Chapter 6
Closing the Divide: Women Empowerment in Qatar Between Rhetoric and Reality

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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 travel[1] (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

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[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 (Metcalfe, 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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