the country and its peculiar work structure, the low female participation can be explained by a change in opportunity structures for educated women (Assaad et al., 2018). The Gulf state experiences work structure imbalances in two aspects. First, there is significant disparity between nationals and expatriates in the labor force. The second dimension concerns the proportion of nationals in the public sector.

In Qatar, women are primarily employed in the public sector, but with declining growth in opportunities in this sector, unemployment has become an issue. Despite this, female unemployment in Qatar remains low compared to Arab countries and OECD members (Fig. 4.4). The main reasons for female unemployment are lack of job opportunities, health conditions, lack of experience, unsuitability of jobs, inadequate academic qualifications, and search for better jobs (PSA, 2022). Despite the gender imbalance in Qatar, the gender equality index for Qataris is 55.4%, with a female economic participation rate of 37.6% compared to 67.9% for men (PSA, 2020b).

Qatar has seen significant progress in female economic participation over the years. The Qatari female labor force participation rate rose from 27.4% in 2001 to 42.0% in 2021. Excluding Qatari female students, the rate increased from 38.4% in 2001 to 56.6% in 2021 (Fig. 4.5). According to the latest labor force sample survey (2022), 43% of Qatari women are economically active, while 57% are inactive, compared to 65% and 35% for non-Qatari women, respectively (PSA, 2022).

The reasons for Qatari women’s inability or reluctance to participate in the economy are mainly due to their commitment to education or their families. Many

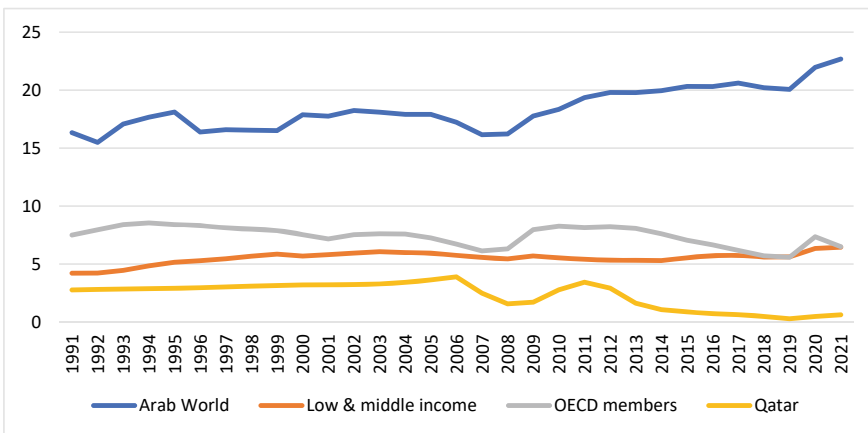


Fig. 4.4 Female unemployment in Qatar (% of female labor force) (Source <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS>. Accessed December 6, 2022)

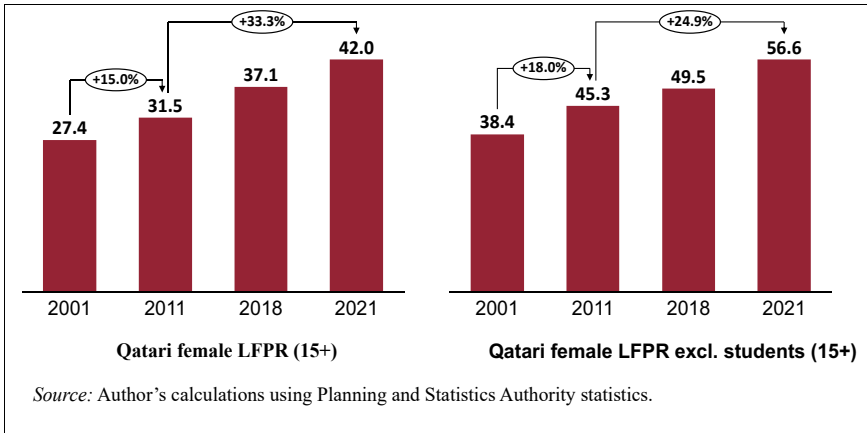


Fig. 4.5 Qatari female labor force participation rate, 2001–2021

are full-time students (44%) or homemakers (42.8%), with only 10% being retired (PSA, 2022). Becoming a homemaker can be a personal choice motivated by family priorities, such as childcare (Golkowska, 2014). A survey of young Qatari graduates found that female students, with diverse educational and professional goals, agreed that family and child-rearing are the top priority once married (James-Hawkins et al., 2017).

d. Wage Gap

The wage gap in Qatar is wide due to the imbalanced local economic activity structure and the high proportion of female migrants in domestic work. In 2019, the average female monthly income was 88.9% of the average male income, a gap of 11.1% (PSA, 2020a). However, some high-skilled fields, such as construction, manufacturing, and accommodation and food service, showed a favorable wage ratio for women reaching 200%, 167.1%, and 139% respectively (PSA, 2020b). The average monthly wage for total paid employees was QR 11,737, with males earning QR 11,642 and females earning QR 11,990 (PSA, 2022). These data suggest that policy-makers are making an effort to reduce gender inequality, particularly in terms of the wage gap.

e. Gender Roles and Sharing Family Responsibilities

Challenges that hinder women's empowerment in Qatar's public sector include the difficulty in balancing family and work responsibilities. Cultural and social norms place the burden of family duties on women, limiting their participation in the workforce. Women in almost all countries, particularly in the Gulf Arab states, work longer hours than men when combining paid and unpaid work (Al-Ansari, 2020). The challenge to balance work and family obligations leaves women with two options: quitting work or delegating parenting responsibilities to domestic workers. This latter option

has negative effects on women's ability to raise their children and on their psychological development (Al-Matary & Ali, 2013). To address this, the second National Development Strategy aims to reduce the use of domestic staff and promote family cohesion, while the National Vision seeks to reduce gender stereotypes and promote women's full participation in the workforce. However, cultural barriers, such as patriarchy, continue to impact women's employment (Salem & Yount, 2019). Social and cultural barriers at both individual and community levels also pose obstacles to women's employment.

4.2.2 Strategic and Legal Frameworks Related to Women's Empowerment in Qatar

The empowerment of women in Qatar is influenced by both legal frameworks and cultural practices. While the absence of legal rights and protections for women can hinder their workforce participation, this is not the case in Qatar, where gender equality is enshrined in law (Felder & Vuollo, 2008). However, as pointed out by Golkowska (2017), the country's National Vision 2030 affirms gender equality in legal terms but also leaves the challenge of bridging the gap between modern practices and traditional customs with regard to gender relations and women's empowerment to women themselves.

To support women's empowerment, the first and second National Development Strategies (NDS) were developed, with the second NDS (2018–2022) being more explicit in its efforts. The strategy explicitly stated the government's commitment to increasing the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions and reducing gender stereotypes. It also aimed to improve the individual well-being of all Qataris, through increased career opportunities for women and better occupational safety standards. One of the eight priorities for family cohesion identified in the NDS was empowering women, through measures such as expanding childcare facilities and family-friendly employment practices and promoting gender-sensitive working environments (NDS, 2018–2022, p. 175).

The first National Development Strategy in Qatar aimed to increase women's empowerment through the recognition of their capabilities and qualifications for political and leadership positions. The "Women in Leadership" program was established to build women's skills, increase their representation in decision-making roles, and create a supportive environment. The second National Strategy continued to monitor progress made in women's empowerment and included the "Empowering and Educating Women" project under the violence prevention program, which was implemented by the Protection and Social Rehabilitation Center with support from the Qatar Foundation for Social Work and the Ministry of Administrative Development, Labor and Social Affairs. Despite higher average educational attainment by women, the strategy acknowledged the existence of a "glass ceiling" in employment

and promotion opportunities for women. The strategy aimed to address this challenge and change traditional views toward women through various initiatives.

The legislative framework in Qatar supports its vision of empowering women. The constitution codified gender equality in 1999, granting female Qataris the right to vote and hold public office (Golkowska, 2017). In addition, labor laws reinforce equality in the workforce, such as Law No. 1 of the Civil Service Act (2001), which guarantees equal pay and career advancement, and Law No. 24 of 2002, which provides retirement benefits to working women. Qatar has also ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention No. 111 on job discrimination in the workplace (AlMunnajjed, 2011). The labor law offers generous benefits to working women, including 50 days of paid maternity leave, the right to a daily one-hour breastfeeding break for one year, and protection from dismissal due to marriage or maternity (UNIFEM, 2023). The Civil Human Resources Law No. (15) of 2016, which replaces the Human Resources Law No. (8) of 2009 and regulates the public sector, includes provisions aimed at further empowering working women by promoting work-family balance.

Secondary data shows that various contextual challenges, including structural, situational, and cultural factors, influence women's empowerment in the public sector in Qatar. However, there is limited research on these factors in this context. The following sections present the results of field research to identify the factors affecting women's empowerment, based on the perspectives of female and male public sector employees.

4.2.3 Factors Affecting Women's Empowerment: A Qualitative Analysis

This section focuses on the results of the qualitative aspect of the study. The aim is to uncover the enabling and hindering factors of women's empowerment in the public sector in Qatar through the experiences of 50 women and men working in this sector. The interviews were structured to gather the participants' perceptions of the concepts and dynamics of empowerment in the public sector. Their perspectives serve as the main source of understanding the driving forces for women's empowerment and the obstacles that hinder it. The interview questions were designed to be comprehensive, allowing the participants to share their experiences and opinions beyond the formal factors in the work environment.

4.2.4 Methods

This research employs a mixed methods approach, including an online survey with a sample size of 510 civil servants and semi-structured interviews with 50 participants (33 women and 17 men) working in the public sector. The participants were selected

using referral and snowball sampling and were interviewed to share their perceptions on the concepts and dynamics of women's empowerment in the public sector. Their narratives provide insight into the driving forces behind women's empowerment and the barriers that hinder it. The interview questions were designed to elicit a comprehensive understanding of the participants' attitudes and experiences, going beyond formal factors in the work environment. In this section, we present the qualitative findings through thematic analysis, where themes were extracted and analyzed from the interview narratives.

The inductive approach is a widely used reporting tool in qualitative research, especially among social constructivist researchers. It involves the identification, analysis, and interpretation of narratives to derive major themes. This bottom-up approach thoroughly examines the data and identifies recurring patterns of meaning that form the core findings of the study (Thomas, 2006). Table 4.1 highlights the demographic characteristics of the participants, which are crucial to understand the themes derived from their narratives.

Most of the participants (48%) were in their 30s to 40s, and the majority of them were women (66%). Most participants were also Qatar nationals (62%) and held a high level of education, including Bachelor's (40%) and Master's/Ph.D. degrees (54%). The sample had a good representation of participants who were married (52%) and held leadership positions at the 4th rank or higher (54%). These demographic characteristics are important to consider when analyzing the themes derived from the data.

4.2.5 Data Analysis: A Multi-level and Multidimensional Approach

The semi-structured interviews conducted in this study revealed several themes related to the opportunities and challenges affecting women's empowerment in the public sector in Qatar. The themes, which represent a mix of internal and external factors, highlight the importance of considering a multi-level and multidimensional approach to understand the process of women's empowerment in the workplace. The internal factors include individual and psychological dimensions, while the external factors involve institutional, organizational, societal, and cultural norms. A summary of the empirical results and relevant quotes from the participants are presented in separate tables to provide consistency throughout the report and to help illustrate the multiple factors impacting women's employment in Qatar.

4.2.5.1 Individual Factors: Agency and Outcomes Related Dimensions

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted concept, involving agency that enables women to make decisions and exert control over their lives. In the context of this

Table 4.1 Demographics characteristics of the participants

	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	0–19	0	0
	20–29	6	12
	30–39	24	48
	40–49	13	26
	50–59	4	10
	60–69	2	4
Gender	Male	17	34
	Female	33	66
Nationality	Qatari	31	62
	Non-Qatari	19	38
Marital Status	Single	15	30
	Married	27	54
	Divorced	8	16
Education Level	PhD	6	12
	Master's	21	42
	Bachelor's	20	40
	Secondary	3	6
Discipline	Arts & Humanities	7	14
	Social Sciences	19	38
	Math and Information Science	9	18
	Other	15	30
Job Rank according to Human Resources Law of 2016	Rank 1	8	16
	Rank 2	7	14
	Rank 3	9	18
	Rank 4	3	6
	Rank 5	3	6
	Rank 6	11	22
	Rank 7	7	14
	Other	11	22

study, the participants pointed to both individual and psychological factors that can either support or hinder women's empowerment. These factors, such as women's personality, motivation, self-efficacy, and determination, are considered to play a crucial role in determining women's agency in the workplace.

It is worth noting that women's empowerment goes beyond the ability to make decisions and choices, it encompasses the overall well-being and quality of life of women. In this light, many participants linked women's empowerment to job

Table 4.2 Multi-level analysis of Women Empowerment/Employment in the public sector: Micro/Individual Level

Perceived influencing factors	Respondents' Quotes
Job satisfaction/Intrinsic motivation	<p>“Personally, I love what I am doing in the field of media and projects. I am enjoying my work and feel empowered” (I#49, FQ)</p> <p>“I think that the negative impact of the work on personal life is less for a single woman, than for married and working mothers” (I#4, FQ)</p>
Leadership/Participation in decision-making	<p>“Being named in charge of a department, at a time when there were alternative options and male colleagues available, is an indication of my empowerment as a woman. My opinion is considered in some specialized issues to a large and wide degree. The degree of the responsibility reflects on the level of empowerment” (I#11, FQ)</p> <p>“To be empowered for me, requires to be asked about my opinion, to be heard, to listen to what I have to say, to be able to express my point of view along with others, so that decisions related to mu work are made based on my experience, and my knowledge that I sought and my certificates that I obtained and the training that the State paid for” (I#10, FQ)</p> <p>“As a manager, I give the employee a scope of freedom to act and make a decision. It is good that one delegates the authority to his subordinates on the basis that they get the necessary trainings” (I#14, FQ)</p> <p>“Empowerment in the workplace implies that I can make a decision without having to constantly go back to my boss” (I#23, FM)</p> <p>“Being empowered, means being able to make decision at work, able to be lead and to express your opinion” (I#32, FQ)</p>

satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and a love for their work. In addition, participants also emphasized the importance of women’s ability to lead and make decisions in the workplace. Table 4.2 presents a summary of the micro-level factors affecting women’s empowerment and includes selected quotes from the participants to provide a deeper understanding of these factors.

4.2.5.2 Work Environment and Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a critical factor in employee retention and motivation in the workplace. When employees are satisfied with their jobs, they are more likely to stay with an organization and progress in their careers. Results indicate that the work environment has a mixed impact on personal life, with 24.2% of women and 32.4% of men feeling that it positively affects their personal life, while 38.8% of women and 35.2% of men feel that it has a negative impact. This suggests that men are more likely to see their work environment as having a positive impact on their personal life, while women are more likely to experience it as negative. Results also show

that men are generally more satisfied with their work environment than women, with 60.9% of men and 52.7% of women indicating at least some level of satisfaction. However, more women than men prefer to remain in the public sector, despite lower levels of job satisfaction, because it offers job security, stability, and benefits such as less working hours, social status, and retirement benefits. Additionally, the findings suggest that marital status and number of children can have a significant impact on women's job satisfaction.

4.2.5.3 Leadership and Participation in Decision-Making

Participants unanimously agreed that key components of empowerment through employment are active involvement in decision-making, the ability to express opinions and contribute personal experience and knowledge, delegation of authority, trust, and support for personal initiatives, and the ability to lead and communicate change. Despite many participants holding managerial and leadership positions, they reported feeling restricted by the nature of the field, workplace culture, bureaucracy, and poor management practices. Research by Jaradat (2019) and Al-Ansari (2020) support these findings, highlighting challenges such as lack of support, societal refusal of women as leaders, and lack of confidence as factors that hinder women's advancement in leadership positions. The struggle to balance work and family life was also a factor that led some participants, including those with PhDs and high-level leadership positions, to resign. Therefore, policy-makers need to consider the impact of organizational and societal factors on women's agency and intrinsic motivation to improve their effective participation in the workforce and overall well-being.

4.2.5.4 Organizational Factors: Resources-Related Dimensions

The empowerment of women through employment is greatly impacted by organizational and institutional factors, with the public sector being a major provider of employment opportunities and benefits such as a favorable work environment, higher pay, and retirement benefits. However, it also faces challenges in the form of organizational culture, laws, managerial practices, and work climate that hinder women's empowerment. Participants identified common barriers such as limited agency, poor work-life balance policies, bureaucracy, routine work, lack of capacity-building, and unequal treatment of nationals and expatriates. Table 4.3 summarizes these meso-level factors and includes quotes from participants.

4.2.5.5 Recruitment/Access to Employment in the Public Sector

Access to employment in the public sector remains a critical factor in the growth of women's labor force participation in Qatar and the main source of job opportunities. Participants reported that the most common way for women to secure employment

Table 4.3 Multi-level analysis of Women Empowerment/Employment in the public sector: Meso/Organizational Level

Perceived influencing factors	Respondents' Quotes
Recruitment/Hiring process	<p>“Empowerment at work relates to providing opportunities for an individual to get the job based on merit and competency, regardless of gender” (I#46, FQ)</p> <p>“At the institutional level, I really don't think the hiring policies disadvantage women, based on gender or specific marital status” (I#23, FM)</p> <p>“I had 3 interviews and after that I started my job normally. This took place in 2013, now the procedures have changed, they have become very different, before if I want to apply for a job, I must go to the authorities and apply in person, now there is an electronic program—where you fill in your personal data, CV and apply, or check vacancies and apply” (I#4, FQ)</p> <p>“The entity/Ministry was in contact with the university to nominate students with cumulative GPAs above 3.0. So, as soon as I received my graduation certificate, I immediately started working in this ministry” (I#28, FQ)</p> <p>“My CV reached the Ministry and I was contacted directly. I was interviewed and was nominated and recommended” (I#44, MQ)</p>
Skills development/ Capacity-building	<p>“We need to have a clear career path and the necessary trainings to get the next grade and understand what are the short and long-term goals to reach the career objectives” (I#38, FQ)</p> <p>“Developing job skills, providing training courses, and expanding opportunities for employees to further build their capacity is part of their empowerment” (I#47, MQ)</p> <p>“The ministry's work schedule was appropriate and they would grant me a leave a week before the exams period what enabled me to complete my master's degree” (I#4, QW)</p>
Promotion	<p>“For the ministry, you get promoted automatically, based on your educational level and the years of experience” (I#47, MQ)</p> <p>“Promotion is based on the civil human resources law of periodical promotion that occurs every three years, depending on the corporate career ladder” (I#11, FQ)</p> <p>“The promotion process is very narrow, unless I change my current field of work or resign” (I#5, FQ)</p> <p>“There is a certain system according to the Qatari labor law, in which you are subject to promotion automatically. This is only for Qataris in the government sector. Non-Qataris enter on a designated salary and remain with the same rank and the same salary indefinitely” (I#26, FM)</p> <p>“I have been working for almost 8 years without getting promoted. It is very frustrating” (I#23, FM)</p> <p>“To get to senior positions is a discretionary matter. There are no clear criteria” (I#4, FQ)</p>

(continued)

Table 4.3 (continued)

Perceived influencing factors	Respondents' Quotes
Relationship with supervisor	<p>“Empowerment at work depends on the employee’s direct manager. I came across different direct managers. There is a difference in the way I felt empowerment depending on how much freedom I had to make decisions” (I#9, FQ)</p> <p>“I am not in a kind of leadership position. However, when there is a decision that is being made to develop the department, my boss does ask for my opinion, and I feel involved in the decision-making process” (I#30, FM)</p> <p>“At the departmental level, I would say that the flexibility of your manager is definitely a contributing factor” (I#21, FM)</p> <p>“If there is flexibility from higher management, the employee will be able to produce and innovate. Feeling comfortable at work would make him/her more empowered, but on the other hand, if there were restrictions to freedom, you will feel disempowered” (I#16, FQ)</p>
Agency segregation/ gender wage gap	<p>“The number of working women in our workplace is a factor of empowerment. It’s very comforting that I work in an environment where my boss is a woman, the team working under my supervision are also women. So, I feel empowered amongst a huge group of women, I don’t feel alone, unlike when I’m in a group of men” (I#7, FQ)</p>
Compensation	<p>“I don’t think there are enough flexibility in laws and policies, regarding financial incentives to encourage or make women equal to men. Let’s talk for example about the spouse allowance, it is only given to men and not to married women, the land loan in the country is given to married men even though they receive a title based on the marriage contract. When I got divorced, I applied for support certificate to prove that I have my children under my custody, and only in that condition I received the spouse allowance” (I#46, QW)</p>

(continued)

Table 4.3 (continued)

Perceived influencing factors	Respondents' Quotes
Work-life balance	<p>“In order to be a productive person, we need to be able to take care of our family” (I#9, FQ)</p> <p>“When covid started, all of the working mothers we wrote a petition to say that we can't keep up abalance because of online learning and having to work, but unfortunately it didn't go through, it was shut down” (I#33, FM)</p> <p>“One of the reasons I had to resign was the long working hours preventing me from spending more time with my children and taking care of them” (I#12, QNW)</p> <p>“There is a need for improvement of the regulations related to maternity, breastfeeding and nursery” (I#22, MW)</p> <p>“There are laws in place generally for both men and women without taking into account women's nature or her nature being a mother or a caregiver. I'm talking particularly about mothers who have children. So, when you make me come to work same as men 7 h a day, you didn't consider the concept of family, particularly that there are some campaigns at Aman Centre for women and children protection under the title “drive your child”. How am I going to drive my child when me and his father go to work at the same time? And this child must be present at school at the same time as well. We all must be present at 7 am or 7:30 maximum. I mean, you set up, start a campaign, you invest resources on it, while you don't even have laws that supports this campaign or back it up. I mean I feel that these are mere slogans without any real change” (I#3, QW)</p> <p>“The maternal leave is supposed to extend to the man also so that there can truly be a balance within the family and the tasks distributed among them fairly” (I#9, QW)</p> <p>“The maternity leave is only two months, it is not enough for the woman physically and mentally to go back to work. I wish there were some policies to help the woman have a little bit of balance between her career and her life at home. I wish to see policies that will empower us more. I am sure that many women quit or went for a part-time job, just because of this.” (I#2, FM)</p>

(continued)

Table 4.3 (continued)

Perceived influencing factors	Respondents' Quotes
Social exclusion	<p>“To feel empowered, I need to feel that I’m being included, that my rights are guaranteed in the policies and procedures, and that my own circumstances as a woman are taken into consideration. Both men and women are going through some difficult situations and need inclusive and multi-scenarios policies to make them feel empowered” (I#34, FQ)</p> <p>“In the public sector, as non-Qatari people, we do not have opportunities. But during my work in the public sector, I received an opportunity for promotion and a salary increase. This is only because my manager made like a special case which she submitted to the Board of Trustees to get the approval. But in the normal situations, it is very rare for non-Qatari to get promoted” (I#26, FM)</p> <p>“In the public sector HR policies, there is empowerment and help for Qatari. But for non-Qatari it is not clear. There are differences” (I#25, FM)</p>
Gender discrimination/ Gender equality	<p>“When the culture is purely patriarchal or tends to favour men in certain fields, men are hired regardless of the competency, and women are disqualified and discredited because they have a family or they get pregnant. There are entities who actually do so, and I have witnessed cases where women were rejected because they were pregnant even though they were highly qualified” (I#28, FQ)</p> <p>“Empowerment is about equality of opportunities, fairness and absence of discrimination based on gender. Evaluations should be based on competency and efforts, regardless of gender” (I#46, FQ)</p> <p>“The policies related to Human Resources... not all of them are supporting women” (I#1, FQ)</p> <p>“In the workplace, you are fine as long as you are single. There is a negative view from the work community, from managers and colleagues, of pregnant women and those who have children” (I#14, FQ)</p>

in the public sector was through formal procedures by applying to the Ministry of Administrative Development. Many female participants stated that they applied, went through multiple interviews, and were ultimately hired. On the other hand, men tended to rely on references and recommendations as a key means of access to employment. This suggests that networking is more significant for men and that the Ministry of Administrative Development is working to increase the number of women in the workforce. Participants agreed that hiring policies at the institutional level do not discriminate against women based on gender or marital status.

4.2.5.6 Skills Development and Capacity-Building

The availability of professional development opportunities and capacity-building is crucial for women's empowerment and growth in the public sector workplace. The expansion of skills and knowledge through such programs can lead to promotions or raises, and thus contribute to employees' upward mobility. However, the results of this study suggest that women may not have equal access to professional development opportunities compared to men. Only 32.1% of women and 54.2% of men reported that their organization supports professional development and education scholarships, and 36.4% of women and 42.2% of men reported that their agency provides a professional development plan. According to one interviewed expert, the current focus on short-term training courses in the public sector is not enough and there is a need for long-term capacity-building plans. To achieve women's empowerment in the workplace, it is important to have a clear career path and to provide equal professional development opportunities for all employees in the public sector.

4.2.5.7 Promotion

The promotion of women in the workplace is seen as a key factor in empowering them (Agran et al., 2016; Rusch, 1990). Participants in this research were asked about the criteria for promotion and most of them said that the procedures are based on the human resources law and the manager's evaluation or "boss's referral", along with years of experience and education. The data shows that women were more likely than men to receive a promotion based on higher education, with 52.4% of those who were promoted due to education being women and 73.2% of those who received a raise due to education being women. However, some interviewees reported that subjective factors such as connections and favoritism also play a role in promotions, and even referred to the process as "discretionary". When asked about women's potential for growth and promotion, 73% of the interviewees said they have the competence to be promoted, while 12% said they could not be considered due to citizenship status. Therefore, the eligibility for promotion remains a critical issue.

4.2.5.8 Relationship with Supervisor

The relationship with one's supervisor is crucial for job satisfaction, job retention, and upward mobility. Supervisors often have a significant impact on promotions and professional development. As per the participants' responses, empowerment in the workplace is largely dependent on the employee's direct manager. When asked to describe their relationship with their supervisor, 76.2% of women and 84.0% of men reported it as cooperative. In terms of feeling motivated and supported by their supervisor, 52% of women and 64% of men agreed. This indicates that men have better relationships with their supervisors and why they feel more satisfied with their work environment. Although most participants reported cooperative relationships at work, some pointed out instances of bad management practices and discrimination from their direct supervisor, resulting in a hostile and demotivating work environment. As one interviewee stated: "Institutional policies exist, but they are not always followed by senior managers who pursue their own agenda" (I#25, FM).

4.2.5.9 Agency Segregation and Gender Wage Gap

Gender-based pay disparities in the public sector are a widespread issue, with women often concentrated in lower paying industries. However, in the case of Qatari female public sector workers, they are found to earn more income than their male peers in the same positions. This is a unique finding compared to most countries, where women are paid less than men within the same rank. This result is commendable but needs to be viewed within the context of the overall public service system, as overall, women still earn significantly less than men. When asked about unequal pay, a majority of interviewees (56%) disagreed, stating that both men and women should be treated equally as they both fulfill the requirements set by the public sector. However, some male participants justified the gender pay gap based on their financial responsibilities. Gender-based pay disparities are not favored in the public sector in Qatar, as it promotes discrimination and hinders women's empowerment.

4.2.5.10 Compensation Determinants

The issue of compensation remains a critical factor in promoting women's empowerment in Qatar's public sector. To gain insight into the factors that contribute to pay disparities, the interviewees were asked to provide reasons for any differences in their pay compared to other employees. One-third of the interviewees indicated that rank is a major determinant of salary, while the remaining two-thirds believed that the legal framework, represented by the human resources law, has a significant impact on salary levels. This could be seen as a negative aspect for women's empowerment as factors such as hard work and years of experience were mentioned less frequently by the interviewees as important determinants. In addition to salaries, other benefits such as housing, transportation, communication, and other social allowances also

play a crucial role for public sector employees, especially those with lower salaries. The issue of divorced women was also raised during the interviews, highlighting the loss of benefits associated with their work after divorce.

4.2.5.11 Work-Family Balance Policies and Practices

Balancing work and family is a critical issue that greatly impacts women's empowerment. The relationship between maintaining a work-family balance has been extensively studied by researchers (Bauer, 2009; Jones et al., 2006). When asked about their ability to balance work and family, 23% of the interviewees reported facing a significant imbalance. The primary reasons cited were: the distance between work and home, excessive family responsibilities, long working hours, limited leave options, and limited childcare facilities. As a result, many female interviewees expressed a need for shorter working hours, extended maternity leave, workplace childcare facilities, flexible work arrangements, and part-time options.

4.2.5.12 Social Exclusion

According to Avramov (2002), demographic factors play a significant role in shaping the working environment and can lead to social exclusion. This issue is faced not only by women but also by men, especially when non-national employees work alongside national employees. Rodriguez and Scurry (2019) explore how gender and foreignness intersect to shape the experiences of skilled migrant women in Qatar and contribute to their exclusion in the workplace. Our data analysis indicates that being a non-citizen is the most significant factor leading to social exclusion. Migrant employees in the public sector are disadvantaged as they do not have access to promotions and career growth, and their allowances are limited compared to those of Qatari employees. Thus, social exclusion based on national differences appears to impede the empowerment of female expatriates in particular.

4.2.5.13 Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination continues to be a significant concern in the workplace and other social institutions. Gregory (2003) suggests that gender discrimination in the workplace can hinder job advancement and empowerment for women. To explore whether gender discrimination impedes the potential growth of women in the public sector, the interviewees were asked about potential discrimination related to maternity leave or breastfeeding hours. 15% of the interviewees reported facing discrimination due to social reasons such as family emergencies or female health problems. When asked about government laws in Qatar discriminating between male and female employees in the public sector, the majority of the interviewees stated that the laws

were non-discriminatory. However, 23% of the interviewees reported facing discrimination that was a result of male-dominated practices rather than government laws. Thus, discrimination seems to be prevalent and stems from societal norms, according to the views of many interviewees.

4.2.6 Macro Level: Societal Factors

The literature recognizes patriarchal social orders as a common challenge faced by Arab women across the region (Lari, 2016; Moghadam, 2004; Sholkamy, 2010). Participants in the majority also raised the issue of patriarchy and identified cultural traditions rooted in tribal mindsets as constraints to women's empowerment in the regional and local contexts. They differentiate between religion, which can act as a catalyst, and cultural norms and traditions, which hinder empowerment. Table 4.4 summarizes the macro-level related factors and corresponding quotes.

4.2.6.1 Role of Religion

Studies have conflicting views on the impact of Islam on women's participation in the public sphere in the Gulf. Some researchers argue that Islam is the root of barriers to women's progress, while others point to economic conditions, such as oil wealth, as the main obstacle (Masoud et al., 2016; Metcalfe, 2011; Ross, 2008). However, this study provides empirical evidence that Islam is perceived as a catalyst for women's active participation in society, as 80% of the 50 participants from both the male and female public sector workers interviewed, refuted the idea that religion constrains women's employment and considered work as "an act of worship" in Islam.

Participants in this study provided insight into the role of Islam in shaping women's participation in the public sphere. Many noted that the constitution and national vision of Qatar are based on Islamic principles, which include a call for work, regardless of gender, and a rich history of Muslim women holding prominent positions. The majority of interviewees stated that their religious beliefs do not conflict with the work system, as long as the professional environment adheres to Islamic laws. Some interviewees, particularly women working in the public sector, viewed gender segregation as a fostering factor, while others highlighted the potential for misinterpretation of religion. On the other hand, the study of Blaydes et al. (2021) suggests that mixed-gender workplaces can be more constraining for women in conservative societies like Qatar compared to work sector or salary. Interviewed men also agreed that religion was not a constraint for women's work, but mentioned customs, traditions, and jurisprudential views as potential hindrances. Overall, it was emphasized that policy-makers must take into account the importance of understanding religion correctly to align laws with the spirit of Islam and its justice.

Table 4.4 Multi-level analysis of Women Empowerment/Employment in the public sector. Macro/societal level

Religion/Islam	<p>“Islam urges work, diligence, community building, and Islamic history is full of stories of working women. Islam does not prohibit women’s work, but rather permit it” (#49, FQ)</p> <p>“Religion encourages work, particularly in my case as a divorcee. I have to work as the allocations does not cover for my needs and my children’s” (#34, FQ)</p> <p>“I have always believed that work is an act of worship” (#21, FM)</p> <p>“Many verses and hadiths encourage work” (#33, FM)</p> <p>“There are many verses encouraging work, its mastery and good performance” (#40, MQ)</p> <p>“Islam recognizes the right for a woman to have her own income. Sharia’ guarantees women the right to an individual income, and gives them the choice to contribute to the household or not” (#14, FQ)</p> <p>“Islamic is a way of life. All the provisions and precepts are in line with common sense. Islam has urged Muslims to work and earn a lawful income, including both men and women. But Islam has set rules on the work of women in a way that guarantees their freedom and dignity and prevents them from humiliating mingling and degrading dealings. If the woman secures a healthy environment far from any violation of God’s prohibitions, then work is welcome, as for a Muslim woman, obtaining the pleasure of God in this world and the hereafter is the ultimate goal” (#26, FM)</p>
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(continued)

Table 4.4 (continued)

<p><i>Issue of Misinterpretation or misunderstanding of religion</i></p>	<p>“We have a problem either of misunderstanding of religion or its misappropriation. We need to have a correct understanding of religion, rooted in the authentic sources of legislation (Qur’an and Sunnah) without interfering opinions. There are principles of jurisprudence and there is a certain methodology to induce a fatwa (formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar). If we make fatwa without proper knowledge and “<i>fiqh</i>”, we might make mistakes. The Holy Qur’an is valid for every time and place. But some fatwas are definitely not valid for every time and place because societies change and cultures change” (#11, FQ)</p> <p>“It’s not religion, it is the understanding of a group of society about religion that create restrictions for women and fences around them. So, religion is exploited in a way to promote certain ideas and mindsets. If you return to the prophetic biography and history, a woman had much more freedoms than she currently has” (#9, FQ)</p>
<p>Culture</p>	<p>“Sometimes the problem is in our environment, the networking in Qatari society is different in nature. Most decisions are made in Majalis which are exclusively for men. Women are away from the place where decisions are being made” (#9, FQ)</p> <p>“I think we need a detailed internal examination of the laws, a general comprehensive view gives us an unclear picture of the situation. I think that we have empowerment, but to some extent. The empowerment is conditional to the presence of an understanding guardian. So, we need to look at the laws and the procedures followed in the state so that it facilitates the right of women whereby a woman does not have to go back in every small or big matter to someone who can stop her or not allow her to reach her goal; a goal which is not in conflict with the laws of the state or the religion” (#8, FQ)</p> <p>“There is always a need to focus on efforts on women’s empowerment since we live in patriarchal societies governed by customs and norms beyond laws” (#26, FM)</p> <p>“Government has to set rules and regulations to women’s empowerment to make it easy for her, and to make the society accept the change” (#32, FM)</p>

4.2.6.2 Role of Culture: Patriarchal Society/Tribal Mentality

Patriarchy, defined as a system of social organization in which men hold a disproportionate share of power, is seen as a major obstacle to women's empowerment and participation in the public sphere in many countries and notably in the Arab Gulf states (Al-Ghanim, 2019; Haghghat, 2013; Naguib & Jamali, 2015). Cultural practices, outdated customs, and tribal traditions are often cited as the root of these patriarchal attitudes (Dechant & Al-Lamky, 2005). Participants in the study also mentioned social expectations and pressure on women to be "superpowers", and a lack of trust in their abilities and qualifications. Despite these challenges, there is a recognition of progress and social change happening in the country. While one-third of the interviewees invoked a social pressure on working women stemming from remaining conservative mindsets, the rest of participants pointed to the noticeable progress and social changes that occurred in the country with political leadership playing a key role in empowering women and encouraging their participation in different domains.

4.3 Discussion: Integrative and Culturally Sensitive Lens

Women's employment and their participation in the economic activity, as a determinant of women's empowerment worldwide, is a complex and complicated topic subject to heated debates and ideological struggles. While some are considering paid employment as empowering women, others deem female's participation in the workforce as counterproductive and exploitative and hence disempowering (Haghghat, 2013). According to Barsoum (2019), the decision to participate or not in the labor market is a pragmatic one and cannot be reduced to ideology. The findings in our study indicate a lower level of job satisfaction of women compared to men in the public sector. They concretely highlight the various factors and multiple dimensions affecting women's employment as identified by the literature and derived from the empirical study. The multi-level perspective and contextual approach adopted in this study helped in exploring the challenges and opportunities related to this phenomenon involving individual, organizational, and societal factors embedded in the specific context of the Qatari public sector. It shows the imbrication and entanglement of these multiple factors and the difficulty to single out a specific dimension as a catalyst or obstacle to women's empowerment through employment and economic participation.

There is an agreement about agency as the main determinant of empowerment. The enactment of agency in the workplace is revealed to be influenced by individual as well as organizational and institutional factors. The access to leadership and the ability to actively and effectively participate in decision-making are apparently limited. This is due either to women's lack of interest and personal choices or to structural barriers such as glass ceiling and the difficulty to balance professional and family roles and responsibilities. Despite the availability of many opportunities

and resources attracting women to work in the public sector, the workplace's regulations and practices, as highlighted by many participants, are deemed unsatisfactory and necessitate improvement especially in regard to promotions, compensations, capacity-building, and family-friendly policies.

The literature recognizes institutional constraints, such as laws and regulations, as crucial factors in either promoting or hindering women's empowerment (Cornwall & Edwards, 2010; Kabeer, 2005). This was supported by the female participants in the study, who emphasized the impact of laws and policies on women's empowerment. Some participants highlighted the constitutional and national vision of Qatar, which promotes equality between men and women and supports family-friendly initiatives. However, other participants had varying views on the human resource laws in the public sector. Some felt they were supportive and accommodating, while others believed they were a hindrance and should apply equally to all workers. Additionally, there was a need expressed for laws to cater specifically to mothers, caregivers, divorced women, and widows. Overall, the participants agreed that laws and policies should be based on principles of equity and justice, aligned with both women's nature and Islamic principles, while taking into account cultural influences on religion.

The Women, Business and the Law Index 2022 assigned Qatar a score of 29.4 out of 100, lower than the MENA region average of 53 (World Bank, 2022b). The index evaluates local laws in 190 economies based on 35 questions across 8 indicators, including workplace, parenthood, marriage, and mobility. Qatar scores low in these areas, particularly in relation to maternity and parental leave benefits. Some of the questions in the index, such as those relating to women working at night or in dangerous jobs, may be considered less relevant and appropriate. There are concerns about the moral legitimacy of international organizations and financial institutions interfering in national jurisdictions and imposing their own views on women's rights. The EU's promotion of women's empowerment through market incorporation can be seen as a form of external governance in the global South (Huelss, 2019).

This example shows how global indicators can be biased and influenced by neoliberal values and conflicting ideologies, emphasizing that a one-size-fits-all approach is not effective. It supports criticism of other indicators like the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and the Gender-related Development Index (GDI), which are criticized for ignoring cultural and social differences and fundamental empowerment variables. These indicators lack a contextual approach, taking an external normative perspective and disregarding local knowledge and practices (Haghighat, 2013; Kabeer, 2001). Thus, there is a need for policy-makers to create more culturally sensitive and nuanced indicators and to find solutions that are based on endogenous values and resources, instead of blindly imitating the West.

Another problem with the current understanding of empowerment is its top-down approach. As reported by Heitlinger (1996, in Benford & Snow, 2000), women's integration into the workforce under the guise of gender equality was imposed on them by the Communist party-state and reinforced the conflict between home and work, leading to rejection of the goal of equality itself. Several studies argue that the empowerment promoted by development agencies is not providing women the ability to make their own choices and is instead tying them to serving others (Chant, 2016;

Cornwall & Edwards, 2010). This violates the essence of empowerment, which is to enhance women's capacity for self-determination (Kabeer, 2001). Thus, besides cultural and structural factors, women's choice to participate in the workforce or be a homemaker should be respected and the necessary resources and opportunities should be provided accordingly.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) considers housework and caregiving as "non-economic" activities, raising concerns about unpaid work and social status. Neglecting these activities undervalues women's contributions to the economy as homemakers and caregivers. As highlighted by Miranda (2011, p. 6), homemaking and voluntary work, also "contribute to societal well-being but are not included in the traditional economic measures". Policy-makers should consider women's choices and aspirations. For example, Kuwait has proposed a law to pay housewives a fixed monthly income,⁶ recognizing the value of their caring roles while improving their economic empowerment. It is important to acknowledge and value women's work as homemakers and caregivers while providing appropriate workplace conditions and family-friendly policies for those participating in the workforce. To address the complex and multidimensional phenomenon of women's economic empowerment, different approaches and alternative pathways should be considered, taking into account local women's voices and needs.

4.4 Conclusion: Policy Recommendations

The significance of public policies in advancing women's empowerment has been emphasized as a factor that varies depending on the context (Duflo, 2012; Foss et al., 2019; Hunt & Samman, 2016). Policy-makers are encouraged to recognize the challenges faced by women in both public and private spheres and to establish legal reforms that support their empowerment and well-being (Perkins, 1995; Zuhur, 2003). A more empowering and participatory approach, rather than a paternalistic one, should be adopted by policy-makers (Rappaport, 1981). To ensure that women's voices are heard, participants were directly asked to offer their recommendations for policy-makers. These recommendations can be classified into five broad categories.

1. **Women's Participation in Policy-Making:** Participants emphasized the importance of utilizing their experiences and abilities in policy-making. They suggested the inclusion of women in committees responsible for developing policies and reviewing HR laws to prevent gender discrimination and biases. They also suggested involving women in resolving internal issues instead of relying on

⁶ This proposed payment of 600 KWD (about USD 2000) is available to "women once they reach 40 years of age on the basis that the woman had fulfilled her full opportunity in employment if she desires a government job, and accordingly, at this age, a woman needs to be close to her family and take care of them more than at any other time" (author translation). <https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/parliament/1013731/29-12-2020-الديحاني-تصرف-لربة-البيت-مكافأة-شهرية-بواقع-دينار>. Accessed October 4, 2022.

external consultants who may not be familiar with the local culture and work practices in the public sector. To empower all employees, training, capacity-building, delegation of authority, and freedom of expression should also be emphasized.

2. **Transparency in HR Laws and Policies:** Interviewees expressed concern about the lack of clarity and transparency in the decision-making process, particularly regarding appointment methods, promotion rules, and job descriptions. They emphasized the importance of non-discrimination and adopting more flexible and equitable HR laws and policies, particularly for divorced or widowed women and non-Qataris. Equitable incentives based on merit and competency, regardless of gender and nationality, will improve the overall working environment in the public sector.
3. **Promoting Family-Friendly Policies:** Most interviewees highlighted the difficulties faced by working mothers, particularly in the early stages of motherhood, and the need to address these challenges. They proposed extended maternity leaves, father leaves, and childcare arrangements, as well as teleworking, flexible hours, and part-time work options to help balance work and family responsibilities and protect the physical and mental health of working mothers.
4. **Advocating for Gender Justice within Islamic Principles:** Participants agreed on the important role of religion in empowering women and emphasized the need for policies that align with the objectives of Shari'a. They called for restoring principles of justice in accordance with the discourse of freedom and dignity and avoiding any misinterpretation or exploitation of religion to legitimize certain policies or interests. The aim is to remain true to the egalitarian principles of Islam.
5. **Encouraging Regional Cooperation:** Given the similarities among GCC countries, participants stressed the need for regional programs that allow women to support each other and called for policy-makers to cooperate on laws and benchmarks related to women's empowerment.

In conclusion, the advancement of women's empowerment in the public sector in Qatar requires a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to address the various factors that impact women's employment and economic participation. This chapter highlights the crucial role of public policies in this regard and underscores the need for policy-makers to adopt a more empowering and participatory approach and to take into consideration the recommendations of women. Through this empirical study, participants emphasized the importance of including women in policy-making, promoting transparency in HR laws and policies, supporting family-friendly policies, advocating for gender justice within Islamic principles, and encouraging regional cooperation. The key recommendations focus on equal employment opportunities, professional development and capacity-building, merit-based promotion, positive relationships with supervisors, addressing the gender wage gap, equal opportunities and rights regardless of nationality, job satisfaction, leadership and decision-making, intrinsic motivation, aligning with Islamic principles, and challenging patriarchal attitudes and cultural practices. The study highlights the significance of creating

a supportive environment for women in the public sector that acknowledges their unique challenges and provides opportunities for growth and advancement.

Finally, the study suggests several policy implications for women's employment and economic participation in the Qatari public sector. These include improving the workplace environment for better job satisfaction, ensuring equitable and culturally sensitive policies, using nuanced indicators to measure empowerment, respecting women's choices and aspirations, valuing non-economic activities and acknowledging their contribution to societal well-being, and promoting self-determination. The study emphasizes the need for a bottom-up approach that provides women with necessary resources and opportunities, while also acknowledging the cultural and religious influences that shape gender roles and norms.

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Chapter 5

Work-Life Balance Challenges and Family-Friendly Policies: Evidence from Qatar



Julia Barbar, Rabia Naguib, and Maysaa AbuHilal

Abstract This chapter focuses on the major challenges facing women in balancing work and family life, highlighting the crucial role of cultural and institutional factors in shaping work-life policies in Qatar. The chapter provides a comparative analysis of human resource laws and recent developments in family-friendly policies, such as leave, childcare, and flexible work arrangements. The chapter also presents the findings of 26 semi-structured interviews with local and migrant women, exploring the challenges they face in the workplace, the factors influencing their employment decisions, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work-life experiences. The chapter concludes with insights into the significance of part-time work and flexible work arrangements for women in Qatar.

Keywords Work-life balance · Family-friendly policies and practices · Female empowerment · Human resource laws · Socio-cultural dynamics · Part-time work · Flexitime

5.1 Introduction

Work-life balance is a crucial issue for both genders, although its impact on women is different from that on men. Defining the concept of balance is a challenge in itself, as work-life balance assumes a balance between work and non-work activities, including not only leisure time but also domestic duties (Rao, 2017), which often falls more heavily on working women. To achieve work-life balance, it is essential to create a supportive and motivating work environment that allows individuals to

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balance their work and personal responsibilities and activities, leading to increased productivity, commitment, and loyalty (Dhas, 2015). In recognition of its impact on employee performance and organizational productivity, progressive workplaces are placing more emphasis on work-life balance (Hobson et al., 2001). The literature suggests that a balanced work-life results in a better family life and career experience (Anderson et al., 2002), while an imbalance can lead to strained family relationships and reduced productivity at work (Doble and Supriya, 2010).

The evolution of workplace settings and employee demographics in recent years has highlighted the need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between work and non-work lives (Hayman, 2005). The concept of work-life balance gained increased attention from top management and human resource management in the 1980s, particularly as more women with dependents entered the workforce (Hamilton et al., 2006). The literature has recognized the link between socio-demographic factors and work-life balance, but the topic remains understudied (Joseph & Sebastian, 2017).

It has been established that men and women have different behaviors, attitudes, choices, and values (Adams & Funk, 2012). Therefore, scholars have emphasized the importance of diversity, which enriches decision-making processes, social capital, and cognitive models, ultimately leading to improved organizational outcomes (Al-Alawi, 2016; Dezsó & Ross, 2012; Hillman et al., 2002). In the GCC countries, the public sector is the largest employer (OECD, 2019). Notably, women in public administration in Arab countries are mainly concentrated in the health and education sectors (Nasser, 2018) due to the more flexible working hours and conditions offered in these fields (OECD, 2019). The limited female participation in the workforce in the Arab world can be attributed to formal and informal institutional configurations that regulate gender roles in society and determine female participation in the workforce (Faghih & Zali, 2018). Therefore, it is important to consider the implications of work-life balance and its practices when exploring the various conditions affecting working and non-working women. Socio-cultural, political, and economic factors vary across countries and are known to influence work-life balance.

The literature has primarily focused on work-life balance in developed countries, leaving the Middle Eastern context underrepresented (Kamenou-Aigbekaen & Thory, 2016; Yount et al., 2016). To address this gap, a closer examination of work-life balance in the Middle East is necessary. Our study focuses on Qatar, a diverse country with both traditional and international socio-cultural dynamics that impact work-life balance. We specifically examine the public sector, as it is the main employer of women in Qatar and the GCC countries (OECD, 2019).

This chapter explores the issue of work-life balance in the Middle Eastern context, with a focus on Qatar. It highlights the need for family-friendly policies and practices in the public sector, which is the largest and primary employer of women in Qatar and the GCC countries. The study emphasizes the importance of considering socio-cultural dynamics in shaping policies and practices that promote work-life balance for working women. The chapter presents the evolution of human resource laws in Qatar, based on interviews with working and non-working women, and discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected work-life balance. The study concludes

by presenting options for improving work-life balance, including part-time work and flextime.

The chapter is structured as follows: The first section discusses work-life balance for women in Arab countries, followed by an overview of work-life balance challenges in the Middle East, focusing on Qatar. This is followed by a review of international human resource laws and a comparison of human resource laws in Qatar, highlighting the evolution of laws that positively impact work-life balance. The methodology for conducting semi-structured interviews is then presented, along with research findings and implications. The conclusion summarizes the key points discussed in the chapter, including the responses of working and non-working women, experiences of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic, and family-friendly options that promote work-life balance such as part-time work and flextime.

5.1.1 Work-Life Balance for Females in Arab Countries: Focus on Qatar

Scholars who study the context of Arab countries have found that women often choose to prioritize family responsibilities over additional work responsibilities or managerial/supervisory positions (Tlaiss & Alwaqif, 2020). In addition, working women in these environments are more concerned about achieving a balance between their careers and marriages, especially in settings where domestic duties are given more importance than career goals (Liloia, 2019). This is due to the strong sense of duty that Arab women feel toward their families and spouses. The imbalance between work and life that women experience highlights the need for family-friendly policies that can help improve work-life balance. It is essential to support women in maintaining and developing their careers while also allowing them to devote appropriate time to their families, which is a fundamental aspect of socio-cultural norms and traditions in Arab countries.

Research highlights the connection between gender and work-life balance (Chandrasekar et al., 2013), showing that women are more likely to consider work-life balance initiatives, including part-time work, sabbaticals for family obligations (Buddeberg-Fischer et al., 2010), and parental leave (Connor & Wright, 2013). Although the public sector is the primary employer of women in Arab countries, especially in the GCC where work-life balance benefits such as flexible work arrangements and hours are available, women tend to work more in certain sectors such as education, healthcare, social work, professional and clerical fields, and agencies (OECD, 2019; Salem & Yount, 2019).

Despite significant progress in Qatar to provide support and opportunities for women and empower them to participate in political, economic, social, and leadership spheres (Qatar National Vision 2030, 2008), women still face challenges in balancing their work with their non-work activities. El-Kassem (2018) notes that

female employees place great importance on leave-taking benefits. Due to the unequal distribution of responsibilities between men and women and the heavier burden of family duties that falls on women, achieving a work-life balance is more challenging for women in Qatar.

5.1.1.1 A Contextual Overview of Work-Life Balance Challenges for Females

Achieving work-life balance is an increasingly important issue that requires urgent policy development to ensure that employees can properly balance their work duties with personal responsibilities and activities. The implications of work-life balance on both organizational outcomes and individuals' quality of life outside work, amidst institutional and environmental dynamics, underscore the importance of multi-level factors in its realization.

In the Middle East, where cultural and regulatory barriers impede the overall employment of women, especially in more conservative societies, scholars have highlighted the macro-level factors that affect work-life balance (Alfarran et al., 2018). Despite notable efforts to support female participation, concerns remain regarding the impact of women working on their marriage, family, and traditional values (Elamin & Omair, 2010). Women in Arab countries face cultural constraints that manifest as concerns within families (Blaydes et al., 2021). Moreover, family-friendly policies that create flexible work conditions and enable employees to manage their work and family responsibilities are lacking, highlighting the need for clear-cut policies on the matter (Belwal et al., 2019; Belwal & Belwal, 2017, 2014).

At the organizational level, Long and inflexible working hours, along with minimal workplace support, are key factors that negatively impact both work-life balance and organizational productivity (Adekoya et al., 2021; Al-Asfour et al., 2017). Despite national commitments and initiatives in Arab countries, particularly in the GCC, to support female employment, development, and growth, women still face significant challenges in balancing their work with personal and domestic activities. These challenges are due to demanding roles and positions that may not fit a woman's lifestyle and obligations, such as frequent travel and demanding workloads that require time away from familial duties, as well as gender-based challenges related to pregnancy and short maternity leaves (Al-Alawi, 2016; Al-Asfour et al., 2017; Belwal & Belwal, 2017).

Achieving work-life balance is a crucial factor that affects women's decision to enter and remain in the workforce. However, the features and dynamics that impact work-life balance are not consistent and are dependent on various factors such as institutional settings, personal experiences, and individuals. Work-life balance varies not only based on gender but also across countries, workplaces, and human resource management systems. At the macro-level, socio-cultural, legal, economic, and political factors that differ across countries have significant implications on work-life balance. Similarly, individual (micro-level) and organizational (meso-level) factors are believed to influence work-life balance practices positively or negatively.

5.1.1.2 Work-Life Balance Challenges for Females in Qatar

Women still face challenges in achieving work-life balance despite policymakers and employers addressing the issue (Jabeen et al., 2018). In Qatar, family is a top priority for its citizens, who view success as a balance between their personal and professional lives, ensuring their family's needs are met (DIFI, 2018). According to Pontefract (2016), workplace actualization occurs when individuals are satisfied with their jobs because their personal purpose and activities align with the organization's purpose and their work duties. However, challenging jobs that require long hours, frequent travel, and high productivity are difficult without telework, flexible schedules, and family-friendly benefits. In Qatar, where family life is highly valued, work-family conflicts can impact workplace outcomes, individuals' well-being, and familial happiness and health, which are key aspects of women's empowerment.

According to a 2018 study by DIFI, almost all working men and women in Qatar struggle to achieve work-life balance, and this challenge is more significant in Qatar than in Western countries due to the country's cultural differences. In Arabic societies, such as Qatar, family and community life plays a central role, emphasizing the importance of spending time with family, taking care of children, and elderly parents (Allen et al., 2018; Lewis and Guillari, 2005). Despite the traditional gender-based division of roles, both men and women in Qatar view work as a means to meet their family's financial needs and achieve their desired lifestyle and expenses. However, female empowerment is a relatively new initiative in Qatar compared to Western countries, where older contemporary workforces have paved the way for more developed employment conditions and work-life balance initiatives for working individuals. Achieving work-life balance is crucial for individuals' health and well-being, as emphasized in the DIFI study.

The Qatari government initiated the Qatar National Vision 2030 in 2008, which prioritizes transforming organizational values and cultures to support economic development and enhance the welfare and quality of life for citizens and residents. This has led to a growing interest among organizations in Qatar to improve work-life balance and create a supportive work environment (El-Kassem, 2018). However, it remains unclear how much progress has been made in translating this interest into actual practices, warranting further investigation.

The integration and implementation of national objectives and corporate strategies are among the main challenges to achieving adequate work-life balance in Arab countries. While the Middle East, especially the GCC countries, has demonstrated a growing commitment to policy dialogue and change toward gender balance in the workforce and corporate leadership (OECD, 2019), increasing female representation in these areas remains a challenge. Women continue to face social biases and unsupportive working conditions that disregard their familial responsibilities and personal activities. Work-life imbalance is believed to be a crucial factor contributing to these challenges. The multi-level barriers that hinder work-life balance for females in Arab countries need to be addressed through policy improvements and recommendations. Understanding the factors that contribute to the current situation is essential in striving for a more equitable and balanced work environment that promotes gender equality.

5.1.1.3 An Overview of International Human Resource Laws

Without workplace policies that support work-life balance, men and women may feel constrained by traditional gender roles. To address this issue, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has developed four conventions that focus on work-life balance and a range of social and labor issues. ILO Convention No. 183 promotes maternity leave for pregnant and nursing women and emphasizes equal treatment for both men and women in the workplace. The convention identifies five key components for pregnancy protection, including maternity leave, job protection, cash and medical benefits, health protection, and breastfeeding support. While most working and non-working mothers aim to breastfeed, many face obstacles due to their working conditions. Offering breaks and private spaces for nursing mothers is in compliance with international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and ILO Convention No. 183. In particular, granting breastfeeding breaks to working mothers with newborns should be a priority due to the importance of breastfeeding for infant health, according to UNICEF and the ILO (2013).

ILO Convention No. (183) includes Article No. (4), which states that the duration of maternity leave and postnatal leave should not be less than fourteen weeks and six weeks, respectively. The convention also provides the right to additional leave in case of sickness or complications during pregnancy or childbirth. The convention ensures job security for pregnant mothers and those on maternity leave, as well as those returning to work. It guarantees that working mothers can return to the same or a similar job with the same salary, their breastfeeding breaks are respected, and their overall working hours are reduced. Moreover, the convention prohibits any form of discrimination related to pregnancy, including asking for a pregnancy test as a precondition for employment (ILO, 2000).

5.1.1.4 A Comparative Overview of Human Resource Laws in Qatar

Governments worldwide have been striving to establish a healthy work-life balance through family-friendly policies. Such policies include flexible working hours, telework, maternity/paternity leave, and childcare availability/subsidies. However, policies and policymakers vary across countries, emphasizing the uniqueness of each nation and the significance of considering national institutional conditions and their impact on policies and policy improvements. In this regard, we reviewed family-friendly policies in human resource laws in Qatar and briefly compared them to those in other GCC countries, namely the UAE and KSA (as summarized in Table 5.1).

Despite progress made in recent years, some laws in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries require further improvements to promote work-life balance. Paternity leave is not available in Qatar or KSA, while the UAE allows for three days of paternal leave during the first month after a child's birth. Maternity leave in Qatar is limited to two months and can be extended to three months for twin births. However,

Table 5.1 Comparative overview of human resource laws in Qatar

Federal work-life balance/ family-friendly policies	Qatar	KSA	UAE
Maternity leave duration	2 months and 3 months in case of twins' birth	4 weeks before childbirth and 6 weeks after childbirth	3 months
Paternity leave duration	N/A	N/A	3 consecutive or separate working days during the first month of the birth of his child
Breastfeeding duration	Two years as of the end of the maternity leave	Undefined	4 months as of the end of the maternity leave
Breastfeeding hours	2	1	2
Legal text for Nurseries in the workplace	No	Yes	Yes
Legal text for childcare leave with disabilities, sickness, or requiring treatment	Yes	No	No
Flexitime or telework	No	No	No
Working Hours	48 hours per week and 36 hours per week during the month of Ramadan	48 hours per week and 36 hours per week during the month of Ramadan	8 hours per day that are reduced by 2 hours during the month of Ramadan
Annual Vacation	Minimum of three weeks for those employed for less than five years and four weeks for those employed for more than five years	Minimum of 21 days for those employed for less than five years and 30 days for those employed for more than five years	30 days for the occupants of special grade (B) posts and above and 22 days for others
Job Security	No	No	No

employees in Qatar are entitled to two hours of daily breastfeeding for two years after maternity leave, a more generous policy than that of the UAE, which only allows for four months of breastfeeding, or KSA, which permits only one hour per day. Unlike the UAE and KSA, Qatari laws do not require nurseries or childcare facilities in the workplace, but they do provide childcare leave for women. Working mothers in Qatar are granted a five-year leave of absence to care for a sick or disabled child. Regarding working hours, full-time employees in Qatar work 48 hours per week, except during Ramadan when the hours are reduced to 36 per week. However, laws

in Qatar, like other GCC countries, do not address telework or flex work. Qatar allows for 21 days of annual leave for employees with less than five years of service and 30 days for those with more than five years of service. Job security in Arab countries is generally limited to protecting the jobs and rights of women on maternity leave or during pregnancy and childbirth and is not guaranteed in other situations. In Qatar, a medical authority grants sick leave for a period not exceeding three continuous working days and a total of 10 working days per year.

5.1.1.5 The Evolution of Some Legislative Frameworks from the Human Resource Management Law no. (8) of 2009 to the Civil Human Resource Law no. (15) of 2016 in Qatar

In the quest for achieving a healthy work-life balance, countries worldwide face constant pressures to develop and improve family-friendly policies. For Qatar, being an Arab country, there are additional challenges to empower women to participate in the workforce while preserving traditional family and community values. Despite this, the public sector remains the country's largest employer, with a significant number of women employees (OECD, 2019). To support and encourage women's employment and offer them work arrangements that allow them to attend to their families and domestic duties, Qatar has been continuously improving working conditions in the public sector, which it controls and can influence the most (Qatar National Vision 2030, 2008). In 2016, Qatar replaced the Human Resource Management Law No. (8) of 2009 with the Civil Human Resource Law No. (15) of 2016, which focuses on three benefits: leaves, childcare arrangements, and flexible working arrangements (Table 5.2).

Leaves. Both the 2009 and 2016 laws in Qatar provided for a 60-day paid maternity leave, but the latter made an exception for mothers of twins, who are entitled to a 90-day leave instead. The 2009 law allowed for Qatari employees to take leave to care for their children with disabilities, with a maximum of two leaves during their service and a maximum of three years at a time, with the first three years being fully paid and any additional years paid at 50%. However, the 2016 Civil Human Resource Law No. (15) introduced improvements in this regard. Article No. (74) of this law grants a Qatari employee a fully paid leave to care for children with disabilities, as well as those receiving treatment or with illnesses requiring a mother's attention, for a maximum of five years. The employee must provide a report from a competent medical authority and obtain approval from their supervisor. If the leave exceeds five years, approval from the Prime Minister is required. Additionally, under Article (88) of the Executive Regulation No. (32) of 2016, a Qatari employee is entitled to a fully paid leave to accompany their sick child during their treatment in a public or private hospital in the country. The employee must obtain a report from the hospital and its ratification from a competent medical authority.

Childcare Arrangements. The Human Resource Management Law No. (8) of 2009 required employers to grant employees two-hour breastfeeding sessions per day for one year after the end of her maternity leave, while Article (83) of the Civil

Table 5.2 The evolution of legislative frameworks related to human resource laws in Qatar

Policies to support balance between work and family responsibilities		Comparison	
		Human Resource Management Law No. (8) of 2009	Civil Human Resource Law No. (15) of 2016
Leaves	Fully paid maternity leave (in days)	60	60
	Fully paid maternity leave, in case of twins (in days)	60	90
	Fully paid leave to the mother to care for a child with a disability (in years)	3	5
	Fully paid leave to attend for children with disabilities, sickness or requiring treatment in one of the public or private hospitals within the State	N/A	5 years that can be extended after the approval of the Prime Minister
Childcare	Breastfeeding hours (in hours)	2	2
	Duration of taking advantage of breastfeeding hours (in years)	1	2
Flexibility of work arrangements	Part-time work system	The Council of Ministers, based on the proposal of the government agency and according to the nature of the work, sets a system for appointing to certain part-time positions	The government agency may fill some positions with the part-time system in accordance with the conditions and regulations issued by a decision of the Council of Ministers

Human Resource Law No. (15) of 2016 extended this duration to two years and gave women the freedom to fix their nursing times.

Flexible Working Arrangements. The 2016 Civil Human Resource Law No. (15) introduced flexible working arrangements to empower women in Qatar, including the development of part-time systems based on the positions they hold. The law implemented a decentralized approach to the part-time system, where government agencies such as ministries or public institutions are responsible for filling some available positions using the part-time system. The conditions and regulations for the part-time system are determined by the decision of the Council of Ministers.

Article (11) of the 2016 Law states that government agencies have the authority to fill certain part-time positions, while the 2009 Law granted the authority to appoint part-time positions to the Council of Ministers based on proposals from government agencies and the nature of the work.

5.1.1.6 Qatar's Cabinet Decree No. 13 of 2021

Qatar's commitment to promoting women's empowerment is reflected in the recent Cabinet Decree No. 13 of 2021, which outlines the regulations and conditions for part-time work in government agencies. The decree aims to consider and address the interests and needs of employees, particularly women with children. To be eligible for part-time work, an employee must be a Qatari official subject to the provisions of the Civil Human Resources Laws, work for only one government entity, have completed the probation period successfully, and not hold a senior or leadership position.

5.1.2 Work-Life Balance Challenges: An Empirical Evidence

In our research on women's empowerment in Qatar, work-life balance emerged as a crucial factor that can either encourage or deter women from joining the labor force. In this section, we will present the results of our empirical study on the work-life balance challenges and opportunities highlighted by women participants.

5.1.2.1 Methodology: Qualitative Approach

We utilized in-depth semi-structured interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various factors affecting women's empowerment from their own perspectives and experiences. Our interviews consisted of 57 questions divided into five themes, including demographic information, the definition of empowerment, promoting/hindering factors of empowerment, work-family balance and the assessment of remote working experience, and the impact of COVID-19. While some of the questions were direct (yes/no) questions, most of them were open-ended, allowing women to express their opinions, share their thoughts, and voice their experiences. The interviews were conducted over a four-month period in 2022, with each interview lasting between 1.5 and 2 hours. Our sample consisted of 26 women, including Qatari (N = 17) and Arab migrant (N = 9) participants, selected through snowball sampling. The sample comprised both currently employed in the public sector (N = 15) and non-working or unemployed (N = 11) women participants (Table 5.3). We conducted 20 interviews in Arabic, which were then translated into English, and 6 interviews were conducted in English. We analyzed the transcripts of the interviews

Table 5.3 Participants’ demographics

	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age	30–35	10	38.5%
	36–45	11	42.3%
	46–55	5	19.2%
Nationality	Qatari	17	65.4%
	Non-Qatari (Migrant)	9	34.6%
Marital Status	Single	2	7.7%
	Married	21	80.7%
	Divorced	3	11.6%
Number of children	0–1	4	10.4%
	2–3	15	39%
	4–5	5	19.2%
	N/A	3	11.5%
Education Level	PhD	4	15.4%
	Masters	14	53.8%
	Bachelors	8	30.8%
Employment Status	Working	15	57.7%
	Non-Working	11	42.3%
Employment status by Nationality	Qatari Working (QW)	11	42.3%
	Qatari Non-Working (QNW)	6	23.1%
	Migrant Working (MW)	4	15.4%
	Migrant Non-Working (MNW)	5	19.2%

using Nvivo software, employing both a deductive and inductive approach to identify themes.

5.1.2.2 Factors Associated with Employment Decisions According to Interviewed Females

When asked about their ability to balance work and family life, 30% of the interviewees reported maintaining a smooth balance, while 16% said they had an excellent balance. However, 23% of the interviewees reported experiencing a significant imbalance between work and family. The data suggests that several factors contribute to this issue, including a lack of part-time or telework options, overwhelming family responsibilities, excessive working hours, limited childcare arrangements, insufficient family-friendly policies, and an unsupportive work environment.

Hussain and Jullandhry (2020) found in their study that unemployed women had higher levels of empowerment than women with salaried employment. Non-working women indicated in qualitative discussions that they chose to avoid the “triple burden” of caring for their children and elderly family members while working (p. 8). We hence differentiate between females who chose to work and those who chose not. Factors impacting either decision were personal/family-related reasons or

Table 5.4 Participants' education attainment and employment status

	Working	Not working
Bachelor	4	5
Master	9	4
PhD	2	2
Total	15	11

work conditions. Noticeably, education does not seem to be a determinant factor as both groups achieved a high level of educational attainment (Table 5.4).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting work-life balance and employment choices of women in Qatar, we present a summary of our interviews with female participants. These interviews provided valuable insights and implications based on the participants' experiences and perspectives. To make the text more readable, participants' quotes and key extracts from the interviews are presented in a separate table (Table 5.5) summarizing this section.

5.1.2.3 Women Who Chose not to Work

Seven out of eleven who chose not to work mentioned finding a balance between family and work as the primary challenge to having a job. Females who were not working or who quit their jobs explained that their decision was based on the nature of their employment, i.e., the challenging daily work and the long working hours they had to complete as they struggled to commit to their work demands while attending to their home and family. These females were struggling and sometimes were even unable to balance between work and home responsibilities, which felt like two full-time jobs with no rest time for some of them. An important factor that influenced interviewees' responses is whether they have children and the age of their children. In this regard, two respondents, both Ph.D. holders with a medical background, referred to work-family balance as the key reason that made them resign at some point in their lives particularly when their children were younger. Interviewees accordingly underlined that human resource laws do not necessarily support or empower working mothers.

Females participating in the interviews also explained that they not only struggle to balance their long working hours with their personal and family responsibilities, but their maternity leave was relatively short, and their organization did not provide them with flexible work conditions, breastfeeding facilities (i.e., nursing or pumping rooms), and facilities or allowances for nursery. As daycare is relatively expensive in Qatar, the cheapest option for these working mothers is to leave their child/infant with the grandparents, which is not necessarily a solution either because the grandparents are also working or—in the case of non-Qataris in general—the grandparents live abroad. Respondents accordingly expressed their preference for part-time work, telework, or freelance work which would allow them to have better time management and work-life balance rather than get consumed by work at the expense of their

Table 5.5 Factors Associated with Employment Decisions According to Interviewed Females

Interviewed females who chose not to work	
Reasons for choosing not work	Respondent’s quotes
Absence of family-friendly policies at work and unsupportive work environment (i.e., insufficient maternity leaves, insufficient breastfeeding hours, heavy workload, and long working hours)	<p>“I do not find the laws pertaining to employment to be supportive and able to ensure the empowerment I am seeking in my life choices (married with 5 children)” (I#12, QNW)</p> <p>“...The international laws that governments put in place to support and protect breastfeeding, including the WHO recommendations, entail providing a long maternity leave that helps protect and continue breastfeeding for as long as possible. I think WHO advises a year, I see if it is 6 months it would be excellent. Currently, we have two to three months in the government/ public sector, and if you work for private, it will be less, maybe 50 days...” (I#14, QNW)</p> <p>“Working environment, its laws and policies are not designed to accommodate women’s different settings. They are not flexible enough that they accommodate a woman’s circumstances, whether she has children, or has an elderly mother and father, or has a child that needs breastfeeding, or she does not have someone to assist her, or does not have a driver to drive around, or someone watching over or staying with her children during the long working hours. I feel there are lots of policies that do not allow women to work” (I#2, QW)</p> <p>“I chose not to work because of the long hours of jobs that I found. So, long hours are a problem. I cannot leave home at 6am, come back home at 3 pm. I have a family as well, I have a very busy husband who cannot help, and all responsibilities are on me. I prefer if I find a part-time work, I will definitely go for it, and it will be easier for me and for my family” (I#22, MNW)</p>

(continued)

Table 5.5 (continued)

Interviewed females who chose not to work	
Challenges related to finding or financing childcare (i.e., absence of childcare or breastfeeding facilities at the workplace, costly daycare with no subsidies from work, and absence/unavailability of parental help)	<p>“If a woman decides to work, she will get support from her family, but on the other hand, issues might arise from the short maternity leave, the inability to get her kids into nursery due to financial incapability” (I#3, QW)</p> <p>“...they want women to come back to work quickly, but at the same time, they do not provide them with what they need to continue breastfeeding (nursing rooms or pumping rooms), which a lot of global and international organizations now provide for the women working for them. We do not have facilities or allowances or even support from the government or the employers for a nursery” (I#14, QNW)</p>
Difficulties in balancing personal/family life with work	<p>“...Actually, I worked in Qatar for about two years, part-time job, and it was very good experience but things stopped because of the pandemic, and maybe I will go back to this job, or maybe I will find another one which will not deplete me, or consume me because I want to live as well, to give children their time and my husband, my house, I have a priority you know. I also like social life, I like to go with friends, I don't want the job to take me” (I#22, MNW)</p> <p>“I think one of the main reasons why women chose not to work because it is just so hard to balance, especially married women or mothers. You literally have two full-time jobs. If you don't have that support that is going to be a reason why you choose not to work” (I#23, MW)</p>
Unavailability of telework or flextime	<p>“I consider that the human resources laws are not empowering women. I see employed mothers, in particular, suffering with pregnancy. There are no flexible options, for example, working from home or 3 days of work, two days at home, meaning there are no such options and flexibility that mothers need during pregnancy...” (I#14, QNW)</p>

(continued)

Table 5.5 (continued)

Interviewed females who chose not to work	
Choice to focus on family and children	<p>“The most common reason I see around me is women having children and wanting to focus on raising them, so they do not work” (I#10, QW)</p> <p>“She may be financially sufficient, and her priorities may be different. Her priorities may mean that she takes care of the family or the disapproval of the head of the family” (I#17, MW)</p>
No support/restrictions from family and spouse	<p>“Maybe familial pressures, a lot of responsibilities especially for married women who have children, there isn’t any cooperation or task distribution of responsibility between them and their partners so the entire burden is placed on the woman who is forced in the end to either work and fall behind in her home/ familial duties, or she devotes 100% of her time and energy to her family and home” (I#9, QW)</p> <p>“Woman not getting support from her husband or from family in general regarding helping her with her career path” (I#3, QW)</p> <p>“There are some families until now who do not allow women to work. There are some husbands or brothers who are preventing the wife or sister women from working, telling her “stay at home and I will provide for you” (I#10, QW)</p>
Interviewed females who chose to work	
Reasons for choosing to work	Respondent’s quotes
Work motivation and love for career/field	<p>“My motivation to work at the first level is financial independence, this is from one aspect, from the second aspect I love my field, I love the field that I specialized in and I love working in it” (I#11, QW)</p> <p>“Honestly there is a lot of reasons why I go to work. The first, because it was always something I wanted to do. I went to the university and wanted to work and have a job. Also, because I feel that I am good at my job and I am passionate about it and I feel that I can make a difference and that’s what motivates me to go to work” (I#23, MW)</p>

(continued)

Table 5.5 (continued)

Interviewed females who chose not to work	
Contribute to society and community	<p>“To develop my career, to support my family, to find myself also, I am happy to work and to be involved in building the community, although it is not my community, but our profession is for the human beings” (I#25, MW)</p> <p>“At a personal level, I see myself as a useful person in society. You could say it is kind of “given in life” and we must continue to do it. I like to leave my mark in what I do, besides, work organizes my life style in a great way. It makes me look at other things other than the personal side or social side of my life” (I#3, QW)</p>
Self-actualization, self-sufficiency, and financial independence	<p>“Self-actualization and material/financial need” (I#17, MW)</p> <p>“My motivation is to have an income for my subsistence” (I#2, QW)</p> <p>“Autonomy, and to be financially independent” (I#9, QW)</p>
Support for family and children	<p>“I am not going to hide the fact that finances are definitely a factor especially now that I have a family and I want to be able to provide to them. I know it is not my responsibility, but I feel that I want to contribute to make sure that my kids have all they need” (I#23, MW)</p>
Not staying idle	<p>“...I do not like to stay at home, (the youngest of my children is 7 years old), so if I stay at home, what should I do? I don't have anything. So, I go to work better for me, I don't like to stay idle” (I#4, QW)</p>

(continued)

Table 5.5 (continued)

Interviewed females who chose not to work	
Support and encouragement from spouse and parents	<p>“My family supports me and helps me to a big extent. If it weren’t for my family, it would have been impossible for me to balance my responsibilities towards my son and my job” (I#11, QW)</p> <p>“To their best extent. My husband encourages me a lot to work because I will go crazy if I stay at home. But at the same time, I am too tired as after work, I have to take care of the kids. My husband tries to help me to the best extent to have this kind of balance between work and home” (I#21, MW)</p>
Family-friendly policies at work and a supportive work environment	<p>“Yes, and there is more inclination towards more initiatives such as remote work, part-time work, and fewer working hours, it is mainly within the government sector/public sector that the working hours are few. However, they said that they are jobs that will not require that you go to your place of work, such as call centers and other jobs. All of this is on the basis that they push women to work and not fall short with regards to the rights of the home, because they know that the Qatari society is family oriented and the work might create a lack of life balance. The current law is helpful, and with this, they have adopted new ways and initiatives to increase support for women including the labor law in terms of working hours, maternity leave. It includes Qatari and non-Qatari, but the initiatives regarding remote work and the call centers are for Qatari women only” (I#17, MW)</p> <p>“In Government sector laws, there is empowerment and help that has been established, and women are directed to these jobs...for example, the duration of breastfeeding is two hours for a period of two years, double the period in the private sector,” (I#4, QW)</p>

personal, family, and children’s time. They likewise underline that the unavailability of telework and flexible working options is the main obstacle and reason for their exit from the labor market. Working females also felt uncomfortable and were forced to quit their jobs when working in men-dominated organizations where they faced gender-based bias and found it difficult to match their aspirations. Moreover, while some respondents added that they simply chose not to work or to stop working to focus on their family and children instead, others explained that they had no support

and faced restrictions from their family and husband that disrupted their career path and employment decision.

In summary, the struggle to balance family and work has been cited as the primary reason for not having a job by two-thirds of non-working women. These women quit their employment due to long and demanding work hours, lack of support for working mothers, and difficulty in balancing work with their personal and family responsibilities. Having young children was also a factor in their decision. The absence of supportive HR laws, short maternity leaves, and limited facilities for childcare and breastfeeding made it difficult for these women to balance work and family. They preferred part-time, telework, or freelance work for better time management and work-life balance, however, the limited availability of telework and flexible work options were a major hindrance. Some women experienced gender-based bias in male-dominated workplaces and faced opposition from their family and husband which impacted their career choices.

5.1.2.4 Women Who Chose to Work

Female participants in the interviews explained that the main reason they chose to work and to stay employed comes from personal reasons rather than work-related factors or conditions. These reasons are their own motivation to work, their desire to have financial autonomy and independence, and the support they receive from their families. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that eight out of fifteen working females felt unsatisfied or struggled to find balance between family and work.

Females participating in the interviews underlined their motivation and enthusiasm to work and develop their careers and spoke with great interest and love about their jobs, careers, and/or fields. Some respondents even stated that they enjoy going to work and engaging with other people. Interviewees also believed that they have an important role to play and expressed their desire to be involved in their community, to participate and serve society, and to make a difference. These respondents even considered that female employment is an added-value and a great contribution to society. Other females highlighted the importance of being self-actualized and self-sufficient from work and of developing and advancing their careers rather than being restricted to their family and children's duties. Participants likewise explained that an essential motivation for their employment is their wish to be financially independent and have an income for their subsistence, especially in the case of divorced women. Others added that they also work to provide for their family, support their husband with financial expenses, and make sure that their children have everything they need. Lastly, female participants highlighted that an essential motivation for their employment is the understanding and support they have from their families, parents, and husband who encourage and value their education and employment, provide and/or assist with childcare including picking up and dropping off children, and share and help with domestic responsibilities. Females hence highlighted the crucial role of a supportive family and partner in empowering and supporting them, by understanding their workload and work time, by helping when needed, and by

being cooperative and dividing tasks rather than burdening women with the entire house- and family-related duties.

Overall, the female participants in the interviews emphasized that their personal motivations and family support were the main reasons they chose to work and stay employed. They spoke with passion about their careers and their desire to contribute to society and be financially independent. However, eight out of fifteen working women expressed difficulty in balancing work and family. The participants also emphasized the importance of supportive HR laws and work environments, including shorter working hours, extended maternity leave, workplace childcare arrangements, and flexible working arrangements after maternity leave. The role of a supportive family and partner was also highlighted as crucial in empowering and supporting women in their careers.

5.1.2.5 Women's Opinions on Part-Time and/or Flextime Work Options

The implementation and execution of family-friendly policies and practices that enhance work-life balance are vital. An important option that is worth considering by agencies, institutions, or governments who are seeking culturally guided women empowerment in the workplace is providing choices of part-time and/or flexible working hours. As part of the interviews conducted, working women were asked about their opinions on such options in general. Overall, all participants agreed that part-time work and/or flextime options are necessary for women empowerment and help women achieve a better work-life balance. When asked whether they would consider part-time or flexible working hours, nine participants responded positively. Four of them, however, were concerned about the possibility of a decrease in their monthly salary. Five interviewees likewise underlined the financial challenges and burdens they would face because of salary cuts when opting for part-time work. Three interviewees nonetheless stated that they would still go for a part-time option, even if it implies a lower salary or if it affects their career.

In summary, working women in Qatar support the idea of family-friendly policies and flexible working hours as a means of empowering women and promoting work-life balance. Some women may have concerns about a decrease in salary if they opt for part-time work, but a few would still choose it for the benefits it brings to their personal lives.

5.1.2.6 Working Women's Opinions on Telework During the COVID-19 Pandemic

While working women in Qatar do not yet have the option of telework or flextime work, the COVID-19 pandemic offered them the novel and valuable experience of working from home which granted them more control over their work schedule and the opportunity to be closer to their family and children. We therefore dedicated a

section of the interviews that focused on assessing participants' experiences and opinions on teleworking during the pandemic. While working from home presents several advantages, working females likewise highlighted the considerable challenges they faced.

Overall, around one-third of respondents had a good experience during the pandemic and underlined the positive implications of working from home on their lives, while the rest were almost equally divided between those who had a bad experience and those who had a mix of positive and negative experiences. Table 5.6 summarizes and presents the Pros and Cons of Telework based on Females' Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Respondents with positive experiences underlined the positive implications of working from home on their lives and highlighted the importance of balancing their work with their family life by attending to their children and family needs. Most importantly, they emphasized the benefits of telework in bringing families together and allowing for more family time, which had a positive impact on their personal lives. Interviewees added that they were generally more productive despite being at home and around children and explained that flexibility is an important benefit of telework that significantly enhances their productivity while working from the office is oftentimes distracting and includes a lot of wasted time. Participants likewise said that breaking the mainstream system of rigid and long working hours is an essential step that can lead to new innovative working choices, particularly for women who aspire for career growth and development while managing their family responsibilities. Some explained that the digitalization of their work provided them with a valuable opportunity for self and professional development through their attendance and participation in international conferences and training courses online. They presented the benefits of telework as an innovative initiative to efficiently manage time instead of physically attending unnecessary and time-consuming meetings, to effectively communicate and reach others, to attend online courses, workshops, and meetings that could not have been attended physically, and to avoid workplace, distractions, pressure, and stress.

Despite all the advantages, some working females highlighted several challenges they faced with teleworking. Responses of the interviewed working women emphasized that the concept of remote working was not fully understood by employees, employers, and even family members. Most importantly, they highlighted the difficulties they faced in coordinating their tasks and shared the discomfort they felt while dealing with all the distractions and interruptions around them at home, especially in the presence of children. These challenges were intensified as they encountered numerous technical difficulties while completing their work. They likewise noted that the boundaries between work and family as well as the working timeframe have been blurred during their experience of working from home. Some even struggled to meet their superiors' expectations of being available and active beyond their working hours. Such challenges are the results of the poor or lack of understanding of telework culture. The traditional working system makes it easier to define the boundaries between work and family, especially regarding time and space. Work is expected to be done at the office during working hours. Family and other life responsibilities should

Table 5.6 Pros and Cons of telework based on females' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

Pros	Respondent's quotes
Positive impact on personal life, more family time, and better work-life balance	<p>“The positive is the time we spent at home, I see this thing as very positive even everyone was saying they wished to sit and work from home” (I#10, QW)</p> <p>“So, it was the other way around, we grew closer as family, there were some things like now I know where my kid's deficiencies in which subject, “ how” does he deal with his friends, I could compare his level of performance with his peers at school, it brought us together, we care about our homes more. Having the whole family gathering together, it was a nice thing, it was a blessing in disguise” (I#4, QW)</p>
Higher productivity due to more flexibility	<p>“Again, in relation to work, I think it's just the flexibility, and saving time with the commuting. It was definitely a serious thing and it helped being in the comfort of your home, and doing things at your own pace” (I#23, MW)</p> <p>“For me, I was not under pressure, I was happy in my best working life, I was able to balance, and I was productive frankly” (I#17, MW)</p>
Benefits related to digitalization (online workshops and training, more efficient online meeting, and no workplace pressure or distraction)	<p>“...there were meetings that were unnecessary to attend in person, you can hold on Zoom. So, COVID-19 made it easier, we would say let us have a meeting on Zoom, so we dealt in this way through the use of easier methods. We were able to attend and benefit from some courses/workshops on line. I see this method of communication, and the use of technology as a very positive thing” (I#10, QW)</p>
Cons	Respondents' quotes

(continued)

Table 5.6 (continued)

Pros	Respondent's quotes
Lack of understanding of telework culture causing distraction, overlapping, and difficulties in coordination	<p>“It offers flexible work conditions, but, I personally didn't like to work from home, especially since I live in an apartment with my daughters who have to work online, so all the house was on alert. The process of focusing on work at home is very difficult, because I am distracted...” (I#1, QW)</p> <p>“It was difficult, to be honest, because I am a single parent. I was the only one staying with my children, trying to coordinate as much as I could between them and my job. The burden that was placed on me as a single mother at home with children was huge. I did not have anyone who could help me and I did not have any breathing space so I could rest. I was 24 hours with my children trying to fulfill their requests, their needs, studies, and entertainment, besides dealing with fear, psychological tension, trying to absorb and reduce the fears and tensions that children suffered from during this period” (I#2, QW)</p>
Overworking due to expectations to always be available	<p>“During the first lockdown, one of the stressful things for me was just the expectation that you will be immediately available since you are working from home. I think with covid, people were just stressed out that people are not doing their job, so they wanted that constant reassurance that the person is there and is available” (I#23, MW)</p>
Poor or absence of adequate logistic set-up	<p>“Not all employees had the same levels of productivity, and also our houses were not equipped, meaning for me at home, I do not have an office. I used to work on the dining room table. Other female colleagues as well did not have an adequate atmosphere in the house that equipped/assisted them to work in a healthy and comfortable way” (I#17, MW)</p>
Psychological and mental pressures	<p>“Of course, this mental weight on women mostly because we are trying to balance kids, the work itself, while in a closed space. It was really difficult. It was mainly the mental pressure we experienced” (I#21, MW)</p>

be met outside offices and working timeframe. Therefore, distractions and overlapping tasks were significant challenges that interviewed women had to face with teleworking. Additionally, most of the participants did not have access to an adequate and private logistic set-up, which includes a proper office space, a healthy chair, a desk, and a good internet connection. This caused them a lot of difficulties, distractions, and interruptions, especially by their children who had online schooling during the pandemic. These working mothers accordingly highlighted the emotional distress they felt and the negative impact of their telework experience on their mental health as they struggled to cope and attend to their professional and family responsibilities while working from home.

Furthermore, while teleworking has provided effective digital communication solutions, some participants felt that it does not negate the need for face-to-face interaction. Three respondents expressed that successful teleworking does not mean that in-person communication and interaction at the office can be completely disregarded. They emphasized that direct human communication is critical and that digital communication should not serve as a substitute. Participants stressed the significance of in-person interaction, particularly at senior levels, as they noted that informal discussions at the workplace often play a crucial role in the decision-making process.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic offered working women in Qatar the opportunity to work from home, which allowed for greater control over their work schedule and proximity to family. A section of interviews focused on their experiences and views on teleworking during the pandemic. One-third of the respondents had a positive experience and saw the benefits of telework in their lives, including increased family time, flexibility, and personal and professional development. However, they also faced challenges such as difficulties in task coordination, blurred boundaries between work and family, poor understanding of telework culture, and distractions and interruptions at home, which affected their mental health. Despite the advantages of digital communication, some participants emphasized the importance of in-person interaction, as direct human communication is crucial for decision-making, particularly at senior levels.

5.1.3 Research Implications

The ongoing gender bias that associates motherhood with primary caregiving and fatherhood with long work hours must be challenged through the implementation of effective family-friendly policies that promote work-life balance (Gatrell & Cooper, 2008). Despite the rising number of women in the workforce, they still face disadvantages compared to men due to the assumption that they will perform caregiver duties and a lack of support from their partners (Arendell, 2000). By adopting family-friendly measures, such as child care subsidies and flexible working hours, employees may experience higher job satisfaction and motivation (Saltzstein et al., 2001; Kim and Wiggins, 2011), ultimately leading to improved organizational performance (Al-Alawi, 2016; Dezso & Ross, 2012; Hillman et al., 2002).

This research provides valuable information for those who wish to promote work-life balance through policy changes and improvements. It focuses specifically on Qatar and examines the effect of cultural norms on work-life balance for working women. The unique cultural context of Qatar, with its strong emphasis on family and recent advances in women's empowerment, offers a valuable opportunity to understand the obstacles and challenges facing female employees in balancing their personal and professional lives. The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers, organizations, human resource departments, scholars, and other stakeholders seeking to establish a supportive work environment that empowers working women. The study underscores the need to consider cultural norms and the impact of family on the experiences of employees, particularly women when creating policies and programs to promote work-life balance. It sheds light on the difficulties working women face in balancing their work and personal lives due to societal expectations and pressure. It also highlights the impact of individual-level factors, such as family and partner support, on work-life balance for working women. In Arab countries like Qatar, cultural and social norms can pose significant barriers to women's employment and advancement. To mitigate these norms, which are deeply entrenched in society, it is crucial to provide female role models and networking opportunities, as well as training and support to help women balance their work and personal responsibilities.

This study holds significant implications for human resource departments and organizations to establish a more inclusive and supportive work environment for female employees. Improving work-life balance for working women requires support from superiors and organizational leadership. This can be achieved by offering flexible work options, such as part-time positions, telecommuting, and flexible schedules, that take into account women's caregiving responsibilities. In a culture that values family duties, providing extended maternity leave and access to on-site child care can help alleviate the strain on working mothers and enhance their work-life balance. The human resource department also plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality through fair hiring, evaluation, and promotion processes and by implementing policies that provide equal pay and opportunities for female employees to succeed in their careers. It is critical to eliminate gender biases and create a family-friendly workplace that supports work-life balance for all employees.

In conclusion, this study highlights the crucial role of policymakers in ensuring that national goals align with organizational policies and are translated into concrete measures and practices. Despite recent advancements in promoting gender equality and work-life balance in the workforce in Qatar, there is still room for improvement. Policymakers must address these gaps through new policies and reforms that enhance female empowerment and work-life balance for working women. Access to education and employment opportunities for women is crucial in this regard. Furthermore, when developing policies, policymakers must consider the impact of cultural and social norms, such as providing extended maternity leave, access to on-site child care, and flexible work arrangements that take into account the personal responsibilities of working women, particularly married women and mothers.

5.2 Conclusion

This chapter emphasizes the critical importance of family-friendly policies and practices in fostering work-life balance for employees, particularly for working women in Qatar and other Arab countries. The progress made in implementing supportive legislation in the public sector in Qatar highlights the importance of considering cultural and societal norms when devising or revising policies. The unique socio-cultural dynamics in these societies must be taken into account to ensure that policies are effective and culturally appropriate.

The study provides important insights into the benefits of offering part-time work and flextime as family-friendly options, as well as the impact of telework on work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Policymakers and organizations in Qatar and other Arab countries should consider these findings when developing strategies to support work-life balance for their employees. The persistent gender bias linking motherhood to child-rearing and fatherhood to long working hours underscores the need for improved family-friendly policies. Human resource departments have a critical role in ensuring gender equality and promoting a family-friendly work environment, while policymakers must align national objectives with company policies to enhance gender empowerment and work-life balance for working women.

Eliminating gender biases and creating a supportive work environment that empowers working women can be achieved through flexible work arrangements, longer maternity leaves, and on-site daycare facilities. This study calls for action from all stakeholders, including policymakers, organizations, human resource departments, researchers, and others. By creating a more inclusive and female-friendly work environment, organizations can support work-life balance for all employees. To conclude, the chapter presents several policy implications to enhance work-life balance for working women. These include challenging gender biases, offering flexible work options, providing extended maternity leave and on-site child care, promoting fair hiring and evaluation processes, addressing cultural and social norms, encouraging support from superiors and organizational leadership, creating a family-friendly workplace, and aligning national goals with organizational policies.

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Chapter 6

Closing the Divide: Women Empowerment in Qatar Between Rhetoric and Reality



Nada Hassan Abdulmajeed Fouad

Abstract The Arab Gulf nations, including Qatar, have embraced women's empowerment as a central aspect of their national development. Numerous initiatives have been launched to further this cause. However, despite the public rhetoric emphasizing progress in this area, there seems to be a discrepancy between this and the experiences of women on the ground. This chapter aims to examine this gap by exploring the impact of state feminism within a welfare state on the empowerment of ordinary women. To do this, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 Qatari women to gather their perspectives. Using a power lens, this study found that the women interviewed faced challenges in areas such as freedom of choice, legal rights, inclusiveness, and representation. The results suggest a disconnect between the empowerment initiatives and the lived experiences of these women, highlighting the need for a shift towards a bottom-up approach that focuses on the organic growth of a powerful female community that can advocate for and assert their rights within the context of their realities.

Keywords Women empowerment · State feminism · Legality · Inclusivity · Representation · Freedom of choice

6.1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Qatari government has implemented numerous initiatives aimed at empowering women across various domains. The Qatar Strategic Plan for 2030 places a special emphasis on increasing women's empowerment under the "Family Cohesion" section and aims to break down stereotypes surrounding women and establish a civil society focused on women's issues. However, in practice, most of the government's efforts have been focused on supporting women's education and employment through incentives and vocational training. Despite the pride the Qatari

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society and state-sponsored media take in the elevated social status of women, this study reveals a disconnect between this image and the reality experienced by women.

Through 20 in-depth interviews, this study found that state feminism in the context of a welfare state falls short of empowering ordinary women and providing them with the power to lead the lives they desire. The findings, viewed through Rowlands' (1995) power lens, indicate that the interviewees struggled in areas such as freedom of choice, legal rights, inclusivity, and representation. This paper questions the effectiveness of state feminism within a welfare state in empowering women and suggests the need for a shift towards an approach that emphasizes the organic growth of a powerful female community that can advocate for and exercise their rights within their realities.

6.2 Historical Context and Conceptual Framework

A historical perspective is important in understanding the current state of women in Qatar. Before the rise of the petrochemical industry, the Gulf region was technologically underdeveloped, relying mostly on pearling, trade boats, and minimal crafts for sustenance. While all the men would leave for months at a time to collect pearls during the pearling season, women and children would be left behind, with only women from poor families working for a wage (El-Saadi, 2012). Women from wealthier families would manage finances through other women or male agents. With the discovery of oil and natural gas in the region, Qatar's wealth grew significantly. Meanwhile, the role of women in the economy diminished as the natural gas market was dominated by Western companies and the labor market by male migrant workers. The Qatari government and ruling tribe redistributed wealth among the stronger tribes to maintain political stability, which was believed to come in the form of high government positions, stipends, subsidies, and incentives, but with no statistical evidence to support this (Colton, 2011). This redistribution resulted in a passive national population with a sense of entitlement to high income with relatively no-risk occupations and short working hours (Randeree, 2012). With the rise of the Wahhabi movement, religious families discouraged women from pursuing public roles, and the lack of necessity for women to work or seek jobs further perpetuated the gender imbalance. However, as the demographic imbalance became a growing concern, the social and political landscape changed (Rutledge et al., 2011).

The implementation of state-wide policies by the Qatari government has aimed to place locals, including women, at the forefront of various industries. According to Randeree (2012), this has resulted in women being viewed as valuable human assets for the state. This has led to the rise of state feminism in Qatar, which involves a series of women-focused policies that claim to enhance the status of women in society. However, as pointed out by Salem and Yount (2019) and Lari (2019), these policies often only serve to present a false sense of modernity and progress, leading to partial empowerment that prioritizes the interests of the governing entities over actual empowerment for women.

Empowerment goes beyond access to resources, and according to Rowlands (1995), it is rooted in power. Power has three dimensions, including personal power, power in close relationships, and collective power. Personal power refers to an individual's sense of self-worth and value, while power in close relationships involves the ability to negotiate. Collective power, on the other hand, refers to the ability to work together for a greater impact through a sense of collective consciousness. Thus, it is important to focus on power when discussing empowerment, especially in the context of Qatar.

6.3 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with 20 Qatari female participants. The selection of the participants was based on a snowball sampling method, with the criteria being that they had a minimum of a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or equivalent degree, had worked in an occupation for at least one year, and fell within the age groups of 20–40 or 40–60 years old. The purpose of these criteria was to ensure that the participants had relevant exposure to the spheres targeted by the government's initiatives.

The interview questions, inspired by Moghadam and Senftova (2005), aimed to explore the participation and rights of women in various domains, including civil, political, social, economic, and cultural domains. Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives and guide the direction of the conversation. The questions started by covering the work sector and related topics such as stereotypes, social expectations, and rights. However, to ensure the comfort of the participants, the financial and economic domain was explored as a subcategory under each of the other domains. Interestingly, the participants often delved into financial matters when discussing social and family topics.

In the light of the Standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) which emphasizes the importance and value of lived experiences in defining the magnitude and nature of struggle, a feminist approach that prioritizes the perspectives and experiences of Qatari nationals has been adopted in this study to maintain objectivity. As Collins (2002) notes, women's experiences should be the primary consideration when creating knowledge about women, as their struggles can only be defined by their own accounts. This allows the participants to act as informants on their own issues, providing insight into the realities they face and eliminating assumptions and preconceived notions.

Access to data and interviewees can be a challenge in the GCC, making it difficult for researchers to gather information. To overcome this, the interviews were designed to be informal and fluid, allowing the participants to express their opinions and personal analysis of their experiences freely. Participants were informed of the recording of the interviews and their anonymity was protected through a consent form. Most of the interviews lasted more than 30 min, and the interviewees became more expressive towards the end. The interviewer encouraged the participants to

express their opinions and analysis of their experiences, resulting in insightful and diverse perspectives.

Thematic content analysis was employed to extract meaningful patterns from the interview data. The themes for the results were identified based on the frequency and extent of discussion of certain topics. Factors such as the length of the discussions and the level of detail provided by the interviewees were also taken into consideration. However, it's important to note that not all of the interviewees spoke at length about the chosen themes. The objective was to identify the most frequently mentioned and elaborately discussed themes and explore these in the context of other data collected from the interviews and secondary sources.

It was observed that 14 of the 20 interviewees did not perceive themselves as victims, even when they were not able to connect with the government's empowerment initiatives. They also emphasized the importance of religion and family in their lives. Similar to previous studies (Al Muftah, 2010), 15 of the participants believed that families played a crucial role as gatekeepers to access resources facilitated by the government. Additionally, the study found that age was directly proportional to the power held by these women. In conclusion, while several topics were discussed in the interviews, the most prominent themes that emerged and received the most attention from the interviewees were related to inclusivity, freedom of choice, legality, and representation, as discussed in the following sections.

6.4 Inclusivity

The belief in being part of social change is crucial in giving individuals a sense of personal power and self-worth. When Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa was the Emir of Qatar, his wife, Sheikha Mozah, played a significant role in transforming the role of Qatari women in society (Felder & Vuollo, 2008). She was seen as a symbol of women's empowerment. One interviewee said, "After Sheikha Mozah [left the scene], we were worried about our future." Her contributions were widely recognized both locally and internationally. She helped shift the perception of women from being just family caregivers to economically active members of society, participating in many jobs that were previously taboo for them. Sheikha Mozah was appointed as UNESCO's special envoy for basic and higher education and as a United Nations ambassador. She was one of the first Qatari women to be publicly visible on television through speeches and interviews. Most of the interviewees considered her accomplishments to be gateways for change.

However, not all of the twenty interviewees connected with the idea of empowerment. Ten of them related it to iconic figures such as Sheikha Mozah, the Education City project led by her, and the media. Four saw the empowerment project as a means to fill the vocational gap left by men. Some interviewees, particularly older ones, felt that the actions of the royal family's women were seen by their families as liberal and therefore irrelevant to what they considered appropriate. "Everything is granted and can be taken away if the current changes direction," said Interviewee 20. Some of

the younger interviewees linked women's employment to the Qatarization process. Interviewee 12 felt that the policies requiring companies to have a certain percentage of Qataris made it seem like women were only getting jobs due to the regulations, undermining their recognition for obtaining a job through education and training.

Studies by Peterson (1989) and Krause (2009) show that Sheikhas or daughters of wealthy merchant families have long been the only group of women in the GCC who have the privilege of breaking norms. According to Interviewee 17, "iconic figures try to push for social change for their own benefit, not for the masses." As members of the royal family, women in the monarchy are considered part of the governing regime, and stories about them that receive attention are carefully selected to support the government's agenda. However, this approach to creating social change, while successful to some extent, fails to involve women from different backgrounds. As a result, most of these women see value in public figures they believe to be catalysts for social change but lack a sense of their own potential to create change as individuals.

6.5 Freedom of Choice

Choice is a vital aspect of life as it empowers individuals to negotiate with their surroundings and pursue their personal goals. Nevertheless, in many cases, the ability to negotiate is limited, and people have to compromise with social norms to avoid negative consequences. In recent years, the number of educated Qatari women has surpassed that of men (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2016). However, this increase in education does not translate to a corresponding rise in women's participation in the workforce (Felder & Vuollo, 2008; *Ministry of Administrative Development Labor & Social Affairs*, 2015). The interviews conducted revealed several reasons for this lack of representation in the workforce, including family disapproval, conflicting family restrictions on education and work fields, discriminatory standards of employers, and limited financial autonomy.

The most frequently cited reason for limitations on women's education and employment in Qatar was family disapproval, particularly for work in mixed-gender office environments. The interviews revealed a range of opinions on the restrictions imposed by families, with some interviewees having more relaxed parents, while others faced significant parental influence over their career choices and even the use of their income. Among the latter group, some reported that their families drained their salaries, leading to a feeling that their work had limited added value. Three interviewees also reported experiencing discrimination from employers, who asked intrusive questions about their marital status and plans for marriage and children, which contradicts the idea of equality in the workplace. These conflicting experiences demonstrate that not all Qatari women enjoy the same level of freedom and recognition, and some policies aimed at empowering women have created feelings of unworthiness in some. This is further compounded by societal attitudes, such as husbands confiscating a portion of their wives' salaries, or parents interfering with

their financial autonomy. These issues were not widespread among the interviewees but were recognized by most as a problem faced by friends or relatives.

The opportunities available to women are limited. Access to resources such as education, training, and employment is contingent on family approval. This same group of women holds the agency to set their own goals and feels in control of their income. Despite this, they do not see their employment and income as accomplishments, but rather as a blessing. This highlights that the opportunities for Qatari women lack the elements necessary to empower them in society. Interviewee 20 expressed the belief that breaking social norms requires strength and resilience against outside influences.

The implementation of feminist state policies aimed at increasing women's employment opportunities has reduced the need for collective action towards change. However, it has also created an illusion of power, referred to as "*tamkeen suri*" by almost half of the interviewees, where women have a superficial appearance of power, but limited ability to exercise their choice.

6.5.1 Marriage Chances and Childcare

Navigating the choices and expectations surrounding marriage was a common topic among the interviewees. While being unmarried was seen as having significant social consequences, being married also came with its own set of challenges. Interviewee 7 mentioned being asked in a job interview if the workplace would impact her chances of getting married. Despite being seen as a discriminatory question, she responded that she had her personal matters under control. The majority of the interviewees reported feeling pressure from their families to get married and be a caretaker for children. Interviewee 1 chose to work in academia over other industries to "spare herself the headache" of facing familial expectations, as her family feared that working in other sectors would negatively impact her chances of getting married.

This pressure is further exacerbated by the social norms and expectations surrounding women's occupations. According to a survey conducted in 2015, 54% of respondents believed that there were specific jobs deemed suitable for women (Asghar et al., 2015). This is reflected in the employment patterns among female university graduates, where a large percentage are employed in education or public administration, despite a smaller share of female university students pursuing degrees in these fields (Constant, 2016).

The younger interviewees also reported that single women were preferred in job interviews over married women, as it was assumed that they had fewer demands. Additionally, many of them were asked about their plans for marriage, further emphasizing the social consensus on the pressure to get married. These findings highlight the challenges women face in negotiating both familial expectations and the expectations of the job market, as they try to balance their personal and professional aspirations.

Similarly, the Qatari government presents two conflicting narratives. On one hand, women are encouraged to pursue careers and start businesses, but on the other hand,

they are legally obligated under Article 58 of the Qatari Family Law to fulfill domestic and childcare duties. These responsibilities are emphasized in a number of legal matters, casting women as the primary caretakers of children in all aspects other than finances. Despite this, women are not recognized as legal guardians.

The Qatari National Strategy prioritizes work-life balance for women as a means of promoting family cohesion, but this reinforces the notion that working women are solely responsible for balancing their work and personal lives. There is a need to consider the work-life balance of men as well since family responsibilities should be shared equally between both partners. The opinions of 20 Qatari women interviewed also reflect the emphasis on women's family-oriented roles. Many of them believe that a woman's primary role is to be a mother and manage the household, while others blame working women for the decline in family values and the increasing dependence on maids and servants. A Qatari sociologist even suggested that women should have shorter working hours to fulfill their domestic duties.

In sum, Qatari women are legally obligated to take on more than just a job, with their roles as caretakers and homemakers emphasized in both legal and social contexts. This creates a double burden for working women, who are expected to both contribute to the workforce and provide care for their families. As a result, domestic and childcare responsibilities become a burden rather than a choice, depriving women of personal and social agency.

6.5.2 Upholding Traditions

The Qatari National Strategy highlights the role of women in preserving the society's traditions. It states that women should have greater opportunities to participate in the economic and cultural world while still fulfilling their role in the family (Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011). This emphasis on the traditional role of women indicates the importance placed on upholding these traditions during modernization. However, the strategy does not address the traditional role of men within the family.

According to the interviews conducted, there is a cultural practice in Qatari society known as "*tawgeeb* traditions." This refers to social events that women are expected to attend and participate in, which can require time and financial investment. There was some disagreement among the interviewees about whether women or men were expected to attend these events more, but the general consensus was that the expectations were equal or higher for women. This was due to the belief that women bear the responsibility for caring for both their own family and their husband's family. These social obligations are said to increase after marriage and those who do not participate may face societal pressure. *Tawgeeb* involves exchanging visits and gifts and serves as a means of representing respect, care, and social status for both men and women. However, it was reported that adhering to these norms was more challenging for women, who were expected to follow specific behaviors and dress codes that were more time-consuming and expensive than those required of men.

The interviewees also discussed the effects of gender segregation and mobility restrictions, which are part of the family norms in Qatari society. In 2011, a survey found that 80% of surveyed parents preferred their daughters to be in gender-segregated spaces (Asghar et al., 2015). Some interviewees mentioned that these restrictions made even simple tasks difficult, as they could not work after hours, receive work calls at home, or travel without a male companion. The women also needed their guardian's approval to travel¹ (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2014). The job market does not seem to be accommodating for women, as there are no benefits or paid vacations for men to accompany their women. Some interviewees reported being discriminated against in the workplace due to their family's traditional mindset and being asked if they planned to get married and leave their jobs. The stories shared suggest that employers prefer single Qatari women from liberal families, making it difficult for women to be empowered and succeed in their careers.

6.6 Legality

The laws that govern relationships within society have a significant impact on an individual's level of power in interactions with others. Although most of the interviewees expressed satisfaction with their legal rights and considered themselves lucky, two of them had different experiences. Interviewee 20 reported struggling with the legal system frequently, particularly when her husband's presence or consent was required for legal documents or her children's. Human Rights Watch (2021) mentioned the issue of male guardianship in the Qatari legal system as a major concern. Interviewee 19 was generally pleased with the Qatari legal system but expressed frustration about the restriction on Qatari women marrying non-Qatari men as they cannot transmit their citizenship to their children. On the other hand, Interviewee 17 felt that women were misusing their legal rights, such as divorce and the right to file complaints against individuals, including family members, and believed that many of these issues could be resolved without legal intervention.

In the past decade, some laws in Qatar have changed in favor of women, such as the Civil Service Act in 2001 (Law No. 1) and the regulations of the Council of Ministers (Order No. 13), which established equality between men and women in the workforce. However, certain laws remain unclear, such as the Qatari Labor Law, which does not clearly define "appropriate employment for women" (Article 94) or address issues of gender discrimination in the workplace. Some of the interviewees sought assistance from those with high governmental or tribal positions if they faced discrimination, while others were not concerned about the possibility. The interviewees also connected women's rights with their roles as mothers and caretakers and

¹ These are policies that are implemented, but not mentioned clearly in laws. But there is a clear mention of Guardianship of fathers and husbands in the Qatari Family Laws that would explain these practices.

stated that these two should not be seen as conflicting. The state strategy from 2011 to 2016 placed women's empowerment under family issues, with a focus on balancing work and family life. Qatar National Vision 2030 mentions preserving tradition and family coherence but does not mention women.

According to the Qatar Family Law, women's work is considered a form of disobedience. Article 69 raises controversy for its implicit granting of control over a wife's movement and work to her husband. The provision states that a wife is considered disobedient if she works outside the home without her husband's permission unless he is abusing his right in preventing her from working. This article reflects the ambiguity surrounding women's mobility and choice of work in Qatar. Despite having financial autonomy over their property and dowry, the legal rights of Qatari women remain far from clear. The Qatari constitution, as noted by Interviewee 20, does not mention women in any of its articles, further emphasizing the lack of concrete legal rights for women in the country. Laws play a crucial role in determining power dynamics within society, and while having the right laws in place does not guarantee that everyone will be able to enjoy them, they are important in establishing the power of negotiation.

6.7 Representation

Representation is closely tied to the concept of inclusivity and legal rights, as it stems from having personal power and the ability to negotiate and expand that power. The topic of women in the political sphere in Qatar appeared to cause discomfort among the interviewees. Although a standpoint theory approach would discourage discussing themes not brought up by the subjects of the study, the level of discomfort was noticeable. Nearly half of the interviewees showed no interest in the topic, while most of the others attempted to explain that they were satisfied with the current situation. One interviewee, who studied in Education City, argued that the Arabian Gulf has its own form of democracy, referred to as "tribal democracy," which is based on delegation to the wisest and oldest members of a tribe to speak on its behalf. This mechanism, however, fails to provide a space for women's voices, particularly in a patriarchal society. The issue with this argument is that it is based on a hypothetical tribal state scenario where women's opinions would be heard by a community of open-minded men. Additionally, the government closely monitors the establishment of NGOs in Qatar, resulting in a shortage of seasoned female-led organizations, despite the revision of the Association and Private Institutions Law in 2020, and limited online activism for women's rights. As in other Arab Gulf States (Metcalf, 2011), women's empowerment initiatives in Qatar are either quasi-governmental or entirely state-led, suggesting that the top-down approach has not been successful in attracting Qatari women and fostering a collective experience. The selective state policy changes, such as the establishment of the Qatar Businesswomen Association, align with the government's support for women in the workforce. Only one interviewee was willing to comment on the discrepancy in representation, stating that it

would be difficult for a woman to enter the political arena as it would harm not only her but also her family. She noted that a man would face less backlash and his family would not be affected. Despite this fear, in 2017, women started running for the Shura Council. Even though they were not successful in the elections, the Emir appointed four women to his quota, which could be seen as a step in the right direction towards greater representation. However, this inorganic incorporation may result in women being appointed rather than elected, and the state will likely continue to dictate the direction of women's empowerment.

6.8 Conclusion and Policy Implications

The aim of this research was to explore the gap between the women empowerment initiative implemented by the Qatari government and the actual experiences of Qatari women. The concept of empowerment was defined by its main component of power and analyzed across various domains in which it is exercised. Using Standpoint theory and thematic content analysis, the research found that a sample of 20 Qatari women faced challenges in obtaining power in the areas of freedom of choice, legality, inclusivity, and representation. The study revealed that these women did not see themselves as capable of driving social change because of the lack of inclusiveness in the empowerment initiative. Furthermore, the majority of these women showed a disconnect with the initiative and its policies. The results also indicated that these women faced barriers in exercising their power of choice due to the presence of social gatekeepers, and their legal rights remained uncertain due to vague and some male-patriarchal policies.

The research showed a low level of female representation in policy-making, as well as a general discouraged attitude among women. It is anticipated that a significant portion of Qatari women from conservative families will experience a power-deprived reality. Additionally, there is a lack of a strong female community for support. The top-down approach of the empowerment initiative, although successful to some extent, has hindered the long-term social change that could stem from women themselves.

Therefore, the focus of the empowerment initiative should shift from preparing women for passive roles in the workforce to empowering them to be active players in society by creating an environment for them to build a community and grow organically. The establishment of NGOs and informal communities should be facilitated, and policies should be revised to clearly reflect the rights of women. Based on the strong sense of commitment shown by these women towards their community and country, building a strong female community would not only promote their own economic, social, and political growth but also that of the country as a whole.

Based on the findings of this research, there is a clear gap between the women empowerment initiative implemented by the Qatari government and the actual experiences of Qatari women. Therefore, the policies related to women's empowerment should be re-evaluated and revised to ensure that they are inclusive and reflect the

needs of all women, particularly those from conservative families. This requires a bottom-up approach that involves women in the policy-making process, promoting their active participation and representation in decision-making positions. This can be achieved through creating opportunities for women to build their capacities, engage in leadership programs and networking opportunities, and providing mentorship and support.

Furthermore, the laws and regulations related to women's rights should be clear and unambiguous, ensuring that they do not perpetuate male-patriarchal norms. The government should work towards providing an environment in which women feel safe and confident in exercising their power of choice and asserting their legal rights.

In conclusion, the women's empowerment initiative in Qatar needs to be re-evaluated and revised to ensure that it is inclusive and addresses the actual experiences of Qatari women. By creating an environment for women to build communities, promoting their active participation in the policy-making process, and ensuring that laws and regulations reflect their rights, the country will see a positive impact on the growth and development of women and the country as a whole.

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Chapter 7

Through the Eye of the Needle: Lessons in Women's Empowerment and Public Policy from the Arab Gulf



Melissa Langworthy and Rabia Naguib

Abstract In this chapter, we challenge the dominant perspective that views the ‘universalization’ of the international agenda on women’s empowerment as the only way for states to both promote women’s rights and be seen as a legitimate modern state. Our study provides a comparative analysis of public policies and gender data from the six Arab Gulf nations (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) to examine the situation of women’s empowerment in the Arab Gulf region. We argue that the persistence of neoliberal capitalist frameworks and Western-defined human rights strategies has perpetuated orientalist discourses that contrast Arab cultures with Western ones. We assert that the international women’s agenda, by emphasizing neoliberal ideals, overlooks and devalues contexts where progress is not measured in individual terms, but rather requires prioritizing the family and household in women’s economic pursuits. Through this lens, we present Arab Gulf policy frameworks as important and effective strategies that prioritize the provision of care, support for work-life reconciliation, and the freedom to pursue progress for women who have different life goals beyond the neoliberal framework.

Keywords Public policy · Arab Gulf · Contextual embeddedness · Economic empowerment · Gender · Neoliberal discourse · Comparative study

7.1 Introduction

This chapter defines empowerment, as derived from the second chapter, as a multi-faceted process that is rooted in local values, driven by agency, and enhanced by access to resources and seeking women’s well-being both at the individual and collective levels. This definition diverges from a narrow perspective that merely

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concentrates on women's economic status, ignoring their overall well-being. By embracing empowerment as context-specific, diverse, and genuine, the chapter aims to reject instrumentalist and neoliberal interpretations of 'individual power, achievement, and status' and instead highlights women's voices as critical elements (Batliwala, 2010). The chapter critiques the predominant discourse of the international women's empowerment agenda and its portrayal as the sole path for states to advance women's rights.

The international agenda on women's empowerment has primarily focused on economic empowerment as the most effective and politically feasible way to achieve wider empowerment outcomes. The standard metrics used to measure the success of government policies in this regard include women's participation in the labor force and representation in leadership positions. However, the care responsibilities of women are acknowledged as a hindrance to progress, and time spent on care work and domestic chores is seen as being at odds with advancing in these areas. The overarching objective of the international women's rights discourse is to increase women's participation in the workforce and decrease their disproportionate burden of household tasks. Governments are expected to adopt 'female-friendly' policies that promote gender balance, representation of women in leadership, and sufficient parental leave provisions, as demonstrated by clear public policy frameworks.

By examining the impact of the Arab Gulf policies on women's empowerment, we contend that the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism and Western-defined human rights strategies reinforces orientalist views that dichotomize Arab cultures from Western ones. Our analysis reveals that the international women's empowerment agenda, which prioritizes neoliberal ideals, overlooks the context-specific nature of women's progress and disregards the importance of the family and household in women's economic pursuits. Instead, we present Arab Gulf policies as alternative and valuable approaches that acknowledge and support the provisioning and visibility of care responsibilities, provide avenues for work-life reconciliation, and allow women to define their own success outside of the narrow confines of neoliberalism.

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of public policies in the Arab Gulf region and their impact on women's economic empowerment. Our examination challenges the narrow, neoliberal definition of empowerment, which focuses solely on employment rates and leadership positions. By considering alternative pathways to enhancing women's agency and rights, we aim to shift the focus to the complexities of women's lives and the importance of prioritizing their voices and local narratives of empowerment.

We argue that the Arab Gulf states face tension between international standards and local demands in their policy frameworks. Additionally, we engage with the dominant agendas on women's empowerment and address four main challenges in the Arab Gulf context: demographics, workforce imbalances, fertility, and gender roles. We scrutinize the universality of the international women's agenda engage with critiques from the Arab world and present a contextual examination of the current public policy framework for women's empowerment in the region, including an analysis of constitutions, national development plans, and labor laws.

Our critique of the available data on women's empowerment highlights the impact of methodological and conceptual issues specific to the Arab Gulf context on the region's low performance in 'universal' gender equality metrics. However, we also recognize areas where the Arab Gulf policy frameworks have advanced ahead of many other states due to the consideration of contextual elements. Our analysis highlights the provisions made for women in the workplace and emphasizes the importance of understanding the local context and narratives of empowerment in defining progress. Through this examination, we aim to promote the voices of women and broaden the definition of women's economic empowerment beyond employment and leadership positions.

7.2 Women's Economic Empowerment in the International Agenda

The push for women's empowerment, particularly through employment, has gained significant attention in recent decades, starting with Esther Boserup's (1970) call to recognize the contributions of women in development and culminating in the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. This international agreement placed a strong emphasis on women's rights in public life and employment, shaping state policies and defining the discourse on women's empowerment for the years to come.

By 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA) further codified the state's responsibility to 'promote women's economic independence' by defining strategic objectives around women and the economy, and women in power and decision-making roles (United Nations, 1995).¹ This emphasis on women's labor force participation has roots in early feminist economic research that equated women's access to income with increased bargaining power within the household and improved fallback position² (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010). It also reflected the popular development discourses that identified women's value as a better investment than men's and highlighted women's instrumentality as purveyors of household welfare, investing more of their income than men on children, education, and health-care. The women as 'smart economics' discourse has only strengthened in the ensuing years and, correspondingly, the primary focus on a version of women's economic

¹ BPFA recognized that women had made gains in labor force participation by 1995, and thus promoted follow on strategies, such as care work as crucial to promoting women in the economy (Para. 153; Strategic Objective F.6). BPFA also elevated concern for women in positions of power and decision-making to a distinct critical area for action (Area G).

² A woman's fallback position is assessed based on the number and quality of exit options she has from a marriage, which are believed to improve her bargaining power within the marriage. Feminist economists have shown that fallback is constituted by many elements in addition to income, including asset ownership and social norms (e.g., Agarwal, B. (1997). "Bargaining" and Gender Relations: Within and beyond the household. *Feminist Economics*, 3(1), 1–51).

empowerment that equated employed women—especially those with managerial and leadership positions—with empowered women (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

The role of international forums such as the United Nations and frameworks like CEDAW and BPFA in fostering a liberal women’s empowerment agenda is clear. It is also clear that more than 40 years after CEDAW, this agenda is responsible for making inroads in shaping policies globally, despite the lack of nuance towards contextual factors that problematize this agenda—and its primary drive towards a ‘universalized’ shorthand of women’s empowerment that lays the foundation for modern, legitimate statecraft. We argue that two key impacts of this ‘universal’ agenda are important to consider here. First, as a result of the normative ‘universalism’ of this agenda, the international agencies tasked with agenda setting were imbued with a moral authority that continually legitimized this perspective of women’s empowerment. Second, adhering to this universalized agenda leaves little room for states to promote alternative perspectives of women’s empowerment, especially those that are not premised on neoliberal, capitalist priorities. In this section, we elaborate on both of these points.

7.2.1 ‘Universalism’ and the Moral High Road

International institutions like the United Nations established the terms for human rights and women’s empowerment and engaged these policies as universal truths. As a result, these institutions garnered moral legitimacy as agenda setters, evaluators of progress, and protectors of women. Fortified with this legitimacy, however, these institutions have rarely been called to account for their own roles in perpetuating inequalities (Abu-Lughod, 2013). For example, Gayatri Spivak (1988) exhorted the neocolonialist policies of these agendas as reverberations of past programs to ‘save brown women’ from their men, families, and institutions.

Abu-Lughod (2013, p. 81) highlights how this ‘moral crusade’ has bolstered the authority of international institutions and created a ‘new common sense’ about how aspirations for gender equality and women’s freedom are critical components of the modern lexicon of statecraft,

If the authority for this moral crusade to rescue women from other parts of the world, and usually from their cultures and traditions, depends on associating itself with the high ground of universal rights talk that has been forged in a range of international institutions, its emotional persuasiveness derives from the bedrock on which such advocates build.

In this, the modern rights doctrines, and their progenitors, have not only established a ‘virtual monopoly on the high ground of global morality’ but have pressured global activists to rewrite their claims for women’s rights and well-being in the terms set by these institutions, namely as human rights (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 82).

For Arab Gulf states, playing into this shorthand is a political necessity. For example, Kuwait, propelled to identify itself as a ‘good’ modern state and maintain the support of the international community after the Iraqi invasion, became

the first Arab Gulf country to engage in promoting this universalized concept of empowerment—via ratification of CEDAW—in 1994. Saudi Arabia followed suit in 2000, and all Arab Gulf countries had ratified CEDAW—albeit with reservations in each instance—by 2009.³ Ratifications are particularly clustered in years directly following the September 11 attacks, when Arab Gulf countries were deeply scrutinized by the international community, leaving them ‘no choice but to adopt the rhetoric of social reform and substantiate it with specific gender-related initiatives aimed at demonstrating [their] commitment to emancipating women’ (Al Rasheed, 2013, p. 153), particularly through articulating gender equality as designed by the United Nations treaties (*ibid.*, p. 136).

Viewed in this way, the women's empowerment agenda serves as a powerful tool upholding what Benjamin Smith deems ‘market orientalism’ towards the Arab Gulf states. Smith (2017, p. 9) argues that such universalized agendas produce ‘imaginative geographies’ in Edward Said's (1978) sense as practices and spaces that are ‘ranked, structured, theorized, assembled, and sometimes punished in ways inseparable from earlier forums of dealing with supposedly “backward” economies and peoples.’ Smith argues that assumptions around how particular states and markets diverge from a global ideal are ‘as much “cultural” as they are “economic,”’ and are instrumental in doing ‘the work of creating positional superiority in today's economies’ despite being deeper conduits of ‘centuries of thought and practices about how to deal with others’ (Smith, 2017). In the case of the international women's empowerment agenda, this positional superiority is once again enacted in opposition to the ‘orientalist’ prerogative insofar as it maintains a singular universal approach to women's empowerment; an approach that draws specific lines between state and market and prioritizes neoliberal feminist formulations of individual responsibility and liberation through the workplace (Ennis, 2019a; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Rottenberg, 2018).

This singular approach, however, remains mired in the orientalist gaze. Abu-Lughod (2013, p. 88) argues that ‘what is constant is that Muslim women are portrayed as culturally distinct, the mirror opposites of Western women.’ Similarly, the edicts of modern statecraft position Arab Gulf states in the untenable position of promulgating legitimate policy frameworks, on the one hand, and empowering women who are conceptualized in opposition to the very women the discourse is designed to empower. This uneasy balance results in modernized policies, Al Rasheed (2013, p. 29) explains, albeit ones that must combine ‘a difficult and contradictory commitment to provide for women without seriously empowering them.’

³ Bahrain (2002), UAE (2004), Oman (2006), and Qatar (2009).

7.2.2 *Making Space for Women's Voices—Even When They Have Alternative Goals*

Within the international gender agenda, the discourse—however universal it is made out to be—does not capture the voices of many women on the ground. In the case of Saudi Arabia, for example, Al Rasheed (2013, p. 137) details how Arab women conceptualize empowerment under very different terms than those posed by the international human rights system. Saudi women, she explains ‘do not call for gender equality with men but for complementarity, as they see themselves contributing to society in specific ways that do not negate their identity as women.’ For Gulf women—and for the Gulf states, as will be further detailed below—it is the family that takes center stage in terms of the litmus test of well-being within the society.

This disconnect between these disparate avenues towards empowerment leaves Arab Gulf states as uneasy interlocutors of economic empowerment, strung as they are between the international demands of modern, inclusive statecraft and the local, contextual demands of their citizens. Despite the undeniable impacts of Islam and societal patriarchy in shaping Arab Gulf women's experiences, empowerment is largely drawn by the state, its policies, and overall political and economic stability (Haghighat, 2013). Therefore, the efficacy of the international agenda for women's empowerment in establishing powerful incentives to align policy contexts with indexes of progress descended from CEDAW and BPFA (e.g., the United Nations Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] and Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]),⁴ is intimately tied up in Arab Gulf policy development (Ennis, 2019b; Metcalfe, 2011). Primary among these goals are women's labor force participation rates (MDG 3), women's representation in management and leadership positions (SDG 5.5), and the time devoted by women towards unpaid care and domestic responsibilities (SGD 5.4).

Under these universal and decontextualized terms, Arab Gulf states continually fall short. While Gulf states have included women's development in their national policies and made progress in education and employment indicators, they are still in the beginning stages of establishing human rights systems and public policy systems with clear gender-based agendas (Metcalfe, 2011) that are critical to ‘performing’ women's empowerment. Indeed, researchers suggest that the grassroots level, not the state, makes more progress with women in the Gulf countries precisely because of their capacity to employ a more contextualized and palatable presentation of women's empowerment (Metcalfe, 2008, 2011).

This section has highlighted how more than four decades of women's empowerment processes have been influenced by a singular international women's empowerment framework that itself was a result of political negotiations. This is not a new or wild finding, but a necessary bargain to visibilize women in political, economic,

⁴ The Millennium Development Goal (2000–2015) three on gender equality emphasized women's representation in wage employment, along with education and political participation. The SDGs (2015–2030) inherited the work left by the MDGs, and sought to address weaknesses in the MDGs, such as through having a specific monitoring and data collection component.

and social processes. However, the normative nature of this agenda is all too often presented as a universally true edict rather than a subjective (largely acceptable to neoliberal, capitalist, and political actors) selection of the necessary and sufficient components of empowerment. Importantly, despite the universal power of this agenda, many viewpoints and priorities for women—who often have alternative visions for their own empowered futures—have been, and continue to be, subordinated and ignored. Importantly, the politically negotiated women's empowerment agenda has been ascribed with the power to impart universal normative prescriptions that can, in effect, delegitimize just these alternative perspectives: these women are merely subjects of a patriarchal, traditional, religious, backward culture, and/or state. In the next section, we present the Arab Gulf right's frameworks and highlight how contextualized nuance of women's empowerment represents itself in different policy formats.

7.3 The Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment in the Arab Gulf

The previous section established the competing logic that comprises the policy frameworks in the Arab Gulf states, primarily the imbalance between the standards set by the international community and the values and priorities of the local populations. The extent to which public policies in the Arab Gulf countries can and will empower women is determined—and assessed—by these disparate stakeholders. In this section, we offer a comparison of the policy frameworks offered by Arab Gulf states by analyzing constitutions, national vision and development plans, and national legal frameworks for women's employment. Such a comparison allows for the identification of any differences in terms of the position of and policy approaches towards women in each of the six countries, including how women are envisioned in forward-looking policies.

7.3.1 Arab Gulf Constitutions

Exhibit 7.1 presents a snapshot of the constitutional provisions related to citizen employment, gender equality, and the family unit. Overall, the constitutions show that work—especially in the public sector—is not only encouraged but is entrenched as a fundamental 'right' for all citizens. All six Arab Gulf constitutions state that citizens have rights to employment and economic life. Bahrain's provision stands out in not only prohibiting gender discrimination, but explicitly codifying women's rights not only to work but to institutional supports that contribute to establishing a clear reconciliation of economic and household duties.

Country	Employment	Gender equality	Family Unit
Bahrain	16b. Citizens are equal in the assumption of public posts in accordance with the conditions specified by law.	5b. The State guarantees reconciling with their work in society, and their equality with men in political, social, cultural, and economic spheres without breaching the provisions of Islamic Canon Law.	5a. The family is the cornerstone of society, deriving its strength from religion, morality and patriotism. The law preserves its lawful entity, and children, tends the young and protects them from exploitation and citizens are equal before the law in safeguarding them against moral, bodily public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination among them on the basis of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed.
Kuwait	41. Every Kuwaiti shall have the right to work and to choose the nature of dignity and his occupation. Work is the duty of every citizen. Dignity requires it and the State shall make work available to citizens and shall see to the equity of its conditions.	29. The people are peers in human rights, equal public rights and obligations. There shall be no differentiation among them because of gender, origin, language or religion.	9. The family is the foundation of society; its mainstays are religion, morals and the love of country. The Law shall preserve its entity, strengthen its bonds and shall, under its aegis, protect mothers and infants.
Oman	12. Citizens are considered equal in taking up public employment in accordance with the provisions stipulated by the Law.	17. All Citizens are equal before the Law and share the same public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination amongst them on the ground of gender, origin, color, and language, religion, sect, domicile, and social status.	12. The family is the basis of the society, and the Law regulates the means for protecting it, preserving its ties, strengthening its members and values, safeguarding its members and providing suitable conditions to develop their potential and capabilities
Qatar	34. Citizens shall be equal in terms of public rights and duties.	35. All persons are equal before the Law and there shall be no discrimination whatsoever on ground of gender, race, language or religion.	21. The family is the basis of society. A Qatari family is founded on religion, ethics and patriotism. The Law shall regulate as necessary to protect the family, support its structure, strengthen its ties and protect mothers, children and the elderly.
Saudi Arabia	28. The State shall provide job opportunities to all able-bodied people and shall enact laws to protect both the employee and the employer.	N/A	9. The family is the nucleus of Saudi society. Its members shall be brought up imbued with the Islamic Creed which calls for obedience to God, His Messenger and those of the nation who are charged with authority; for the respect and enforcement of law and order; and for love of the motherland and taking pride in its glorious history.
UAE	20. Society shall esteem work as a fundamental basis of its development. It shall strive to ensure that work is available for citizens and to ensure that they are prepared for it. It shall take such steps as are necessary to ensure this by providing legislation to protect the rights of the employees and to protect the interests of the employers, bearing in mind developing international labour legislation.	N/A	15. The family shall be the basis of society. Its support shall be religion, ethics and patriotism. The law shall guarantee its existence and shall safeguard it and protect it from corruption.

Source: The Constitue Project ([link](https://www.constituteproject.org/countries?lang=en)).

Exhibit 7.1 Articles in Arab Gulf constitutions focusing on employment, gender equality, and the importance of the family unit (Source The Constitue Project <https://www.constituteproject.org/countries?lang=en>)

In a series of statements that are nearly identical, gender discrimination is prohibited by Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. Gender discrimination is not recognized or protected in the constitutions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In all six constitutions, however, it is the family that is at the center of public life whether as the 'basis,' the 'cornerstone,' the 'foundation,' or the 'nucleus' of society. In all cases, this provision supersedes the mention of gender equality in terms of the order in which the topics appear in the constitutional provisions. Such an emphasis on the family unit has a specific impact on forming not only key policy frameworks for women in the workplace but also highlights the local spaces for women's empowerment that simultaneously reflect and reinforce the contextual values for women's roles.⁵

7.3.2 Arab Gulf State National Visions and Development Planning

Long before the release of the United Nation's Agenda 2030 in 2015, Arab Gulf states were establishing their own 'vision' planning processes. Such processes were largely sparked by the need to reorganize economies that relied too heavily on oil revenues and to establish economic diversification goals. Oman first released its 'Oman Vision 2020' program in 1995, followed by Bahrain (The Economic Vision 2030) and Qatar (Qatar National Vision 2030) in 2008 (Koch, 2017). Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed suit in 2010, and Saudi Arabia released its 'Vision 2030' strategy in 2016. This first wave of national vision documents emphasized comprehensive, broad-based reforms yet established few specific or measurable action plans which led to limited results.

Exhibit 7.2 illustrates the great discrepancy in the treatment of gender issues in these documents. Women's inclusion in these goals range from no mention of gender goals (Bahrain) to a broad nod to the international agenda (Kuwait) to inclusion as one among multiple venerable groups (Oman) all of the way to specific, meaningful and measurable goals related to women's empowerment (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE).

This range of policy focus is further highlighted in the National Development Plans, which provide evidence of the effort to align international policy priorities with local and context-specific needs (as shown in Exhibit 7.3). For instance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality (SDG 5) is clearly and broadly mentioned in the development plans of Kuwait and Oman, but without any information on how it will be implemented at a local level or what specific areas will be focused on. This lack of detail or specific goals for the local population suggests that the inclusion of this goal in the development plans may be more of a formality

⁵ In this way, such policy frameworks act as technologies of gender as described by Teresa de Lauretis whereby institutions have 'the power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and "implant" representations of gender.' See de Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender*. Indiana University Press.

Country	National Vision	Objectives related to female empowerment
Bahrain	Bahrain Economic Vision 2030	• <i>Not specified</i>
Kuwait	New Kuwait Vision 2035	• “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” by implementing UN SDG 5
Oman	Oman Vision 2040	• “A cohesive and vigilant society that is socially and economically empowered, especially women, children, the youth, the persons with disabilities and the most vulnerable groups”
Qatar	Qatar National Vision 2030	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Enhance women’s capacities and empower them to participate fully in the political and economic spheres, especially in decision-making roles” • “Increased opportunities and vocational support for Qatari women”
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Vision 2030	• Aims to provide jobs for around 1 million Saudi Arabian women to increase women’s labor force participation
UAE	Vision 2021	• Aims to become one of the world’s top 25 countries achieving gender equality

Exhibit 7.2 Objectives in Arab Gulf National Vision Plans focusing on female empowerment

to meet international standards, rather than a fully integrated and committed plan to empower women.

Bahrain and the UAE offer more comprehensive discussions of women’s needs, opportunities, and support systems, but they position these needs within the context of the family and institutions rather than focusing on specific outcomes for women. In contrast, the strategies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia are notable for their specific focus on critical issues such as increasing the number of women in leadership roles, combating negative stereotypes, and promoting women in the workplace.

It is also worth mentioning that work-life balance is explicitly addressed as a goal of state policies, particularly in Bahrain and Qatar. On one hand, these policies reinforce the strong cultural emphasis on family life and women’s roles in the household. On the other hand, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where many nations are struggling to support working families, these policies create a clear foundation for addressing the overrepresentation of women in unpaid care responsibilities (in line with SDG 5) and for creating a policy environment that supports women’s economic agency.

Country	National Plan	Objectives related to female empowerment
Bahrain	National Plans for the Advancement of Bahraini Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Seeks to ensure the achievement of family stability and to enable it to meet the requirements to contribute to competitiveness in development, based on the principle of equal opportunities, and the integration of women's needs into development, in order to achieve opportunities for them to excel and improve their choices for the quality of their lives and their lifelong learning, through integration with partners and allies in institutional work, so that Bahrain becomes a regional center specialized in women's issues' (<i>Supreme Council for Women - Supreme Council for Women: Two decades of successful empowerment of worthy partners in nation building</i>, 2021)
Kuwait	Kuwait National Development Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Has a component and budget for gender development, with a focus on SDG5 on gender equality and women's empowerment' (<i>Working to achieve SDG 5 in Kuwait</i>, 2018)
Oman	Five Year Development Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated the UN SDG5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, into the main pillars of its Five-Year Development Plan (<i>Sustainable Development</i>, 2020)
Qatar	National Development Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions, while reducing stereotyping of women's roles and responsibilities...ensuring the individual well-being of all Qataris, whether through increased career opportunities for women or through stronger occupational safety standards' • 'The government will improve support for working families, particularly for women, by expanding childcare facilities and family-friendly employment practices and by encouraging gender-sensitive working environments.' • 'developing the capacities of Qataris, especially highly-educated women'
Saudi Arabia	National Strategy for Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding the employment of Saudi women who want to work by establishing female employment units in labor offices and the Saudi Human Resources Development Fund, encouraging remote work, creating a program to qualify female job applicants, and identifying which jobs can be filled by Saudi women (<i>National Strategy for Employment</i>)
UAE	National Strategy for Empowerment of Emirati Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Aims to provide a framework for all federal and local government entities, private sector, as well as social organizations, to set plans that will provide a decent living for women and make them creative in all sustainable and developmental fields' (<i>National Strategy for Empowerment of Emirati Women</i>, 2021)

Exhibit 7.3 Objectives in Arab Gulf National Plans focusing on female empowerment

7.3.3 Labor Laws, Family Law, and Women's Employment

So far, we have introduced the treatment of women's empowerment concepts in the constitutions and future-oriented national vision and development plans. However, it's important to recognize that in Arab Gulf states, there is a disconnect between

international goals and local priorities with regard to public policy, which affects women specifically.

7.3.3.1 Equality for Citizen Women's Employment

In addition to the constitutional provisions, various labor laws in the Arab Gulf address equal work rights and the issues of discrimination. Five of the six Arab Gulf states have labor laws that commit to nondiscrimination in the workplace. Direct text on equal work rights or the prohibition of discrimination was not found in Kuwait's labor laws.

- Qatar's 2004 Labor Law No. 14 states that men and women should have equal working rights in terms of job opportunities and equal wages.
- Article 39 of Bahrain's Private Sector Labour Law states that 'discrimination in wages based on sex, origin, language, religion or ideology shall be prohibited.'
- Article 80 of Oman's Labour Law (which applies to both citizens and expatriates in both the public and private sectors) states that 'all provisions regulating the employment of workers shall be applicable to women workers without discrimination between them in the same work.'
- Article 3 in Saudi Arabia's Human Resources law states that 'All citizens have equal rights to work without discrimination based on gender, disability, age or any other form of discrimination, whether during work or hiring process, or when the position is advertised.'
- Article 4 of the UAE's Labour Law states that any discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, national or social origin or disability which would have the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity, or prejudicing equal treatment in the employment, the maintenance of a job and the enjoyment of its benefits, is prohibited.

The World Bank Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) index reports the legal equality of women in 190 economies around the world. In Exhibit 7.4, the WBL assessment highlights that the policy space for women remains more complex and variable across the six countries. Namely, despite broad constitutional guarantees of nondiscrimination in labor law provisions, family law policies continue to enact clear gender boundaries. For example, legal provisions that mandate women's obedience to their husband—often indicative of needing the husband's permission and approval to engage in employment—are directly linked to women's equality of access to the workplace. In addition, policies in many Arab Gulf states set the terms under which women are allowed to work, such as denying work late at night and refusing women entry into jobs considered hazardous or dangerous to their health (e.g., Oman Labor Law Art. 81–82). As is discussed later in this section, such policies reflect the constitutional emphasis on the health and stability of the family unit and ensure the availability and protection of the woman for her familial roles. Rather than being seen as limiting to an individual woman's employment options, however, such policies

are seen as a guarantee that the family unit is sufficiently supported throughout her employment.

Legal provisions that distinguish women's employment, however, are not all limiting. For example, women's work-life balance is also clearly valued through pension provisions. In Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, pension policies set differential requirements for men and women; largely these policies allow women to retire at younger ages than men and with fewer total years of work. In Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar women can access full pension benefits five years earlier than men if they meet tenure requirements of 10–20 years of service. These provisions are

Country	Provision	Documentation
Can a woman get a job in the same way as a man?		
Bahrain	No	Family Law No. 19/2017 Art. 56
Kuwait	No	Personal Status Law Art. 89
Oman	Yes	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	Family Law Art. 69(5)
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Guidelines for employment in the private sector
United Arab Emirates	Yes	Personal Status Law 28/2005 amended by Federal Decree 5/2020 Art 72
Is there no legal provision that requires a woman to obey her husband		
Bahrain	No	Family Law No. 19/2017 Art 40(a)
Kuwait	No	Personal Status Law Art 87
Oman	Yes	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	Family Law Art 58 and 69
Saudi Arabia	Yes	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
United Arab Emirates	Yes	Personal Status Law 28/2005 amended by Federal Decree 5/2020 Art 56
Does the law prohibit discrimination in employment based on gender?		
Bahrain	Yes	Labor Law, Art 29
Kuwait	Yes	Ministerial Decree No. 177 of 2021 on Prohibiting Discrimination in Employment and Prohibiting Sexual Harassment at Workplaces Art 1
Oman	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Labor Law, Art 3
United Arab Emirates	Yes	Federal Law No. 11 of 2019 amending certain provisions of Federal Law No. 2 of 2015, on Combating Discrimination and Hatred

Exhibit 7.4 Women's equality under Arab Gulf States legal frameworks (Source World Bank 'Women, Business and the Law' [2022]; **This law was not included in the WBL report)

Is the age at which men and women can retire with full pension benefits the same?		
Bahrain	No	Social Insurance Law Art. 34
Kuwait	No	Social Insurance Law 1976, Art. 17(6); Law No. 10 of 2019
Oman	No	Social Insurance Law, Art. 21-2
Qatar	No	** Retirement and Pension Law No. 24 of 2002, replaced by Social Insurance Law No. 1 of 2022.
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Social Insurance Law Art. 38 (1)
UAE	Yes	Law No. 7 of 1999, Arts 1 and 16
Does the law mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value?		
Bahrain	Yes	Labor Law, Art 39; Decree Law No, 16/2021
Kuwait	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Oman	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Decree No. 215739/1440
UAE	Yes	Federal Decree Law No. 6 of 2020 Art. 1

Exhibit 7.4 (continued)

widely accepted as recognition of women's dual roles in the workplace and in the household, both of which are of service to the state and the community. In addition, half of the Arab Gulf countries (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) have policy provisions that explicitly protect women's pensions by accounting for periods of absence due to childcare. Given the high proportion of public sector employment among citizens, and especially women, these policies signify a direct set of entitlements in the form of work-life reconciliation policies for women in employment.

7.3.3.2 Gender Wage Gaps Persist Despite Policy Framework for Equality

All Arab Gulf states have extremely imbalanced workforces (to be discussed in greater detail in the next section). Migrant workers have minimum wage thresholds, often set through negotiations between the home country and the country of employment. According to Exhibit 7.4 above, only Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have legal provisions for equal pay. Notably, the World Bank report does not cite Article 51, Law No. 6 of 2010 of Kuwait labor law which provides that 'in terms of performance of the same type of work women are paid same rates as men.' Perhaps this law does not meet the standards set by the research teams or perhaps there is lax implantation which explains the high gender wage gaps in the country. Estimates set

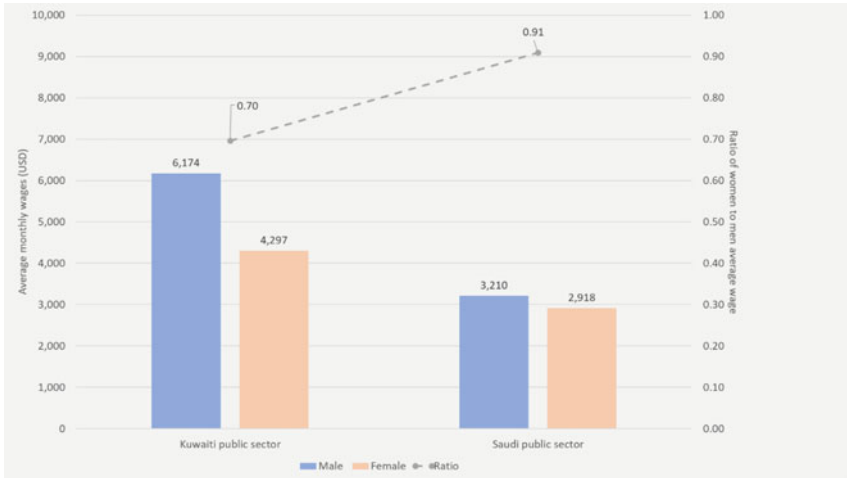


Exhibit 7.5 Gender wage gap for nationals in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Q4 2020. Values are in US dollars (Source Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS] and Saudi General Authority for Statistics)

the gender wage gap in Kuwait at 41 percent in the public sector: in the first quarter of 2019 average monthly salary for Kuwaiti men was 1,807 compared to KWD 1,279 for Kuwaiti women.⁶ Interestingly, the wage gap is less for non-Kuwaiti workers in the public sector, where men earn only 9 percent more than women on average (KWD 726 vs. 666).⁷ As shown in Exhibit 7.5, citizen women in Saudi Arabia have almost closed the gender wage gap, perhaps a change attributable to equal pay legislation. Similarly, women in the public sector in Bahrain make only 3 percent less than men on average (BD 781 for men and BD 758 for women; Lukova 2021 citing Belfer, M (2018) ‘Fighting the Gender Wage Gap: The Bahrain experience’).

Despite the widespread global efforts to attend to and challenge gender wage gaps, there is much evidence, however, to show that this is not the only story being told in the Arab Gulf. To continue with the previous example, the wage gap in the Kuwaiti private sector is inverted, with non-Kuwaiti women earning 42.7 percent higher salaries than their male counterparts (KWD 387 vs KWD 271). It is important to note that none of these figures includes domestic workers, who have a minimum income set at KWD 60 per month, which would greatly deflate the statistics. As indicated in Exhibit 7.4, Qatar has no legal wage protections. However, in this case, the absence of a legal mandate has allowed women (foreign and citizen) to outearn their male colleagues. Data from 2022 shows that the average monthly wage for

⁶ Kuwait Central Statistics Bureau. (2019) *Statistics for 2019*. Gender gaps persist in the private sector of Kuwait as well; however, they are not reflected here as the government has instituted a ‘top-up’ program whereby they subsidize salaries for citizens in the private sector. Therefore, the data would not be useful for a full rendering of wage gaps.

⁷ Ibid.

women in Qatar in the second quarter of 2022 was QR 11,990 compared with QR 11,642 for males.⁸

7.3.3.3 Night Duties and Hazardous Work

As introduced above, policy frameworks in the Arab Gulf states often restrict women's access to night duties and hazardous work. In addition to the Omari Labor Law cited previously, similar provisions exist in most Arab Gulf states:

- Bahrain's Human Resource Law specifically outlines that female employees 'shall not be entrusted to work in a government industrial project between 8 PM to 7 AM' ('Decision No. 51/2012 Promulgating the Executive Regulations of Civil Service Law issued by Decree Law No 48/2010,' 2012).
- Kuwait has a similar policy against women working at night—with an exception for women in the health sector—as specified in Law 38/1964 (Alansari, 2018).
- In the UAE's Law, under Title Two, Employment of Workers and Youth and Women Labor, Chapter 3: Women Labor, Article 27 states that 'Women may not be employed at night. The word "night" shall mean a period of eleven consecutive hours at least including the period from 10 p.m. until 7 a.m.' Article 28 following this article specifies some cases exempt from this law such as women in health services.
- According to Qatar's Law No. 14 (2004), Article 94, 'Women shall not be employed in dangerous arduous works, works detrimental to their health, morals or other works to be specified by a Decision of the Minister.'

In contrast, as part of sweeping reforms to Saudi Arabia recently removed the prohibition on women 'from working at night and working in hazardous jobs and industries' to enhance female employment in the private sector (Matthews-Taylor et al., 2020). One result of such changes is the increasing presence of women in the security sector. In February 2021, Saudi Arabia opened posts for women in the military and in 2022 women were allowed to register to join the Border Guard services and other military departments.⁹ Kuwait's more contentious transition in 2022 allowed women to take combat roles but required that they wear a head covering and have the permission of a male guardian.¹⁰

Such conflict highlights the balancing act that Arab Gulf policy frameworks play between appeasing and embracing international standards (in the case of Saudi Arabia) and actively resisting such change (in the case of Kuwait). Lawmakers across the region face harsh reactions from sizeable factions of their populations who want

⁸ https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/statistics/Statistical%20Releases/Social/LaborForce/2022/LF_Q2_2022_AE.pdf.

⁹ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/saudi-arabia/2022/03/25/saudi-arabia-allows-women-to-join-its-border-guards/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/kuwaiti-army-allows-women-in-combat-roles-but-without-guns>.

to embrace women's familial roles and who do not demand neoliberal individual equality in every arena to feel empowered. The use of proxies such as 'women's work at night' and 'women's work in hazardous jobs' are not relevant indicators of empowerment, nor is their access necessarily a signal of equality, empowerment, or well-being.

This section has examined the Arab Gulf policy frameworks at multiple levels to highlight the tenuous, and often resistant, interactions of international women's agendas with a more nuanced and contextualized empowerment. In the case of women's economic empowerment in particular the emphasis on neoliberal individuality is at odds with the family-centric environment of the Arab Gulf. Where international agendas seem to envision progress in 'freeing' women from their family roles—or at least ensuring they do not cost her economic opportunities, Arab Gulf policies embrace women's family and economic roles in ways that don't easily fit these models. Such policy frameworks may indeed find fertile ground in the post-COVID era when women's multiple roles have been pushed to the brink, as exemplified by the recent 'Great Resignation' and 'Great Break-Up' movements (McKinsey, 2022). In such an environment, there is a need to revisit the assumptions on which women's economic empowerment has been built and disseminated, particularly those that disarticulate agentic voices that do not accept neoliberal concepts of blunt, unquestioned equality and workforce participation as automatic purveyors of empowerment. In the next section, we provide an in-depth analysis of the contextual nuances in the Arab Gulf and their implications for international women's empowerment discourses.

7.4 Contextualizing Women's Empowerment in the Arab Gulf

In this section, we highlight women's economic empowerment in the Arab Gulf through analysis of two main themes—labor force participation and work-life reconciliation. We show that the unique context for women's labor force participation in the Arab Gulf—notably the dominance of male, foreign workers in the labor force and the high concentration of citizen employment in the public sector—provide challenges to Arab Gulf states in implementing international agendas. These challenges are not well captured in global metrics of labor force participation or care work and as such cannot fully represent the situation of citizen women in these countries.

To properly situate this analysis, a short accounting of the distinctions between the Arab Gulf rentier economies and their labor forces is warranted. First, research shows that women's labor force participation is lower in resource-rich autocracies than in other wealthy countries (e.g., Liou & Musgrave, 2016) and that the development of industries that are oil adjacent are unfriendly towards women's employment (e.g., Ross, 2008). Oil-rich rentier economies, the research explains, had resource wealth that allowed for the importation of foreign male labor and reduced the need for citizen women to enter the labor force (Al Rasheed, 2013; Hijab, 1988; Moghadam,

2005; Ross, 2008). In addition, citizen families could easily subsist with one income (Hijab, 1988).

Second, a deep dependence on migrant labor has shaped the national labor markets from the early oil boom years when the countries needed to address labor and skills gaps quickly. Despite rising human capital levels in these countries, dependence on migrant labor has continued, with the resulting labor market being rigidly formed around this dependence (Buttorff et al., 2018a; Ennis, 2019b). Moreover, gender gaps in migrant labor can be traced to the Arab Gulf countries' rapidly growing infrastructure needs which demanded influxes of male foreign labor to work in massive construction projects and the oil industry—historically and globally, both industries typically hire men over women. As a result, citizens, and especially citizen women, are highly clustered in public sector employment creating a deeply imbalanced workforce that is not fully captured in global measurement tools. These defining characteristics of the Arab State workforces are not fully accounted for in international data sets and result in data that cannot represent women's full participation in these countries.

Third, we provide a critical rendering of the public policy frameworks around women's economic empowerment. In opposition to the challenges discussed above, we show how the policy environment for working women in the Arab Gulf and their explicit support for women's dual roles in workplace and the home are more enabling for women than in other countries. In fact, the overall work-life reconciliation policy framework in the Arab Gulf is notable for its allowances for not just maternity, but also for prolonged illness, educational opportunities, and political participation. As such, these frameworks illustrate a much broader acknowledgment of work-life reconciliation needs that go beyond care work. While such explicit valuation of women's family roles—or even of a worker's multiple engagements outside of the workplace—does not easily align with the neoliberal policy agendas, it is a notable accomplishment in ensuring work-life reconciliation for all workers.

7.4.1 Arab Gulf Women in the Labor Force

The promotion of women's labor force participation rates as a key signifier of women's (economic) empowerment is a central metric of the international rights agendas. As illustrated in this chapter, this agenda is muddled by the proportion of migrant workers in the Arab Gulf labor forces and the inability of international measurement tools to accurately capture citizen women's labor force participation rates in the Arab Gulf countries.

The universal measure of women's economic engagement—through accounting for the female labor force participation rate (FLFP) as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO)—does not fully reflect the large—and male-migrant worker populations and large public sectors of the Arab Gulf (Buttorff et al., 2018a, b). The ILO statistical indicators intend to measure the proportion of the working-age population in a country that is engaged in the labor market -either as employed or

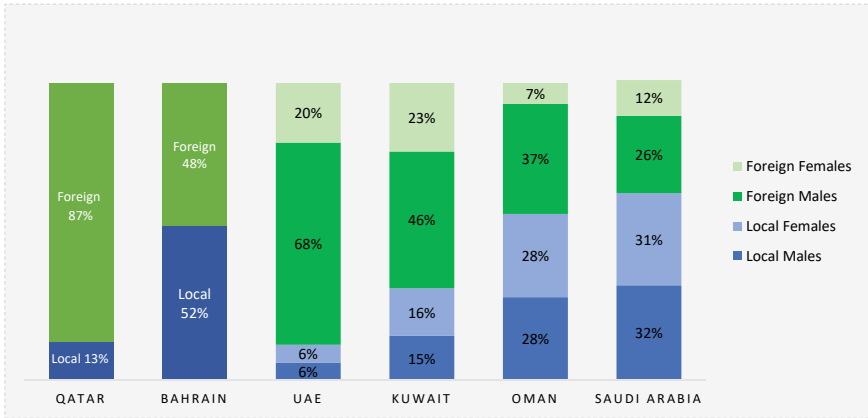


Exhibit 7.6 Demographic composition of Arab Gulf countries (Qatar and UAE, 2010; Bahrain 2014; Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, 2018) (Source Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], and Saudi General Statistics Authority. Estimates for Qatar: Winckler, O. [2015]. How many Qatari nationals are there? *Middle East Quarterly*. Estimates for UAE: <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/fact-sheet>. Estimates for Bahrain: Aref, A. [2019]. Demographic Dynamics and the Question of Sustainability: Abiding Policy Debate in the GCC. Doha Institute for Family Studies, and European University Institute—Migration Policy Center and Gulf Research Center [2016]. Gulf Labor Markets and Migration [GLMM] Demographic and Economic Database)

unemployed persons.¹¹ As this definition makes no allowance for the nationality of the workers—citizen or migrant—the migrant-heavy workforces of the Arab Gulf are largely misrepresented in the data. Research suggests that this oversight leads to the underestimation of citizen women’s participation in the labor force by anywhere from 5 percent (Saudi Arabia) to 38 percent (Qatar) (Buttorff et al., 2018a, b).¹² This effect is strongest in the Arab Gulf states, however, where foreign workers comprise between 36 percent (Saudi Arabia) and 88 percent (Qatar, UAE) of the national workforce (see Exhibit 7.6). On the whole, male migrants dominate these demographic profiles; the sex-disaggregated data from Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE show that for every female migrant, there can be anywhere from three to seven male migrants.

The preponderance of non-nationals and men in the Arab State labor markets obscures the visibility of women, especially in the internationally comparable metrics that do not make distinctions between migrant and citizenship status in determining labor force eligibility. Exhibits 7.7 and 7.8 show the FLFP patterns for the Arab Gulf states since 1990, as modeled by the ILO. Exhibit 7.7 shows that the proportion of

¹¹ <https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/description-labour-force-statistics/>.

¹² The findings were relevant to other regions as well. The adjusted statistics increased women’s labor force participation statistics in the US and Sweden by over 10 percent, while other Middle East countries saw small downward adjustments (e.g., Morocco).

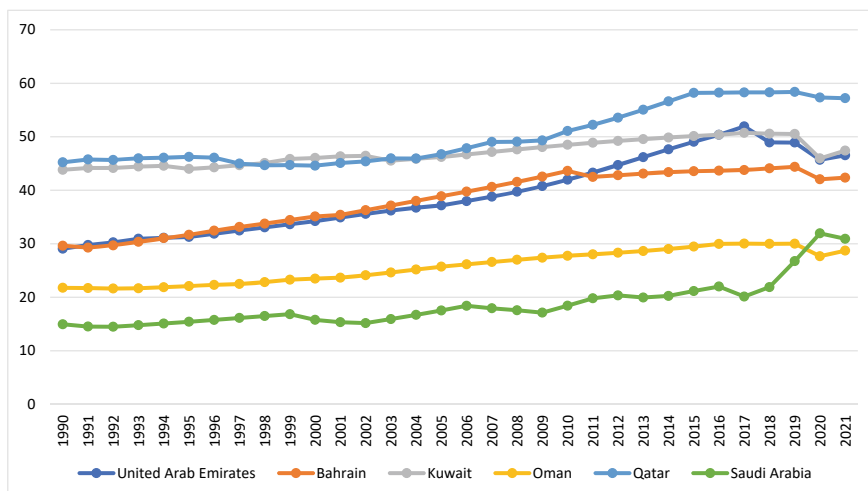


Exhibit 7.7 Female labor force participation rate as a percentage of the female population ages 15+ (*Source* World Bank Data Bank, modeled ILO estimate, Assessed December 6, 2022)

women—migrant and citizen—in each country who participate in the labor force—employed or unemployed—was relatively stable from 1990 to 2010, but that in the past 10 years, participation rates have been trending upwards, particularly in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In fact, as of 2021, the FLFP rates of women in Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE were above the world average of 46 percent, with Qatar outperforming the United States (55 percent) and the European Union (51 percent).¹³ Exhibit 7.8 shows that despite these upward trends, the size of the female labor force remains small, measuring between 12 and 15 percent of the total labor force across the region. This confirms the overwhelming male dominance in the labor force in these countries in addition to highlighting the active participation of women.

The ILO data above, however, includes all working women—migrant and citizen—which again perpetuates a misrepresentation of the employment of citizen women. This is particularly true when considering the heavy reliance of the Arab Gulf states on domestic workers. ILO data suggests that domestic workers are a major proportion of the labor force, reaching, for example, 12 percent of the labor force in Saudi Arabia and 14 percent in Kuwait (ILO, 2018). Thus, nearly half of the female labor force represented in Exhibit 7.8 for each of these countries is solely comprised of migrant domestic workers.

Exhibit 7.9 shows the employment rates of citizen women as a percentage of the citizen labor force. In Kuwait, for example, ILO statistics—by including migrant and unemployed women—underestimate Kuwaiti women’s LFPR: the ILO shows a female LFPR of 46.9 percent compared with the Kuwaiti labor market indicators which show that 58 percent of employed Kuwaitis are women. Countries with larger

¹³ World Bank Data Bank, Labor force participation rate, % of female population ages 15+ (modeled ILO estimate). Accessed November 22, 2022.

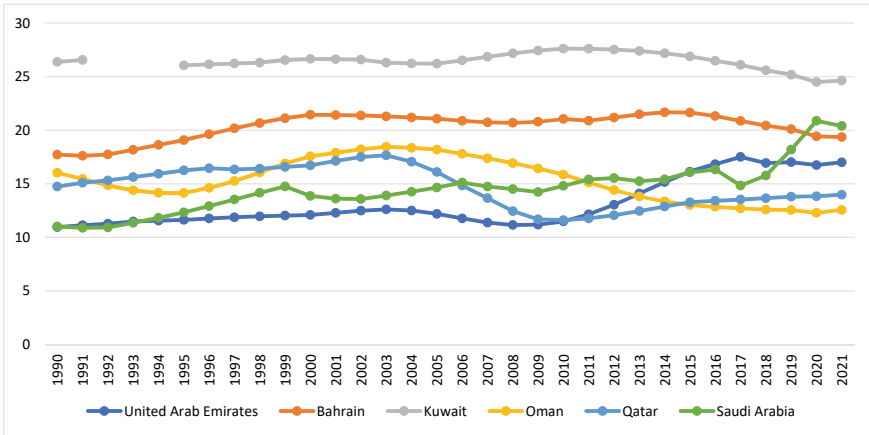


Exhibit 7.8 Female labor force as a percentage of the total labor force (Source World Bank Data Bank, modeled ILO estimate, Accessed December 6, 2022)

shares of migrant labor face larger distortions. In Qatar, for example, the ILO’s estimate of 57 percent of women participating in the labor force primarily captures the large population of migrant women workers; national statistics estimate Qatari women’s participation at 36 percent.

It’s important to note that the high percentage of foreign women employed in the region influences the overall statistics for women in the international labor force.

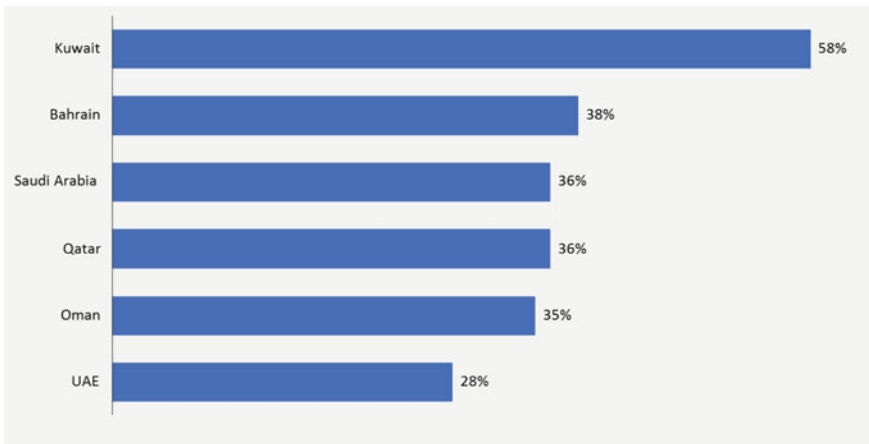


Exhibit 7.9 Citizen female employment in the Arab Gulf as a percentage of the citizen labor force, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal. Note Figures for the UAE are estimates. Data does not include domestic workers)

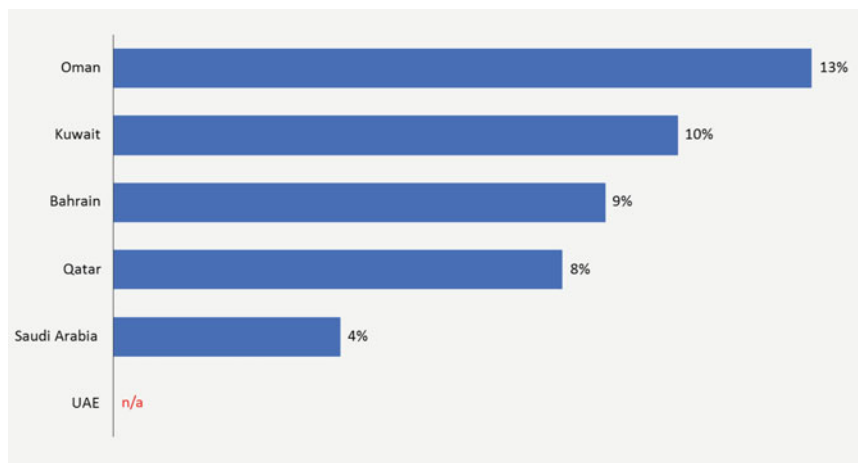


Exhibit 7.10 Foreign female employment as a percentage of the foreign labor force in the Arab Gulf, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal. Note Data does not include domestic workers)

However, both citizens and foreign workers in the Arab Gulf states are predominantly male. As shown in Exhibit 7.10, only 4–13% of foreign workers are female, with a strong male dominance in the foreign labor force. It’s important to mention that these numbers do not include domestic workers (in distinction from the ILO statistics).

As labor force statistics include both employed and unemployed persons, it is important to further establish the presence of women in employment, not just in the labor force. Exhibit 7.11 illustrates total female employment in the Arab Gulf by citizenship, showing that Saudi Arabia has the largest share of female national employment (12.1 percent), while Qatar has the smallest (1.9 percent).

The evidence shows that not only have Arab Gulf women been entering the workforce, but that they have been doing so on relatively positive terms. Arab Gulf women have effectively ‘leapfrogged’ the jobs in low-paying and low-skilled manufacturing industries typical of the workforces in North Africa and the Levant, to find employment in high-level services sector professions (Buttorff et al., 2018a; 2018b). This, along with the higher levels of women’s labor force participation,¹⁴ results in higher levels of female citizen labor force in the Arab Gulf that is rarely depicted in the broader literature on Arab women’s empowerment.

The flip side of women’s labor force participation is women’s unemployment. In the case of the Arab Gulf states, unemployment rates, such as those shown in Exhibit 7.12, largely capture unemployment among citizens, as migrant workers have extremely limited rights outside of their sponsored, employment-dependent

¹⁴ The regional average female labor force participation rate statistics across MENA is 21.3 percent, an average that is lower than that found in any one of the Arab Gulf states.

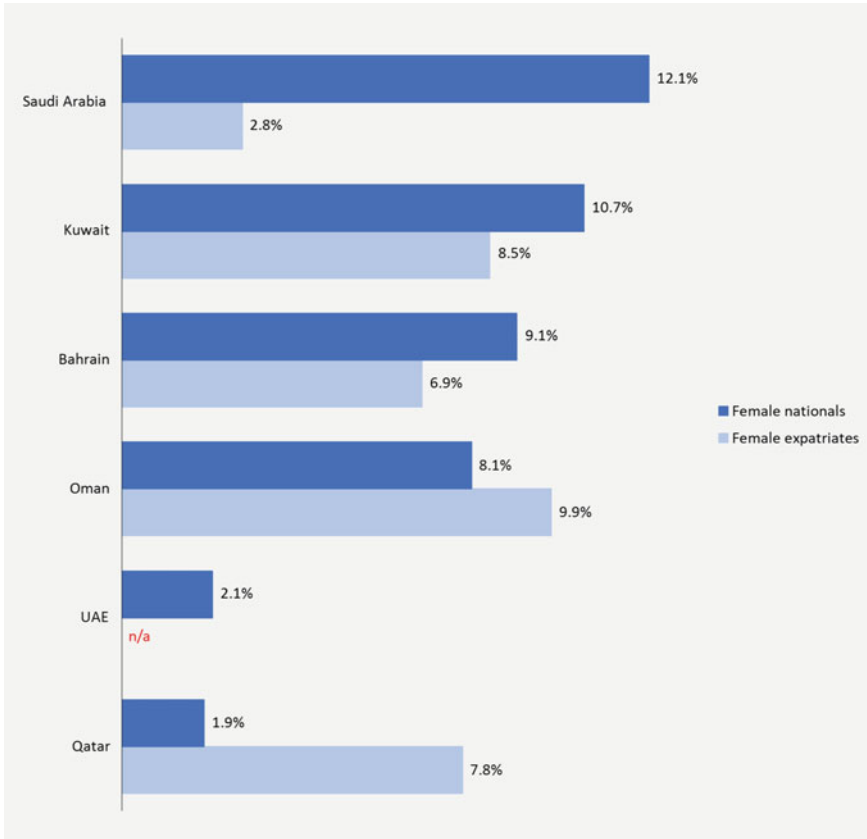


Exhibit 7.11 Breakdown of female employment as a % of total employment in the Arab Gulf by citizenship, 2020. Listed in descending order of female national employment (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA] [35], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS] [36], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI] [37], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA] [38], Saudi General Statistics Authority [39], and the UAE Government portal [40]. Note Figures for the UAE are estimates, and data does not include domestic workers)

visas. This means that when the work ends, the migrant worker also loses their visa to be in the country. The ILO data shows that women in four out of six Arab Gulf states have unemployment rates that exceed world averages indicating that there are women ready to work in these countries (Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and UAE). The issue is extremely acute in Oman and Saudi Arabia, where women experience unemployment at more than two (in the case of Oman) or three (Saudi Arabia) times the world average.

Saudi Arabia has the highest female unemployment rate (23 percent), and Qatar has the lowest (0.3 percent) as of 2021. It is not surprising that Qatar registers such low unemployment rates. It is one of the richest Arab Gulf countries with a small population of 2.8 million people as of 2020. It is also a rapidly growing economy

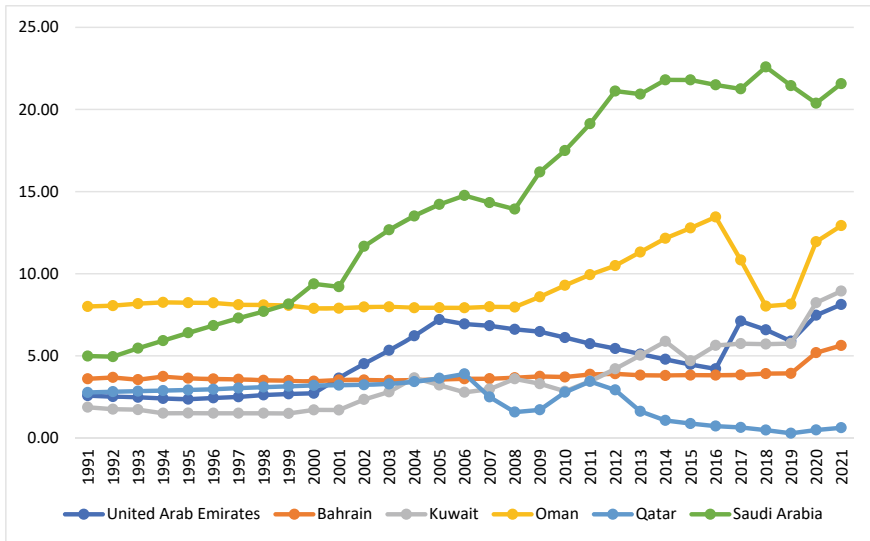


Exhibit 7.12 Unemployment, percent of the female labor force (modeled ILO estimate) (Source World Bank Data Bank, Accessed December 3, 2022)

where nationals receive high salaries and foreigners only enter with work visas. Low-income foreign workers are not allowed to bring in dependents. In most cases, national and foreign women with employed spouses are not in dire financial need to work. Saudi Arabia is a much older migrant-receiving economy and has a much larger population representing diverse socioeconomic strata. In light of rapid policy changes in Saudi Arabia and the growing female labor force participation rate (as shown in Exhibit 7.7) in recent years, the increasing unemployment rate for women may also be capturing women's increasing desire to work and the remaining friction in access to the labor market.

This section has taken the case of female labor force participation metrics and detailed the limitations in analysis that result from the lack of specification for the Arab Gulf economic and labor market circumstances. Specifically, the male- and migrant-dominated labor force means that the interpretation of FLFP statistics, particularly to assess the status of citizen women, is insufficient. As detailed above, citizen women are engaging in the labor force at rates that rival—or exceed—many Western nations. In addition, the quality of the employment accessed by Arab Gulf women is high indicating that circumstances for women's empowerment in the region may be higher than reflected in international comparisons. In the next section, we examine a second labor force imbalance that is central to the Arab Gulf economies—the strong preference of citizen workers—particularly women—for public sector employment.

7.4.2 *Imbalanced Workforces and Public Sector Employment*

In this section, we analyze the gender impacts of public sector human resource policies that build incentives for national workers by giving them priority of appointment in the public sector and permanent contracts that are not available to foreign workers. These policies are implicated as one cause of the imbalance in the workforce with nationals overrepresented in the public sector and foreign workers in the private sector.

Research suggests that public sector employment has provided a key opportunity to women globally who sought to escape many of the discriminatory work environments in the private sector (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010). Globally, women comprise a larger proportion of public sector workforces (46 percent) than private sector workforces (33 percent). Among OECD countries, public sector employment varies widely: government employment can reach upwards of 30 percent of total employment (e.g., Norway) and lows of 6 or 8 percent (in Japan and Korea, respectively) (OECD, 2021).

Across all Arab Gulf countries, citizens have a strong preference for public sector employment (Ennis, 2019a, 2019b). Simply, the constitutional guarantees of employment presented earlier ensure that public sector employment is secure while generous state provisions provide better work terms for citizens than the private sector (see Exhibit 7.13). The demographic imbalance and national sensitivities towards high dependence on foreign workers are also tied to issues of social inclusion and exclusion in labor policies. Some exclusive provisions are for nationals only or are based on other exclusion criteria. Importantly, public sector work allows for a better work-life balance than work in the market-driven private sector.

In the Arab Gulf, the preference for public sector work among nationals is strong (Exhibit 7.14), accounting for a strong majority of citizen employment in Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE. In 2020, Qatar has the largest share of nationals—91 percent—working in the public sector while Bahrain has the largest share of nationals—70 percent) working in the private sector.

The Arab Gulf countries have very similar economies—largely as a result of the high dependence on oil incomes and the rentierist policy structures—that allow for the funding of a large public sector. Oil incomes provide a greater capacity for Gulf states to relocate these rents to bolster public sector employment levels across both genders (Herb, 2014). Exhibit 7.15 illustrates the magnitude of this capacity by presenting the public sector wage bill in the Arab Gulf countries, which accounts for anywhere between one-quarter and nearly one-half of all public expenditures. The variation among Arab Gulf countries, however, is great, with countries like Kuwait allocating more than one-quarter of their GDP to the public sector wage bill.

Notably, public sector employment across the globe is primarily composed of women: In 2019, OECD countries averaged 58 percent women in the public workforce, compared with 45 percent in total employment. Arab Gulf women are overrepresented in the public sector, largely because of the migrant-heavy labor market, where low-wage migrant female labor has dominated with the result that national

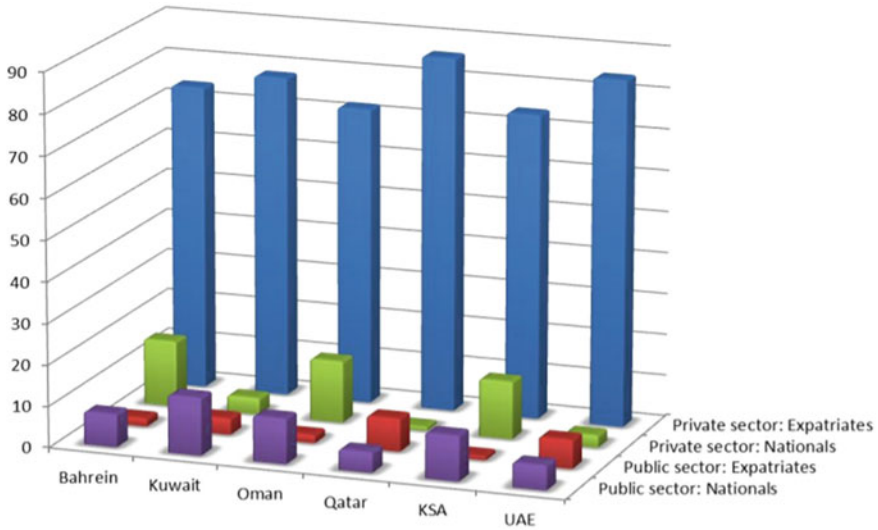


Exhibit 7.13 Structure of the Arab Gulf workforce (Source Raimundo Soto [2016]. Labor market structures in Arab countries: what role for minimum wages? ILO. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/genericdocument/wcms_210614.pdf)

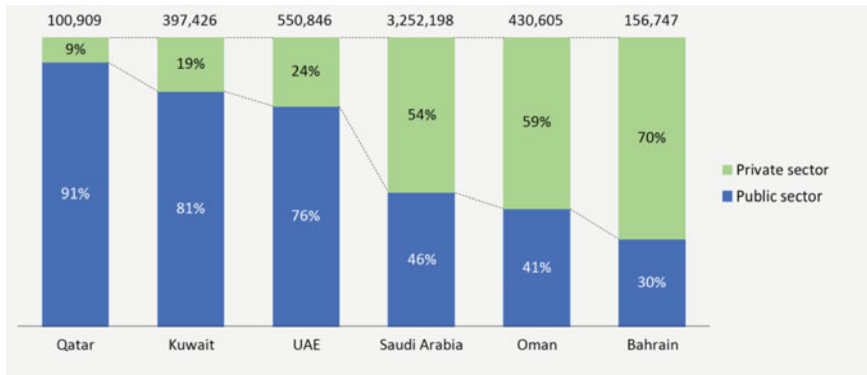


Exhibit 7.14 Sectoral breakdown of citizen labor force across the Arab Gulf, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal. Note Figures for the UAE are estimates)

women are discouraged from entering the private sector (Young, 2016). Exhibit 7.16 highlights how, despite its importance for citizen employment, the public sector across the Arab Gulf states represents a much smaller proportion of employment compared with the foreign-staffed private sector. This graphic is particularly able to highlight the highly masculinized labor forces in the Arab Gulf.

Country	Wage Bill as % of GDP	Wage Bill as % of Public Expenditures
Bahrain	10.97	30.36
Kuwait	27.05	41.02
Oman	13.77	26.67
Qatar	10.96	31.96
KSA	18.70	46.38
UAE	8.18	25.56

Exhibit 7.15 Size of public sector wage bill by GDP and public expenditures, 2020 (*Source* Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators, World Bank Data Bank, Accessed November 26, 2022)

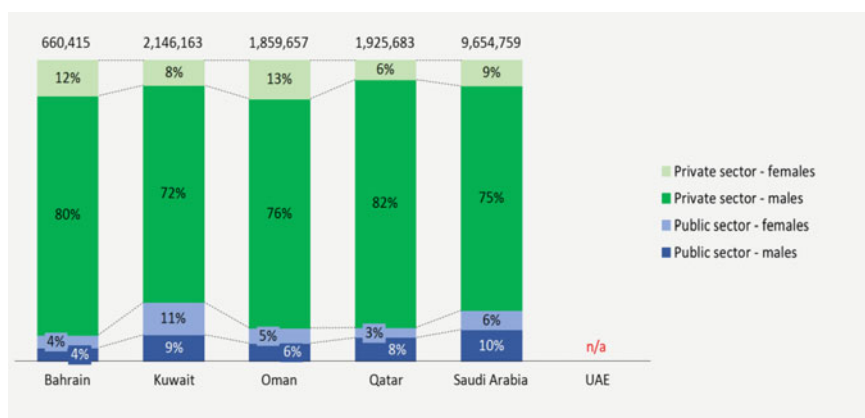


Exhibit 7.16 Total employment in the Arab Gulf by sector and sex, 2020 (*Source* Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal)

The following Exhibits demonstrate the significant role that public sector employment plays in providing opportunities for women citizens in the Arab Gulf states. As seen in Exhibit 7.17, women make up over 50 percent of the public sector workforce in Kuwait and Bahrain, with Oman following closely. Furthermore, Exhibit 7.18 sheds light on the proportion of citizen women participating in the labor force, with 92 percent of citizen women in Qatar being employed in the public sector, despite having the largest gender gap in the region. This highlights the importance of the public sector as a crucial source of economic opportunities for women.

These workforce imbalances—whereby nationality and sex intersect in defining ways within the public and private sector workforces—reflect better provisions in the legal frameworks regulating labor in the public sector, compared to the private sector, across all the Arab Gulf countries (Aref & Al Kahlout, 2015). Financed by oil profits, jobs for nationals in the public sector tend to have shorter working hours and higher wages. Research on national women in the UAE and Qatar shows that women prefer to work in the public sector for these very reasons (James-Hawkins et al., 2017;

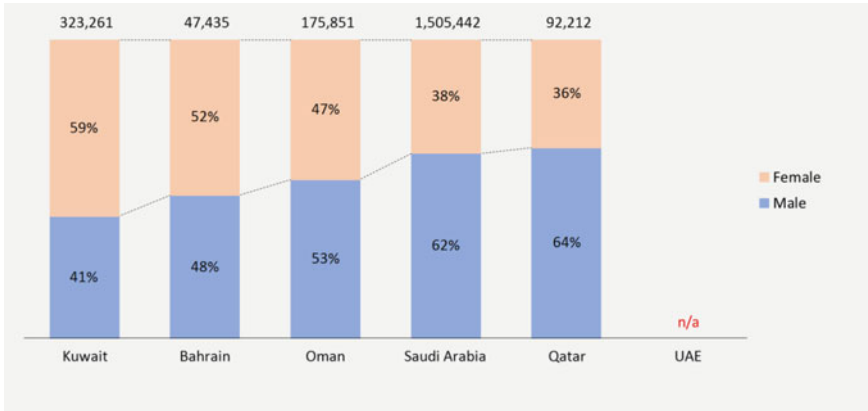


Exhibit 7.17 Breakdown of Arab Gulf citizen public sector labor forces by sex, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal)

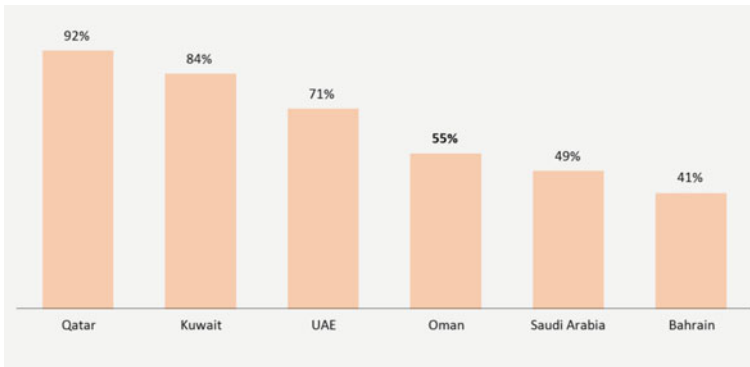


Exhibit 7.18 Percentage of citizen female labor force employed in the public sector, 2020 (Note Figures for the UAE are estimates. Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal)

Marmenout & Lirio, 2014). Moreover, it is argued that the high wages in the public sector, and associated welfare benefits, result in high-income households which thus reduces the economic need for women to work (Moghadam, 2005). Studies in the region confirm that many women seek employment for personal and professional growth, as well as for financial autonomy, rather than for financial need (Ennis, 2019a; Prager, 2020).

However, as noted earlier, with ongoing global economic challenges and the short lifespan of resource-dependent wealth, Arab Gulf countries are under pressure to

correct these imbalances in the workforce as well as to reduce the public sector wage bills. Consequently, Gulf states have continued to develop and implement economic diversification plans and policies to reduce dependence on foreign labor through the drafting of the national vision plans and development strategies presented above. In the aggregate, these plans support the expansion of private and manufacturing sectors, supporting national entrepreneurship (Ennis, 2019a; Young, 2016), and incentives for both citizen workers (e.g., through minimum wages and wage 'top-up' programs) and employers (e.g., through nationalization programs—Kuwaitization, Qatarization, etc.) to increase citizen employees in the private sector (Arab News, 9 July 2021; Fattah, 2021; Gulf Times, 2022; Reuters, 2020). Nationalization policies specifically aim to increase and diversify the representation of nationals in the workforce and build local human capital, including that of women.

While nationalization policies may benefit the employment of national women (and men), they may at the same time hamper the hiring and career progression of foreign women in mid- to high-skilled jobs. While research on this is unavailable, anecdotal evidence indicates that nationality-based hiring policies are indeed affecting foreign women's job prospects. Furthermore, Young (2016) found that Arab Gulf economies with higher proportions of non-national women, such as Kuwait and Bahrain, are also more likely to have higher numbers of citizen women in the workforce. Hence, it appears that supporting women's employment regardless of nationality may not hurt local women's economic empowerment. Increasing the presence and visibility of foreign women in the Arab Gulf workplace may in fact help ease citizen women's entry into the workforce.

Given the notable importance of the public sector for Arab Gulf women's employment, ensuring that public sector employment opportunities are quality offerings is especially important. However, a major challenge, especially in the Arab Gulf, is promoting women's access to leadership and management positions in the public as well as private sectors. As shown in Exhibit 7.19, World Economic Forum (WEF) data reflects the gaps in women's leadership in all sectors across the Arab Gulf states. For example, in Saudi Arabia, women represent 23.9 percent of professional and technical workers, yet only 6.8 percent of decision-makers. A similar pattern is found in Kuwait where, despite having the highest representation of professional women (34.1 percent), only 13.6 percent are in senior and decision-making roles. The representation of women in the public sector—here defined in terms of political leaders in parliamentary and ministerial positions—is a fraction of these numbers.

The UAE, however, offers a critical exception to this, with 50 percent of parliamentarians and 27.3 percent of ministerial positions being held by women. In 2019, Presidential Resolution No. (1) of 2019 established a 50 percent quota for women in the Federal National Council (FNC). As a result of this policy, women's representation in the FNC rose from 7 to 20 seats (out of 40).

This section emphasized the significance of the overrepresentation of citizen women in the public sector as a second contextual factor in evaluating women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf states. The public sector plays a crucial role in providing employment opportunities for women and has the potential to make a significant impact on their empowerment. In the following section, we will delve

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	KSA	UAE
Overall ranking/score*	137/0.632	143/0.621	145/0.608	142/0.624	147/0.603	72/0.716
Legislators, Senior Officials, and managers	21.6%	13.6	11.1	15.1	6.8	21.5
Professional and technical works	32.6%	34.1	25.8	23.4	23.9	21.8
Women in parliament	15%	1.5	2.3	9.8	0	50
Women in ministerial positions	4.5%	6.7	12	7.1	0	27.3

Exhibit 7.19 Selected scores from the 2022 WEF gender gap report (*Source* World Bank Open Data Bank, Accessed November 21, 2022; *scores represent the proportion of the remaining gap between men and women [e.g., 0.632 means that a gender gap of 63% remains across all fields of interest])

into the third contextual element affecting women’s economic empowerment in the Arab Gulf, which is fertility.

7.4.3 Fertility

During the same period in which women’s employment has risen in the Arab Gulf, fertility rates have decreased. Fertility is a critical issue in the Arab Gulf, given the constitutional emphasis on the family. The Arab Gulf states, with their small populations, have strong incentives to promote pro-natalist policies and increase their national populations. However, there are challenges to achieving both higher fertility and women’s employment, as the latter has a traditional negative effect on fertility. Additionally, the preference for public sector employment among citizens complicates the situation, leading scholars to question whether these pro-birth and pro-women policies may be at odds with one another (Fargues, 2019).

The literature on gender and development typically views high fertility rates as a hindrance to women’s empowerment and a sign of patriarchal systems, and that improved education, increased labor force participation, and access to contraception lead to a decline in fertility rates (Phan, 2013). Since the 1970s, fertility rates in the Arab Gulf have decreased from 6.8 births per woman (Al Awad & Chartouni, 2014) to between 1.4 (UAE) and 2.7 (Oman) births per woman in 2020. As shown in Exhibit 7.20, the decline in fertility rates across the Arab Gulf, particularly in Oman and Saudi Arabia, is particularly noteworthy. These rates now align with the average fertility rate of women across the OECD, which is 1.62 births per woman.

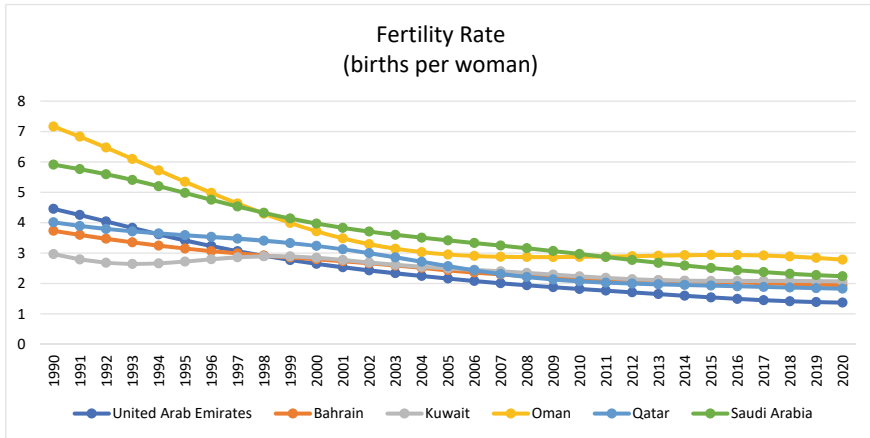


Exhibit 7.20 Fertility rate of Arab Gulf countries (1990–2020) (Source World Bank Data Bank, Fertility rate [births per woman]. Accessed November 26, 2022)

Research suggests that multiple reasons underlie the decline in fertility across the Arab Gulf countries, with more time spent in education and delayed age at first marriage being among the most significant. For example, studies in the UAE and Saudi Arabia found that women’s marriage delay and high female educational levels were more significant than employment status in determining fertility levels (Al Awad & Chartouni, 2014; Salam, 2013). In Oman, the delaying and spacing of births and marriage delays were most impactful (Islam, 2017). In contrast, research in Qatar found that fertility decline was more strongly attributable to employment status but was also affected by rising age at first marriage (Fargues, 2019).

The interplay between fertility and women’s employment reinforces dominant gender norms and stereotypes. While increased participation in education and employment opportunities is often touted as the primary cause of declining fertility rates among women, multiple structural and social factors, including declining marriage rates and high divorce rates, also play a role (Abbasi-Shavazi & Torabi, 2012). The pressure to maintain high fertility rates in these small Arab Gulf nations is predominantly placed on women, despite the challenges faced by both women and men in balancing childrearing and career pursuits. This tension between policies promoting women’s empowerment and policies supporting work-life reconciliation is evident in the Arab Gulf’s policy frameworks, highlighting the need for a more nuanced approach to the international women’s agenda and raising questions about which policies best serve women’s well-being. For example, as is discussed further in the next section, generous leave policies aimed at enabling women to perform care work while also working may be seen as both empowering and aligned with neoliberal women’s agendas, promoting women’s economic engagement above all else.

7.4.4 Traditional Gender Roles Around Domestic Work And Caring Responsibilities

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) recognized the importance of addressing women's care work and domestic responsibilities and called for their inclusion in discussions about women in the economy. However, in 2015, the United Nations took this one step further and included care labor as a key aspect of SDG 5 on gender equality. SDG 5.4 specifically calls on states to acknowledge and value the unpaid care and domestic work performed by women, and to support this work through the provision of public services, social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibilities within households and families.

A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) highlighted the disproportionate burden of care work on women globally, with women performing 76.2 percent of total hours of unpaid care work, which is more than three times the amount performed by men. This disparity has a significant impact on women's economic opportunities, with over 606 million women worldwide reporting that care responsibilities prevent them from participating in the workforce. The report found that six Arab Gulf states, including Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, are among the top ten countries in terms of the amount of time women spend on childcare. The data shows that women in Qatar spend the most time on childcare (394 min), followed by Oman (361 min), Kuwait (283 min), UAE (278 min), Bahrain (269 min), and Saudi Arabia (260 min). Notably, Qatar and Oman also have high levels of men's participation in care work, with 202 and 293 min spent on childcare, respectively, which is higher than the reported levels in many other countries (ILO, 2018).

It is challenging to determine the exact measurements used for distinguishing between citizen and foreign women in the data set. However, the high rankings of all Arab Gulf countries in terms of time spent on childcare suggest that the demographics and imbalances in the workforce are a matter that requires clarification. The treatment of domestic workers, who make up a significant proportion of caregivers and female workers in the Arab Gulf, is a contentious issue when it comes to labor force participation statistics. It is important to provide clarity in this area, given the international and national-level differences in definitions. These results cannot be solely attributed to fertility, as countries like Oman and Saudi Arabia have high fertility rates, nor can they be easily linked to women's labor force participation, as Qatar, for example, has high labor force participation rates but also a heavy burden of childcare time.

The data on care work in the Arab Gulf states, although limited, raises the question of how much of this burden is being carried by paid domestic workers, and how much is being shouldered by citizen women. The perception of mothers as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners still prevails in the region, even though many of the care work tasks are performed by paid domestic workers. The generous leave policies offered by the Arab Gulf states also play a role in this dynamic and warrant further examination.

The data presented in Exhibit 7.21 shows various types of leave options for public sector employees in the Arab Gulf region, with female-specific leaves being highlighted in red. This information highlights the generous leave provisions in the region, which include not only maternity and childcare leaves, but also leaves for prolonged illness, education and training, and political participation (in the case of Kuwait). These policies, while aimed at supporting women's role as primary caregivers, also provide work-life balance that is rare in other countries. It is important to consider these policies when examining the childcare statistics mentioned earlier, as they may indicate a greater ability for Arab Gulf citizens to spend time at home rather than a hindrance to employment.

It is important to emphasize that the allocation of leaves described above is not equally accessible to all migrant women. As demonstrated in Exhibit 7.21, Qatari women are entitled to five years of paid leave to care for a disabled child under Qatar Civil Human Resources Law No. 15 of 2016. However, this benefit is not extended to non-Qatari women working in the same field. Similarly, Muslim women in all GCC countries are granted four months and ten days of paid leave in the event of a spouse's death, according to Shari'a law, whereas non-Muslim women are only entitled to 15 days of paid leave.

The policy framework in the Arab Gulf region places a strong emphasis on family well-being and values work-life reconciliation for women, rather than solely focusing on their economic success. Despite the provision of leaves and the availability of domestic workers and institutionalized care, working women in the region still struggle to balance their careers and family responsibilities, as shown by research in Qatar and the UAE (Al-Ansari, 2020; Marmenout & Lirio, 2014). This challenge extends to women in high-level and managerial positions, who face even greater time demands (Prager, 2020; Yaghi, 2016). As a result, the representation of women in the public sphere and their participation in leadership and decision-making positions is still limited in the Arab Gulf. The prevailing stereotype still views the home as a woman's primary priority, while men's involvement in household duties and childcare remains limited. This manifestation of gender-based discrimination in the region can be linked to cultural factors rooted in tribal heritage, a conservative lifestyle, and family pressures that impose male protection on women (Murray & Zhang-Zhang, 2018).

In this section, we have explored how the experiences of citizen women in the Arab Gulf serve as a lens through which to examine the limits of the 'universal' women's empowerment agenda. Our analysis has revealed the challenges of codifying and achieving empowerment that is relevant to and reflective of the local population's needs. By examining the circumstances of women's empowerment and disempowerment in the Arab Gulf policy space, we have highlighted the ways in which these 'universal' agendas perpetuate 'orientalist' discourses that undermine the rights of women in the region, for example by relying on incomplete labor force participation metrics. At the same time, we have emphasized the need to acknowledge and value the positive aspects of Gulf policies, such as work-life reconciliation initiatives. Given the growing demands for better work-life balance in Western nations, it is imperative to revisit the 'universal' women's empowerment agenda and question the

Type of leave	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	KSA	UAE
<i>Accouchement/Delivery</i>	2 months	2 months	50 days	2 months, but 3 months for twins	70 days	3 months
<i>Family</i>		6 months to 4 years for married females or divorced/widowed females with children				
<i>Iddah</i>	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females or until she gives birth if pregnant	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females
<i>Leave for accompanying a patient</i>	Up to 60 days outside Bahrain, but up to 7 days inside Bahrain	Up to 6 months	Up to 45 days with full pay	Available with full pay	Available	Up to 1 month to accompany first- or second-degree relatives, where the first 15 days are fully paid
<i>Leave for accompanying a spouse</i>	Available without pay if spouse is on an official assignment abroad	Available without pay for female staff members to accompany staff member husband	Available without pay for male employees to accompany their wives on missions or study leaves abroad	Available without pay if spouse is on a diplomatic mission, secondment, or scholarship		Available up to 10 years
<i>Leave for accompanying her sick child</i>		Available with full pay for female staff				Available for female employees if child is under 12 years old
<i>Leave for taking care of a child with disability</i>				Up to 5 years for female employees		Available for parents of children with disability who seek training in how to care for their children
<i>Maternity</i>	Up to 2 years for female employees to care for a child under 6 years of age without pay	4 months after the end of the accouchement leave, where the first month is with full pay	Up to 1 year without pay			Up to 3 years with quarter pay after then end of the accouchement leave
<i>Muhram</i>				Up to 1 month for official missions or training		-
<i>Nursing</i>	2 hours daily for up to 2 years after giving birth	2 hours daily for up to 2 years after giving birth		2 hours daily for up to 2 years after giving birth		2 hours daily for a period of 4 months after giving birth
<i>Paternity</i>				3 days	3 days	3 working days
<i>Sick leave</i>	Up to 24 days per year	Up to 2 years	Up to 7 days at a time, or up to 6 months with full pay in exceptional cases	Up to 10 working days per year	Up to 2 years, where the first 6 months are with full pay	Up to 15 working days per year
<i>Special leave for political candidates</i>		Available for the duration of the election period				
<i>Study</i>	Available with full pay depending on the entity's future needs	Available with full, half, or no pay depending on fulfillment of eligibility criteria	Available with full pay to complete studies at the employee's own expense	Available	Available without pay if employee has served for a minimum of 3 years & received a performance evaluation of very good	Available with full pay depending on the entity's future needs

Exhibit 7.21 Leaves of absence outlined in Arab Gulf Human Resources laws for the public sector (Leaves of absence related to work-life balance are highlighted in red)

oversimplified assumption that employment and managerial positions automatically equate to empowerment for women.

7.5 Conclusion

The title of this chapter, 'Through the Eye of a Needle,' refers to a metaphor for the limited and unrealistic terms set by the normative capitalist women's empowerment agenda. This raises questions about who can truly be empowered under these narrow conditions. Despite more than 40 years of progress on the international women's empowerment agenda, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the ongoing struggles faced by women seeking empowerment through neoliberal means. Meanwhile, the dominant narratives of women's empowerment ignore the perspectives of women who do not subscribe to these values, leaving Arab Gulf states caught between the demands of modern statecraft and the needs of their citizens.

It is crucial to note that these states are subjected to an orientaling gaze by international women's empowerment agendas and their metrics, which present a biased and inaccurate picture of the progress made by citizen women. As a result, Arab Gulf states are doubly disadvantaged: first, by the expectation to conform to an agenda that is not in line with their values, and second, by the skewed reporting of statistics that perpetuates the objectifying narrative. This leads to Western analyses interpreting poor performance as a perpetuation of the essentialism script and perpetuating the idea that it is necessary to 'save brown women' from their communities, cultures, and states.

This chapter has called into question the universality of the international women's empowerment agenda in the post-COVID era. The Arab Gulf region provides a unique case study in the realm of work-life reconciliation policies, which demonstrate a multifaceted approach to women's engagement in economic, social, domestic, and political pursuits. The public policies in the Arab Gulf show a clear emphasis on supporting both women's work and family life, which may challenge the normative definitions of empowerment that are based on neoliberal principles. What does it mean to be empowered when empowerment is not limited to employment policies, or when supportive policies may increase time spent in childcare, or when discriminatory pension policies acknowledge women's domestic labor? Through examining the Arab Gulf's policy framework, this chapter offers a starting point for exploring these questions and considering how a deeper understanding of local context and values can broaden the scope of women's empowerment. Future research is needed to further examine these issues and how they can enhance women's complex agency and desires.

In conclusion, this chapter presents several policy implications based on its findings. Firstly, the international women's empowerment agenda needs to be rethought in the post-COVID era, as the pandemic has exposed its limitations. Secondly, essentializing narratives that perpetuate biases and inaccuracies about women's progress in Arab Gulf states should be avoided in future reporting and analysis. Thirdly, local context and values should be valued to broaden the scope of women's empowerment, particularly in the Arab Gulf region. Fourthly, policies that support both women's work and family life should be implemented, challenging normative definitions of empowerment based on neoliberal principles. Finally, future research is needed to

examine the effectiveness of the Arab Gulf's policy framework in enhancing women's empowerment and the role of local context and values in this regard.

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Chapter 8

Advancing Women's Empowerment in the Gulf: Pathways, Challenges, and Policy Implications



Ahmed Aref and Angela Fallentine

Abstract This final chapter of the book provides insightful concluding remarks based on the valuable evidence presented on women's empowerment and public policy. It emphasizes the need for evidence-based policies tailored to local values, collaboration between stakeholders, and gender-specific research to achieve sustainable progress in women's empowerment. The chapter examines pathways to increase women's empowerment, identifies challenges that need to be addressed, and offers recommendations for sustained engagement to promote women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf States.

Keywords Women's empowerment · Public policy · Pathways · Challenges · Arab Gulf states · Policy implications

8.1 Breaking Barriers: The Journey Toward Women's Empowerment in the Gulf Region

The importance of empowering women in the Gulf region has been widely recognized as a crucial factor in promoting individual and family well-being, as well as fostering social and economic development. In recent decades, there has been notable progress in expanding women's roles and responsibilities in various contexts, such as education and labor participation. However, despite these advancements, there are still obstacles to overcome in creating and implementing effective policies that can improve the cultural, economic, and political status of women and their families in the Gulf. According to Abousleiman (2021), the implementation of gender policies has had mixed success, often lacking an evidence-based approach to determine when, how, and why policies are effective.

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This book provides valuable conceptual and empirical evidence on women's empowerment and public policy, offering insights for sustained high-level engagement and on-the-ground action in promoting women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf States. In these concluding remarks, we examine pathways to increase women's empowerment in the region, highlighting important advances made to date. We also identify key challenges that continue to impede progress in this area. Finally, we summarize the key findings and discuss policy implications, providing recommendations for future action.

8.2 Revisiting Commitments Toward Women's Empowerment

As women empowerment and gender equality terminologies are contextual and multifaceted, Naguib's provided definition in Chap. 2 illustrates that approaching the topic holistically is an effective means of understanding women's empowerment in the Gulf region. Therefore, the following working definition, adopted in this book, is crucial for conceptual understanding within the context of social and cultural values and practices: "Women's empowerment is a dynamic and multi-faceted process that is rooted in local values, requiring agency, and necessitates the availability of resources to achieve well-being and positive changes both at the individual and social levels."

Women's empowerment has been consistently emphasized in various international conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The UDHR recognizes that human dignity and equal rights are crucial for social development, enhancing the quality of life and freedom (United Nations, 1948, preamble). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) define women's empowerment as the ability for women to have agency in pursuing their life aspirations, achieving their full potential (art. 12), working in full partnership with men (art. 15), and participating fully in all aspects of society through gender-sensitive policy and lawmaking (art. 19). In 2003, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 58/15, which recognized men and women as equal partners and called for measures to provide equal political, economic, social, and educational opportunities for women, as well as evaluating and assessing policies to support mothers and fathers in performing their essential roles. Furthermore, in 2015, the international community committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include significant targets for improving gender equality for women worldwide. These resolutions and goals have urged member states to develop national strategies and action plans outlining how they will implement their commitments to women's advancement.

The commitment to women's empowerment is evident at the national level in many GCC countries. For instance, the Qatar National Vision (2008, pp. 19, 22) outlines that women will play a significant role in all aspects of life, particularly through participation in economic and political decision-making, and the government will

enhance their capabilities and empower them to participate fully in decision-making positions. Additionally, Qatar's first National Development Strategy (2011–2016) aims to “enhance an integrated approach to sound social development capacities and empower them to participate more fully in the political and economic spheres” (p. 28), while the second NDS (2018–2022) emphasizes the need to establish “family-friendly employment practices and encourage gender-sensitive work environments” (p. 175).

Notably, Qatar's various national strategies use the term “women's empowerment” instead of “gender equality.” In the Arab world, the concept of women's empowerment is associated with women's unique roles and responsibilities, equal partnership with men, and working within established gender norms (LiLoia, 2019). Conversely, in the West, gender equality is closely linked to women's empowerment, with the perspective that addressing power imbalances is key to achieving gender equality (UNFPA, 2005). Due to contextual differences, the term “women's empowerment” is sometimes preferred over “gender equality” in the Arab world at large. Regarding gender equality, Smith (1979) explains that “Westerners tend to evaluate the circumstances of Muslim women in terms of ‘progress’ or ‘problems,’ and little understanding can be achieved without attempting to view the male–female relationship from within the Islamic perspective.” Therefore, as discussed by Abdelagafar in Chap. 3, “the Islamic perspective has yet to be adequately elucidated at the global level.”

8.3 Reviewing Progress Toward Women's Empowerment in the GCC

According to the World Bank, Gulf nations have made significant progress in empowering women in recent years. This progress has enabled reforming countries' economies to benefit from the productivity of 50% of their populations. It has also contributed to poverty reduction, sustainable growth, and most importantly, gender equity for women in both the public and private spheres. These positive changes have even had a spillover effect on neighboring countries (Abousleiman, 2021). The Global Gender Gap Report (2022) confirms that there have been considerable advances in the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex in the region. Subindex scores have increased, with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait showing the greatest improvement. The report also indicates that the Educational Attainment Index has attained a 96.2% gender parity in the region, and the United Arab Emirates has achieved full gender equality in parliamentary representation.

Qatar has taken steps to empower women by introducing a new government policy aimed at improving work-family balance. This policy allows Qatari women to request part-time employment within the “Mawared” human resources system, reflecting the country's significant investment in women's education and employment aspirations, family cohesion, and the positive impact of flexible working hours on women's

participation in the labor market (Qatar Foundation, 2021). These efforts are in line with the data presented by Barbar, Naguib & Abu Hilal in Chap. 5, which further explores the impact of such policies on women's empowerment.

In a similar vein, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) became the first country in the world to transition to a 4.5 workweek in 2021. The government initiative aimed to improve work-family balance, increase productivity, enhance social well-being, strengthen the UAE's economic competitiveness, and advance women's economic empowerment. The results of an evaluation study conducted by the Sharjah Executive Council (SEC, 2023) in 2023 indicate that this initiative has yielded positive outcomes. These include higher levels of job satisfaction (90%), happiness (91%), job performance (90%), mental health improvement (87%), and improved work-family balance (84%).

The Gulf region has made notable progress in various areas that have the potential to improve women's status and remove obstacles to their full and voluntary participation in all aspects of society. As Robinson (2021) points out, promoting cooperation and gender equality between men and women can further strengthen the Gulf's ability to effectively tackle the diverse range of challenges facing the region in the twenty-first century. Such cooperation and equality can pave the way for a more inclusive and prosperous future for all members of Gulf society.

8.4 Advancements in Women's Empowerment in the Gulf Region: Illustrating Examples

Arab Gulf states have implemented various initiatives to empower women, such as the creation of women's councils, governmental organizations, and laws that promote the well-being of women and families. While Langworthy and Naguib in Chap. 7 delve further into this topic, we present below some illustrative examples.

Bahrain: The Kingdom established the Supreme Council for Women on August 22, 2001. The council is chaired by Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka Bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa and comprises at least 16 female public figures who are considered leaders in women's affairs and related activities. The council's main objective is to empower Bahraini women and ensure their inclusion in development programs, while also promoting cohesive family bonds and lives. The council operates under the principle of equal opportunities, fosters competitiveness among Bahraini women, and facilitates lifelong learning. It also promotes legislation and policies aimed at providing diverse opportunities for women to enhance the quality of their lives. As a specialized expert-led organization that supports women's affairs in line with global standards, the council collaborates with relevant institutions to elevate the status of women in Bahrain.¹

Qatar: In the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee on the Advancement of Women, the State of Qatar emphasized its priority

¹ Retrieved from https://www.bahrain.bh/new/en/equality-women_en.html.

on promoting human rights and equal participation of women in the country's sustainable development efforts, as aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030. Qatar has taken significant measures to ensure equal opportunities for women in education, employment, and care, including the highest rate of women's labor force participation, wage equality in the government sector, and the highest rate of female enrollment in universities. Women in Qatar have also achieved success in the highest administrative positions and hold various ministerial and high-ranking positions. Moreover, women's participation as candidates and voters in municipal and Shura Council elections allows them to become effective partners in decision-making processes at the highest levels. Qatar's legislation and policies aimed at achieving work-family balance have contributed significantly to women's empowerment and participation in the public and private sectors.²

Saudi Arabia: In 2019, the Kingdom made significant progress in promoting women's rights, resulting in the largest increase in ranking on the World Bank Group's Women, Business and the Law report compared to the previous year. The reforms introduced in July 2019 were aimed at expanding women's roles in Saudi society and granting them unprecedented economic freedoms. These included granting women the right to obtain passports on their own, allowing them to be heads of households and choose their place of residency, prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant women from the workplace, ensuring non-discrimination based on gender in access to credit, prohibiting gender-based discrimination in employment, equalizing retirement ages between women and men, and removing the obedience provision for women. A year later, amendments to the Labor Law were introduced, lifting restrictions on women's ability to work at night and opening all industries to women.³

United Arab Emirates: The UAE's Comprehensive Strategy for the Empowerment of Emirati Women 2015–2021 has paved the way for federal government institutions and organizations to develop work programs aimed at empowering women in all areas of sustainable development. The strategy focused on eight main areas: education, health, the economy, lawmaking, the environment, the social domain, information, political participation, and decision-making. To further promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, the Gender Balance Council was established in the UAE to enhance the leadership role of Emirati women in the country's development and ensure that federal institutions implement best practices to achieve their gender equality goals. The UAE has also introduced laws and initiatives to protect women's rights, provide equal job opportunities, ensure decent living standards, and promote their creativity in sustainable and developmental domains.

Additionally, the UAE has taken significant steps to support women's labor force participation, including becoming the first country in the MENA region to introduce paid parental leave for employees in the private sector. The 2020 reform package builds on previous work done by the UAE to prioritize gender equality and women's

² Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1444/03/11/qatar-affirms-that-advancement-of-women-is-priority-of-its-policy>.

³ Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/31327/WBL2019.pdf>.

economic empowerment, including reforms enacted in 2019 to guarantee equality between men and women in applying for passports, allowing women to be heads of households, passing legislation to combat domestic violence and sexual harassment in the workplace, prohibiting gender-based discrimination in employment, and removing job restrictions for women in specific sectors. These reforms were recognized in the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2021 report, where the UAE was the highest-ranked country in the MENA region.⁴

8.5 Challenges to Women's Empowerment in the Gulf

While there have been positive developments in gender equality in the Gulf region, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted in 2014 that these advancements have yet to result in increased empowerment and participation of women in public life. In a 2019 report by the MENA Gender Innovation Lab of the World Bank, it was revealed that women's empowerment in the region is still hindered by several challenges, including the need to enhance women's agency and effective representation in decision-making, enforcing equal opportunity laws and regulations, and addressing cultural and social norms that create barriers to women's participation in the economy. The report also emphasized the importance of involving men and boys in promoting gender equality.

These gaps are not exclusive to the Gulf region and gender equality is a common challenge for all nations. However, as pointed out by Hadad (2018), the nature and intensity of these challenges may vary due to ethnic and cultural diversity within each country. Therefore, experts in the region emphasize the need for constructive intercultural dialogue, international cooperation, and a culturally sensitive approach to promoting women's empowerment (DIFI, 2012). It is also essential to recognize the indispensable role that women play in policymaking. Research conducted in the past decade has shown that societies tend to be more peaceful and prosperous when women fully participate in civic and economic life. Women's empowerment is not solely a "feminist issue" but can also be a high-yielding tool for advancing peace and stability. Furthermore, there is a correlation between women's political inclusion and the durability of policies (Robinson, 2021).

Despite a wealth of literature on women's empowerment, there is a notable lack of research on the Gulf region, with the experiences of Arab women being underrepresented in academic literature. Existing research, including the findings presented in this book, highlights that challenges to women's empowerment in the Gulf predominantly stem from cultural, socioeconomic, and political factors.

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.moec.gov.ac/en/-/gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women-and-girls>.

8.6 Cultural Dimensions

Women's empowerment in the Gulf region is influenced by various cultural factors that differ significantly between countries due to diverse historical and contextual backgrounds. Interpretations of women's roles within Islamic societies revolve around the complementarity of gender roles and responsibilities, which are crucial to understanding the cultural processes of societal organization (Metcalf, 2011). Therefore, these differences have significant implications for women's empowerment, particularly in terms of gender stereotypes and subsequent roles and responsibilities. The following section provides a brief overview of these dimensions.

- (a) **Lack of fatherhood engagement.** Research spanning several decades has demonstrated that a father's involvement is essential to the development and socio-emotional well-being of their children. Although there is a lack of literature on fatherhood in the Arab world, recent research by Ridge et al. (2017) has highlighted disparities in paternal and maternal roles and responsibilities in the Gulf region. The study found that while fathers ranked high as providers, they were less involved in engaging with their children. This has been attributed to the Gulf's changing labor market and the rapid oil industrialization, which altered family dynamics as fathers began leaving their local businesses and agricultural work to seek employment with the state, resulting in their increased absence from their families' lives (Ridge et al., 2017)
- (b) **Decrease in shared family responsibilities.** The past two decades have seen an improvement in the standard of living and an increase in dual-earner families in the Gulf, resulting in significant social changes in work and family life. Women are now required to balance the demands of employment with the responsibilities of caring for their children and extended family. As a result, parents in the Gulf region have become increasingly reliant on nannies and maids for childcare and domestic work. While this has helped dual-earner mothers and fathers manage their responsibilities, they consistently report difficulty in spending enough time with their children. However, the need for parental involvement, interaction, and emotional availability for children remains high (Lari & Al-Emadi, 2022).
- (c) **Evolving gender roles and stereotypes.** To address socioeconomic barriers while preserving Arab and Islamic identity, countries in the Arab Gulf region have integrated women's empowerment into their national strategies. For instance, Qatar's second National Development Strategy (2018–2022) aimed to “increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions, while reducing stereotyping of women's roles and responsibilities” (p. 18). However, the first National Development Strategy (2011–2016) recognized that such progress necessitates “careful consideration and proper respect...to traditional values and cultural sensitivities, even as necessary advancements are made in social equality, protection and justice” (p. 212). Therefore, addressing evolving gender roles and stereotypes within these strategic frameworks requires further empirical studies that take into account the Islamic worldview.

- (d) **Divorce and diminished family cohesion.** Although the divorce rate in the Gulf is lower than in the Western world, experts suggest that “the growing divorce rates in the Gulf countries might be due to changes in social structures resulting from economic development, urbanization, education, employment, and globalization” (DIFI, 2022). These changes have a particularly significant negative impact on women and children, increasing the need for additional support in multiple economic and social contexts.

8.7 Socioeconomic Dimensions

The pursuit of women’s empowerment through research and policy often focuses on increasing the number of women in the workforce and promoting economic growth through structural and organizational changes (Kemp & Rodriguez, 2019). Unfortunately, this discourse has also perpetuated negative stereotypes about women who prioritize caring for their children, nurturing them, and socializing them (DIFI, 2019, p. 39). Therefore, Naguib and Aref (Chap. 4) emphasize the need for a culturally sensitive and integrative multi-level lens to identify the factors that promote or hinder women’s economic empowerment. Additional identified challenges are outlined below:

- (a) **Limited policies to support work-family balance.** The Gulf region currently has limited policies regarding flexible work arrangements and balancing work-family responsibilities. Women still primarily shoulder childcare and household duties at home, adding to the challenges faced by full-time working women. As more women participate in education and the workforce, Gulf countries must ensure that women receive support for their family roles and responsibilities, while also maintaining family integrity. These challenges are further discussed in Chap. 5 by Barbar, Naguib, and Abu Hilal, and in Chap. 7 by Langworthy and Naguib.
- (b) **High female educational attainment and lower labor force participation rates.** Qatari women have some of the highest levels of education among Gulf countries, yet their participation in the workforce remains relatively low. The Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority (2020) reports that almost half (46%) of Qatari women are not engaged in the labor market, with 87% being full-time students or homemakers. This may be due, in part, to women prioritizing their commitment to children and family during their early years, as discussed in Chap. 3 by Naguib and Aref. Further research is needed to explore policies that can accommodate and utilize this highly educated segment of society when they choose to re-enter the workforce after dedicating time to raising their children.
- (c) **Insufficient legal provisions/oversight for wage equality.** The most recent OECD Women in Public Life report highlights the need for stronger legal provisions to ensure wage equality in the Gulf region, as persistent gender pay gaps and a disproportionate number of women in lower-paid jobs continue to hinder economic efficiency and gender equality (2014). Although updated labor laws

in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia aim to reduce the gender pay gap by promoting equal pay for equal work, it is crucial for the private sector to implement these laws into their workplace policies and make necessary changes to ensure compliance (Matthews-Taylor et al., 2020).

8.8 Political Dimensions

The political dimensions of women's empowerment in the Gulf region are rooted in a combination of socio-cultural, structural, and institutional factors, which often result in women's underrepresentation in policymaking positions (Dauletova et al., 2022). This lack of representation can lead to policies and laws that overlook the importance of gender-sensitive perspectives in areas that directly affect women and their families. Therefore, without active engagement in these critical arenas, gender equity may remain elusive in the region.

- (a) **Lack of representation at policymaking levels.** Although progress has been made in reducing gender disparities in education and labor force participation in the Gulf region, women continue to face significant obstacles when it comes to political involvement and representation, as noted by Alhashmi (2019). Despite efforts to increase women's representation in elected legislative bodies and government, progress has been slow. For example, during the 2021 Shura Council elections in Qatar, 28 women ran for council, but none were elected within the tribal-based voting districts. Two women were later appointed to the state's advisory Shura Council, which provided a potential opportunity for women's empowerment through political representation. However, the lack of inclusion in political spaces and cultural/tribal barriers continue to negatively impact women's empowerment both directly and indirectly, given the critical role women play in policymaking. Chapter 5 by Fouad sheds light on the need for representation and inclusiveness and brings into discussion the concept of class.
- (b) **Social exclusion of expatriate women.** The Gulf region heavily relies on expatriate workers, who make up a significant portion of the population in countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. While expatriate women are able to take advantage of the region's labor demands, they often face vulnerability, limited mobility, and workplace discrimination, as noted by Hertog (2014). Aref (2021) further explains that employment policies in the region follow an inclusion/exclusion pattern, where "exclusion is caused by the explicit privileges granted exclusively to nationals" (p. 124). This is due to a combination of factors, such as tribal societies, strict social stratification, structural inequality between nationals and expatriates, and difficult-to-attain social mobility (p. 125). Various nationalization agendas are in place in the Gulf region. For instance, Qatar has introduced a part-time employment policy in the public sector specifically for Qatari women. In the United Arab Emirates, low-status expatriates are frequently unable to negotiate contracts and are often

on short-term work visas with their employers as sponsors. Additionally, Kuwait provides wage, social, and child allowances exclusively for its nationals, and not for expatriates on long-term employment contracts, as noted by Haak-Saheem et al. (2021). These policies further highlight the disparity between national and expatriate workers in the region, which can have negative implications for expatriate women's opportunities and access to resources.

- (c) **Insufficient judicial protection in family relations.** While Gulf countries have made significant progress in closing legal gaps for women and their families, there is still a long way to go in areas such as custody, marriage, inheritance, gender-based violence, and access to the justice system. Despite domestic laws being passed by GCC states, gaps remain in investigating and holding individuals accountable for gender-based violence, and few studies address the issue. For example, although Qatar's second National Development Strategy (2018–2022) emphasized the “urgent need to review and develop family protection legislations and policies” (p. 220), there is still a need for legislation specifically addressing domestic violence (World Bank, 2019). Furthermore, improving women's empowerment in the judicial arena requires addressing complex legal frameworks in the Gulf region.

8.9 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Women play a crucial role in families, politics, the economy, and the overall peace and security of nations. To address the challenges outlined in this policy brief, the following recommendations are proposed⁵:

1. **Ensure that women's empowerment is integrated into national strategies and action plans**, with the establishment or strengthening of institutional structures dedicated to implementing and monitoring gender policies and programs. Additionally, develop methods to enhance coordination and collaboration between government agencies to ensure the mainstreaming of gender issues.
2. **Align gender-related goals with the strategies of regional and national ministries of social development and family.** Ensure that women's empowerment is mainstreamed across all sectors and levels of policies and practices, in addition to targeted actions for women and girls. These components should be seen as essential parts of the same strategy. Strengthen the production and sharing of information on women's empowerment between Gulf states to promote regional cooperation and encourage positive spillover effects into neighboring countries.

⁵ Adapted from Robinson, N. (2021, November 23). Women, peace, and security initiative: Advancing U.S. interests through women's empowerment. The Heritage Foundation; and Doha International Family Institute. (2012). *Empowerment of Women in Arab Countries*. Special series volume 5.

3. **Policy implementation should not be based on a one-size-fits-all approach.** It is essential to involve academia in the production of country-specific, gender-relevant research to provide evidence for policy design and follow-up. This includes analysis of public information on gender-sensitive issues.
4. **Encourage the active participation of civil society organizations and family-centered NGOs in the policymaking process.** Provide support for these organizations to build institutional capacity for promoting women's empowerment. Civil society, including NGOs, the private sector, academia, religious communities/leaders, and community-based organizations, women's groups, and families, should be recognized as valuable resources for facilitating women's empowerment at both local and national levels.
5. **Strengthen data-driven programming to prioritize accountability.** Enhance the collection and utilization of gender and age-sensitive data and research, involving academia to generate relevant data and develop evidence-based policy design and decision-making. The availability of comprehensive data on women's rights, gender-based violence, and socioeconomic indicators can help in the monitoring and evaluation of policy initiatives, thereby increasing accountability and transparency.
6. **Incorporate Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) tools and conduct thorough monitoring and evaluation.** Introduce new practical tools, such as GIA and Gender Budgeting, and adapt existing evaluation strategies and techniques to assess policy outcomes. Ensure that GIA is integrated into the policymaking process to identify and address gender disparities in all policy areas. Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of policies to ensure that they are meeting their intended goals and to identify any unintended consequences.
7. **Reinforce the regional research agenda on women's empowerment.** The body of knowledge on women's empowerment in the Gulf region has several under-researched topics or those that lack empirical evidence. These research gaps include women's roles in policymaking, women's well-being, especially in reconciling motherhood, caregiving responsibilities, and work commitments, social inclusion/exclusion of expatriate women, and perceptions of women's roles. Proper funding is needed to enhance the research agenda, which can be challenging to attain as gender issues are still considered a "sensitive" area in the region.

The emergence of a new post-pandemic era presents an unprecedented opportunity to renew the commitment to a more sustainable future for women and their families in the Gulf region. This book has shown that long-term progress in women's empowerment requires policies that are tailored to the unique cultural and religious values of the region. Effective policy implementation and monitoring must involve collaboration between government agencies, civil society, and families.

To ensure evidence-based policy development and evaluation, academia and other research institutions should produce gender-specific research. A family-centered approach that empowers women while recognizing the important roles of men and

boys is crucial for promoting individual and collective well-being and achieving sustainable progress in women's empowerment.

In summary, achieving sustainable progress in women's empowerment in the Gulf region requires a holistic approach that includes evidence-based gender policies, collaboration between stakeholders, and gender-specific research. The post-pandemic era presents an unparalleled opportunity to renew the commitment to a more sustainable future for women and their families.

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Chapter 9

Epilogue—Epistemic Healing: Reclaiming Women’s Empowerment in Islamic Sources



Rabia Naguib

Abstract This epilogue concludes the journey towards a thorough and contextualized understanding of women’s empowerment in Arab and Muslim-majority societies, as presented in this book. The study debunks the narrow view and prevailing discourse from Western ideologies, offering a fresh outlook rooted in local values and Islamic teachings. It delves into the Islamic sources and teachings that inform women’s empowerment, exploring the policy implications and promoting inclusiveness in such policies. Additionally, the chapter seeks to reconcile the epistemological and cultural tensions in the discourse on women’s empowerment.

Keywords Women empowerment · Muslim-majority societies · Western ideology · Islamic teachings · Policy learning

9.1 Breaking the Mirror: Insight into the Islamic Teachings on Women’s Empowerment

This book advocates for a more nuanced approach to women’s empowerment, one that prioritizes policy learning over policy borrowing. Given the complex and sensitive nature of this issue, policymakers must take into account the unique cultural, institutional, and moral frameworks of the local context. The author calls for an “epistemic healing” (Khan & Naguib, 2019)¹ to counteract any potential harm caused by a one-size-fits-all approach and to instead empower local women and men as agents of change, capable of producing knowledge that is relevant and aligned with their own worldview.

¹ “Epistemic healing requires identifying and then calling back to the center of discussion knowledge traditions of the other that it has excluded and made peripheral” (Khan and Naguib, 2019, p. 89).

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Hence, it is imperative for the Arab nations to “break the mirror” and embark on their own distinctive journey towards development and progress. Adopting a passive approach of mimicking others is no longer sufficient to preserve cultural heritage and identity or to solve the unique challenges that each nation faces. The process must be guided by a comprehensive understanding of the Arab history, culture, and Islamic worldview, and upheld by ethical and moral principles. This mindset shift will enable the Arab nations to pursue a more genuine and sustainable form of development that reflects their rich and diverse cultural traditions. The benefits of this approach will not only be felt by the people of these nations but also by the global community at large.

As emphasized by the prominent sociologist and futurist, Mahdi Elmandjra (1990, p. 10), “there is no prospect for any Muslim society without effective involvement of women in the community’s affairs and the provision of the rights granted to them by Islam.” He calls for “self-criticism” and a self-reflective approach within the Islamic world, especially in Arab countries, to find solutions based on their own values and resources instead of copying the West. This scholar draws on the Islamic teachings of the Quran and Sunnah to highlight the need for just and respectful treatment of women, citing the Prophet Muhammad’s Farewell pilgrimage sermon,² as well as the Quranic verse (13:11), which states that change must come from within. Therefore, Elmandjra (1990, p. 3) views change as “an essential ingredient for a better future,” and encourages both men and women to adopt a proactive stance in their political, economic, social, and cultural endeavors while taking control of their own destiny, considering both the present and afterlife, and encompassing both the earthly and spiritual realms.

In line with this perspective, the author suggests exploring the source of Islamic principles, Sharia’a, to gain a deeper understanding of women’s empowerment. This approach allows policymakers to develop empowerment pathways that are rooted in local values and traditions, rather than solely relying on external models. This recognition of the diverse perspectives and experiences in the discussion on women’s empowerment aims to create solutions that are respectful of local norms and values.

² The “Farewell Sermon” took place in 632 AD, during which the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) addressed various aspects of Islamic faith and also spoke about the rights and responsibilities of women in Islam. In this sermon, he emphasized the equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender. He said, “All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action.”

9.2 Revisiting the Roots of Women’s Empowerment in Islamic Traditions

In order to gain useful insights for the future, we need to trace back to the source. Hence, the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah provide valuable guidance for the promotion of women’s rights and empowerment. These lessons can be summarized around several key themes, including:

1. Recognition of equality of worth and complementarity: Islam, as emphasized in the Qur’an, recognizes the equality and complementarity of men and women both in their spiritual essence. The verse in Surah An-Nisa (4: 1) states, “*O humankind, reverence your Lord, who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and dispersed from the two of them multitudes of men and women.*” This verse highlights the common origin of both genders, as they are created from the same soul, and both contribute to the formation of humanity. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) referred to women as “the counterparts” or “conjoined twins” (شقائق) of men, emphasizing the close relationship and mutual dependence between the two genders. This belief in the inherent worth and dignity of women is a core aspect of Islamic teachings and serves as a basis for the rights and protections afforded to women in Islam.
2. Emphasis on free will and freedom of choice: The verses in the Qur’an, such as Surah Al-Kahf (18:29) “*Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (faith),*” and Surah Al-Baqarah (2: 256) “*There shall be no compulsion in religion,*” emphasize the importance of personal freedom in matters of faith and belief. The Qur’an affirms that belief in God should stem from one’s own free will, without coercion or force, as this is integral to the idea of accountability. Every individual is responsible for the choices they make and the actions they take and will be held accountable for these in the afterlife. Deprivation of free will negates this accountability, as one cannot be held responsible for choices and actions made without freedom of choice. Therefore, as highlighted by El-Ali (2022), the patriarchal notion of men as all-powerful guardians of women, which has been unfortunately transformed into law in some cultures, goes against the monotheistic belief and essence of Islam and takes away from the God-given dignity of women. This view of women as subordinate conflicts with the fundamental principle of equality and dignity established in the Qur’an.
3. Equality in responsibilities and rewards: The Quran emphasizes the principle of equality between men and women in terms of obligations and rewards. The verse, “and there is no burden on one that is another’s burden” (Al-Isra, 7:15), asserts the principle of individual responsibility and that no one can bear the burden of another person’s deeds. Other related verses underscore the idea of justice and equality in the eyes of God and that each soul (males and females) will be rewarded according to their deeds without any injustice.³ They also emphasize the

³ “Whoever does a good deed, whether male or female, and is a believer, those shall enter the Garden, and they shall not be wronged (the equivalent of) so much as a dent in a date-stone” (Women, 4:124). “Whoever does a bad deed will only be repaid its equivalent, while whoever does a

importance of truth and fairness in the evaluation of people's actions regardless of gender.

4. **The Right to Education:** The arrival of Islam marked a critical juncture in Arab history, signaling the end of the Age of Jahiliya (ignorance) and the beginning of a new era of knowledge and enlightenment. The Quran and Sunnah place great importance on the value of obtaining knowledge and make it an obligation upon every individual. The verse "And say, 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge' (Ta-Ha, 20:114)" serves as a reminder to continually strive for self-improvement and expresses humility in recognizing the need for divine guidance and support in the pursuit of knowledge. This is evident through the many accounts of female scholars and intellectuals in Islamic history, including the Prophet's wives, who were known as the mothers of the believers and served as teachers to both men and women.⁴ The University of Qarawiyin, founded in 859 AD by Fatima al-Fihri, further highlights the emphasis on education for and by women in Islamic society.
5. **Equal right to earnings:** According to Islamic principles, both men and women have the equal right to retain the earnings they receive through inheritance or their own efforts. This is emphasized in the verse "for men is a share of what they have earned and for women is a share of what they have earned" (Quran 4:32). This verse lays the foundation for the belief that all individuals, regardless of gender, have the right to own property and benefit from their labor. The principle of equality in the distribution of earned income and property rights is a cornerstone of Islamic teachings.
6. **Right to Advocacy:** This right in Islam is exemplified in the story of a woman who advocated against the pre-Islamic practice of divorce (Zihar). She approached the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and challenged the unjust nature of the practice, focusing her arguments on the welfare of her children and the preservation of the family unit. Ultimately, God ruled in her favor, and this practice was abolished through a revelation in the chapter (Surah) named "Al-Mujadila," meaning "The Pleading Woman." The verse states, "God has heard the words of the woman who disputed with you [Prophet] about her husband and complained to God: God has heard what you both had to say. He is all-hearing, all-seeing." (58:1). This story highlights the importance of advocating for one's rights and the impact of women's voices in promoting positive change. It also underscores the significance of giving women a platform to have their voices heard and the necessity of ensuring their well-being.

good deed and believes, whether male or female, shall enter the Garden where they will be rewarded without measure" (Forgiver, 40:40); "And God created the heavens and the earth with truth, and so that each soul may be rewarded what it has earned. And they will not be wronged" (Kneeling, 45:22).

⁴ It is reported that Aisha taught 232 men and 67 women; Umm Salama (Hind) taught 78 men and 23 women; Umm Habiba (Ramla) taught 18 men and 2 women; Hafsa taught 17 men and 3 women. (El Ali, 2022, p. 83).

7. **Right to Political Participation and Leadership Positions:** Such right is enshrined in Islam for both women and men. In the early days of Islam, women were actively involved in the *bay’ah*, or the allegiance to the political system led by the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). Hence, women in the early Islamic tradition were granted the right to vote much earlier than in the West, where women did not gain this right until the twentieth century. As a testament to the leadership capabilities of women, Omar appointed a literate woman named Al-Shifa’ as the minister of trade and commerce, giving her the important task of overseeing the commercial marketplaces. Furthermore, the example of the Queen of Sheba serves as a demonstration of the ability of women to hold influential positions and participate actively in political life.

In conclusion, the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah offer a rich source of guidance for advancing women’s rights and empowerment. The core principles of Equality and complementarity, free will, equal responsibilities and rewards, education, property ownership, earnings, political participation, and leadership all affirm the inherent dignity and worth of women in Islamic traditions. These foundational concepts provide the framework for the protection of women’s rights in Islam, and it is important to advocate for these rights in Arab societies where cultural and political factors have at times led to deviations from the ideals set forth in Islamic teachings. Policymakers can utilize these principles to enact laws and policies that empower and protect women and ensure that they have access to the necessary resources and support to actively participate in society.

9.3 Women in Power: Lessons from the Queen of Sheba in the Quranic Text

Given the controversies regarding women’s political participation and leadership in Muslim communities, we turn to the example of the Queen of Sheba, as portrayed in the Quran, for insightful lessons and policy recommendations. The Queen of Sheba, who presided over a wealthy and influential kingdom in Yemen, was renowned for her wisdom and fairness as a leader. The story of the encounter between Queen Belquis and King-Prophet Solomon is recorded in the Quran (Surah Al-Naml, 27: 15–44) and provides a fascinating and educational account of their interactions. From both the Queen’s and King’s perspectives, the story offers valuable insights into the dynamics of leadership and decision-making. When King Solomon sent a letter demanding her submission, Queen Belquis consulted with her advisors, who acknowledged her authority and awaited her command. Instead of submitting to King Solomon’s demand, the Queen chose to send a gift, which he rejected and threatened military action if her people did not submit. Eventually, Queen Belquis was invited to King Solomon’s palace and was impressed by its magnificence, ultimately submitting to God along with King Solomon. This story underlines the significant role that women can play in decision-making and demonstrates the positive results that can come

from female leadership. It can serve as valuable source of inspiration and guidance for policymakers, offering important policy implications and lessons to consider, which can be succinctly summarized as follows:

1. **Clearly articulating the issue and engaging relevant stakeholders:** She said: *“O Counselors, A crucial letter has been received by me, it is from King Solomon and begins with the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. It states: “Do not be haughty towards me and come to me in submission” (27:29–31).* The initial stage in the policymaking process is identifying the problem and setting the agenda. Hence, it is imperative for a policymaker to articulate the issue clearly and engage relevant stakeholders and experts.
2. **Decision-making style based on consultation:** she asked: *“O counselors, advise me in this matter, for I make no decision without your counsel or your presence” (27:32).* Queen of Shiba’s decision-making style was based on consultation, which is an effective way of ensuring that decisions are made based on the collective wisdom of the community. By seeking the advice of her council, the Queen of Shiba was able to make informed decisions that were in the best interest of her people. Policymakers can learn from this by ensuring that women are involved in decision-making processes and that their perspectives are valued and considered in policy formulation.
3. **Trust in women’s leadership and wisdom:** They replied: *“We are men of strength and of great military might, but the decision rests with you. So we await your command” (27:33).* The counselors acknowledged the Queen’s authority and were eager to follow her judgment, in spite of their own physical power and military capability. This trust in the Queen of Sheba’s leadership and wisdom highlights the significance of acknowledging and appreciating the abilities and knowledge of women. It underlines the need for policymakers to support women in assuming leadership positions and to acknowledge their contributions to the decision-making process.
4. **Diplomatic choice:** She decided: *“I shall send them a present and see with what reply my envoys will return” (27:35).* The Queen of Sheba’s choice to send a gift to the messengers and assess their response showcases her diplomatic acumen. Policymakers can take lessons from this by promoting women’s involvement in diplomatic endeavors and by valuing the distinct skills and perspectives that women bring to conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.
5. **Condemnation of wars and imperialism:** She said: *“When the kings invade a town, they ruin it and humiliate its dignified inhabitants; This what they always do⁵” (27:34).* The Queen of Shiba’s denunciation of wars and imperialism demonstrates her commitment to peace and stability. Policymakers can learn from this by promoting peace and non-violent conflict resolution and by taking actions to prevent wars and armed conflicts.

⁵ This sentence has two potential interpretations: (1) It could be part of the speech delivered by the Queen of Sheba, used to reinforce her previous statements, and (2) It could be a parenthetical statement from God, added in support of the Queen’s words, and thus asserting her wisdom and sound judgment.

6. **Acknowledgements of truth and submission to God:** She said: “*O my Lord, I have certainly wronged myself, and I submit with Solomon to Allah, Lord of the worlds*” (27:44). The submission of the Queen of Sheba to God and her admission of her wrongdoing demonstrate her virtuous character, humility, and dedication to justice. This event highlights the spiritual equality between men and women, as she submitted directly to God and not to King Solomon, showcasing the monotheistic belief and rejection of submission or subordination to any human being. Policymakers can take inspiration from this by advancing ethical leadership and combating discrimination to ensure equality for all individuals, regardless of gender.

In conclusion, the account of the Queen of Sheba in Islamic literature offers a powerful illustration of the role of women in political leadership and decision-making.⁶ This story provides valuable insights into the importance of clear problem identification, consultation-based decision-making, trust in female leadership, diplomatic strategies, opposition to wars and imperialism, and submission to Allah (God). These lessons can serve as a source of inspiration for policymakers, promoting ethical leadership, combating discrimination, and ensuring equality for all individuals regardless of gender. Furthermore, this example highlights the potential of Islamic teachings to be a rich resource in better understanding the concept of empowerment and shaping locally relevant policies. The story also showcases the empowering narrative style of allowing the women’s voice to be heard rather than having someone speak on their behalf.⁷

9.4 *Tamkeen*: The Islamic Path to Empowerment

The book posits the idea that empowerment cannot be granted by external forces or a third party. This belief is in line with the Islamic perspective that the source of all power and success lies solely with God, the Almighty. The verse Al Imran (3, 26), which states,

⁶ The story of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran contradicts the authenticity and validity of certain falsely attributed sayings to Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), such as the one instructing men to not consult with women and ignore their advice. This also calls into question the legitimacy of the saying that “those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity.” Despite agreement among many prominent Muslim scholars that these statements are either completely false, weak (da’if), isolated (ahad) or specific to a particular situation, they are still culturally used by some as religious arguments to prevent women from taking leadership positions and making decisions.

⁷ This book adopts a similar approach by granting women the opportunity to define key concepts based on their personal perceptions and experiences. It draws on the voices and narratives of women to construct a context-sensitive and well-founded understanding of women’s empowerment in the GCC region.

“Say, ‘O Allah! Lord of all power, You grant power to whomever You will and take it away from whomever You please, and confer honor and dignity on whomever You will and disgrace whomever You please. All good lies in Your hand. Verily, You are the Possessor of full power to do all You will,”

affirms the ultimate power and control that Allah holds over everything, including empowerment. This means that individuals can be empowered through the grace and will of Allah. The Arabic term used for empowerment in the Quran is “Tamkeen,” which is applied at both the individual and collective levels.

The Quran offers numerous examples of empowerment, such as the story of Prophet Yusuf (12:56), which states: *“We empowered Yusuf in the land to live where he chose. We bestow Our blessings on anyone We please and do not waste the rewards of the righteous,”* and Dhul qarnayn in Surah Alkahf (18:84), who was *“empowered throughout the land and given access to all things.”* These verses stress the importance of being deserving and righteous in order to gain power and emphasize that this is ultimately determined by Allah’s will and provision, rather than solely by one’s own efforts.

At the collective level, Surah Al-Hajj (22:41) says, *“Those whom, if We empower on earth, they establish prayer and give zakat, and command with kindness and abstain from the abominable,⁸ and to Allah belongs the outcome of all matters.”* This verse calls for individuals to live a life of God-consciousness and fulfill their moral and social responsibilities by promoting kindness, avoiding harmful actions, and observing religious duties like prayer and zakat. This message applies to everyone regardless of gender, highlighting the significance of balancing moral responsibility and accountability in building a harmonious community. By fulfilling these obligations, people can remain mindful of their relationship with God and their responsibility to care for others and to behave ethically, working towards establishing a just society that is guided by moral values.

The Islamic vision of empowerment, as outlined in the Quran, recognizes the role of divine will in granting empowerment and the importance of personal faith and morality in achieving it. Policymakers can play a significant role in promoting this vision by creating educational programs that emphasize religious understanding and moral values, acknowledging the role of divine will, and adopting the Arabic term “Tamkeen” in national initiatives to raise awareness of the Islamic perspective on empowerment. By doing so, they can work towards creating a virtuous and just society where individuals can cultivate a closer relationship with God and be accountable for their actions in both the worldly and transcendental realms. This perspective diverges from the Western perspective and model of empowerment, resulting in an epistemological discord and a collision of values.

⁸ “يأمرون بالمعروف وينهون عن المنكر” is oftentimes translated as “enjoin what is right or just and forbid what is wrong or evil”, or “to honour and forbid dishonour.” It is directed to others, but it has also a reflexive meaning. *Maarouf* in Arabic is “what is known as such” and *Munkar* meaning “senseless” (El Ali, 2022, p.109).

9.5 Towards More Inclusive Pathways: A Call to Action

It is crucial to understand the different cultural, philosophical, and ideological foundations of women’s empowerment and how they shape the way it is perceived and practiced. Western perspectives are predominantly shaping the understanding of women’s empowerment and framing the policies diffused globally. These perspectives are often influenced by liberal values, neoliberal ideologies, and modernist philosophical ideas. The Western-oriented conception of empowerment emphasizes self-reliance and autonomy, promoting a self-determined and Promethean self. However, this approach may not align with Islamic teachings and philosophy, which stress the importance of submission to God and obedience to His commands. This emphasis on community and spiritual values over individualism and personal gain sets Islamic philosophy apart from Western-oriented perspectives. The clash between these two value systems can lead to a cultural and worldview conflict.

In his extensive body of work, ElMandjra examined the tension between Western and Islamic values and the issues arising from their interaction. He posited that the West’s cultural and political dominance over the Islamic world has caused a collision of values. He argued that Western modernity conflicts with the cultural and religious practices of Islam, and that Western values such as individualism, consumerism, and materialism, are incompatible with Islamic values that stress the importance of community, spiritual fulfillment, and the well-being of the collective. In his book “The Clash of Civilizations” (1996, p. 246), Samuel Huntington acknowledges ElMandjra as the first scholar to use the expression “Civilizational War” in reference to the 1991 Gulf War. However, ElMandjra (2005) presents a contrasting view from Huntington’s perspective. His thesis is fundamentally preventive, emphasizing that most future armed conflicts will stem from cultural differences and that the only solution to prevent them is through better cultural communication. On the other hand, Huntington’s thesis is inherently prescriptive, identifying non-Judeo-Christian civilizations as the potential source of future dangers.

It is imperative to acknowledge the influence of Western ideologies on our understanding of women’s empowerment and to consider alternative perspectives and cultural values. By embracing the diversity of worldviews and value systems, we can broaden our understanding of women’s empowerment and develop policies that are more culturally sensitive and inclusive. In this vein, this book strives to offer a unique contribution by highlighting the significance of a nuanced and context-specific approach to women’s empowerment in Arab and Muslim-majority societies. It advocates for the adoption of locally conceived policies that involve the participation of local stakeholders and invites scholars and students to conduct further research that amplifies the voices of underrepresented groups. By fostering a more inclusive conversation on the topic, we can move beyond a narrow, monolithic view and develop a deeper appreciation of the complexities surrounding women’s empowerment and other critical topics.

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