



The facilities of Northwestern University and Carnegie Mellon branch universities at Education City, Doha, Qatar.

## Women Are Key to Developing a Knowledge-based Economy in Qatar

*by Hind Al-Ansari*

**F**or more than a decade, there have been major plans to reform the educational sectors of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. In Qatar, revenues from hydrocarbon exports allowed the country to focus on reforms that aim to educate and prepare nationals for leadership roles across a range of sectors. As part of these efforts, in 1995, the former emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani established Education City (EC), which comprises a number of prestigious American and European universities.<sup>1</sup> Despite creating numerous quality educational institutions, conservative cultural norms at the family level have hindered many Qatari females wishing to fully partake in this world-class education.

As for Qatari men, many are failing to take advantage of expanded educational opportunities to the same degree as their female counterparts. The former president of Qatar University, Sheikha Al-Misned, has dubbed these unenrolled young men “the missing boys,”<sup>2</sup> describing their absence from the national higher education system as a threat to the robustness of the labor market and the prospect of building a knowledge-based economy.<sup>3</sup> However, many young Qatari men are not incentivized to pursue higher education because they are able to secure—more so than women—a well-paid career in the public sector or military without holding a college degree.

While more women enrolling in university has caused some changes in popular attitudes about gender roles, the cultural shift is in its early stages. Families still devote disproportionate energy to shielding

young females from perceived physical threats and foreign cultural influences. For example, many parents don't consider sending their daughters to EC—despite the academic excellence of its many universities—because of the co-ed environment. They are apprehensive about normalizing male-female interactions outside the classroom.<sup>4</sup> These conservative families often view women as morally vulnerable and they therefore discourage any behavior that might stigmatize their reputation. In contrast, there are far less restrictions placed on men, even if they act against Islamic and conservative social principles.

### **Education in a conservative culture**

To assuage family concerns, the Qatari state has committed to enforcing the same social mores on EC campuses as in the broader society. For example, if students are caught breaking Qatari moral codes on campus, security guards will report them to the authorities. This includes women wearing short or revealing outfits and male and female students expressing physical affection toward each other. Yet these policies cannot completely contain changing social attitudes—particularly among young people—about gender roles. The fact that EC has far less restrictions on academic freedom than public universities means that discussions about gender inequality, gender politics, and feminism frequently take place in classrooms and public lectures. A similar dynamic exists between public and private universities in other Gulf states.<sup>5</sup>

Although changing norms can be empowering for women, there are often cultural consequences. While no hard data exists, there are reports that some Qatari men refuse to wed women who regularly interact with men or have male friends.<sup>6</sup> Many females likely get married before enrolling in university to avoid this issue, as women are taught from a young age that marriage is the ultimate life goal. This leaves women with two difficult options—marrying young before enrolling in university at EC or pursuing higher education at more socially-regulated and less prestigious institutions. In the latter case, this translates into more limited learning options than women who are able to attend university in EC.

That being said, even universities outside EC are starting to loosen their cultural restrictions. Qatar University (QU), the country's leading public university, has begun to establish co-curricular programs and promote itself as open to international students. Females already represent a slight majority at QU—at 51 percent—of the student body, and international students make up 24 percent. But QU is still segregated and this could potentially create challenges down the road for women, especially those who might end up in a mixed workspace.<sup>7</sup>

Psychologists have discussed the college experience in relation to theories of cognitive stimulation and development. Diane Ruble suggests that students' experiences in college, especially during the first year, challenge their conventional ideas and perspectives that they brought with them from back home.<sup>8</sup> The opportunity to interact with diverse groups of people—including those from other cultures as well as the opposite gender—is particularly important to stimulating cognitive development. It also allows female students to become more open to cultural change, which is especially important in a rapidly changing country like Qatar. Qatari women who graduate from universities with an environment similar to QU therefore graduate with a less comprehensive educational environment than what is offered in EC or even abroad.

### **Change is coming, gradually**

The Gulf states are investing heavily to develop a knowledge-based economy—and integrating women better into the workforce is a government priority, considering the educational achievement gap Qatari women have over men. Despite the cultural skepticism and setbacks, women continue to seek educational and professional success. The Gulf countries have in fact seen the sharpest rise in educational achievement for women in the entire Arab region.<sup>9</sup> Many females realize excelling in their studies is not only about re-

## II. Analysis

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ceiving academic rewards and recognition, but it can provide the opportunity to partake in graduate programs at home or abroad. Many women are in turn eschewing early marriage, seeing cultural traditions as limiting their future career potential.

To continue to minimize the concerns of families, the Qatari government is juggling between the demands of importing Western educational standards and the need to establish gradual, yet effective change in a traditional culture. Ultimately, the main goal should be to establish gender equality to maximize the Qatari participation in the local economy and depend less on imported foreign expertise. But the success of such an undertaking will depend not only on strengthening the country's formal educational institutions, but also continuing to change popular attitudes about the role of women in society.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Qatar Foundation's website, the organization's mission is to "nurture the future leaders of Qatar [and] to develop a sustainable human capacity, social, and economic prosperity for a knowledge-based economy," <https://www.qf.org.qa/about/about>.

<sup>2</sup> Sheikha Al-Misned, "The Dearth of Qatari Men in Higher Education: Reasons and Implications," *Middle East Institute*, June 20, 2012, <http://www.mei.edu/content/dearth-qatari-men-higher-education-reasons-and-implications>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Mounira Charrad, "Kinship, Islam, or Oil: Culprits of Gender Inequality?," *Politics & Gender* 5, no. 4 (2009): 546-553.

<sup>5</sup> Rana AlMutawa, "Women and Restrictive Campus Environments: A Comparative Analysis Between Public Universities and International Branch Campuses in the UAE," *Gulf Affairs* (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Nadya Al Awainati, "What Does it Mean to Be a Woman in Qatar in 2008?" *Qatar Narratives*, 2008, 32-33, <https://wikieducator.org/images/c/c9/Qatar-narratives-english.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> AlMutawa, "Women and Restrictive Campus Environments," 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Diane Ruble, "A Phase Model of Transitions: Cognitive and Motivational Consequences," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 26 (1994): 163-214.

<sup>9</sup> John Willoughby, "Segmented Feminization and the Decline of Neopatriarchy in GCC Countries of the Persian Gulf," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008): 184-199.