



Gender Equality Constraints in the Qatari Workplace

by Amal Al-Malki

The surge in rates of working women in Qatar masks still-entrenched gender inequality

In recent years, more Qatari women have become active participants in the workforce. Women's participation in various roles and different sectors across Qatar's economy mirrors an increasing confidence in their abilities. The importance of their economic role is also highlighted in official discourse, with the Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030 defining women's empowerment as a key human and social development pillar. Women have therefore become an integral part of national development plans, and their participation has become a domestic priority—putting them at the forefront of the national development strategy.

The Qatari government's continuous efforts to promote the employment of women has already yielded tangible results. According to 2017 data from the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, the number of employed Qatari women has reached 36 percent of the labor force. Yet better female representation in the workforce doesn't necessarily mean that society, or employers, have accepted the new phenomenon of working women—or granted them equal social status and rights.

Cultural expectations

Cultural norms about gender roles remain a determinant of society's tolerance of women's involvement in the workplace. In Qatar, society continues to this day to prefer certain occupations for women, particularly in the education and social services sectors. The advent of Western education and the introduction of STEM and other disciplines has challenged these cultural boundaries somewhat. However, there is still a preference for women to secure jobs that require the least amount of contact with men and demand minimum mobility. For these reasons, the high number of women university graduates does not translate into higher rates of working women in Qatar.

The dichotomy between placing cultural restrictions on women and at the same time needing them to advance the country's economic development is apparent everywhere. But women, whose minds are set on building careers of their own, have still chosen to put their professional success first. Many are postponing marriage plans, which has already caused the average age of marriage to rise steadily. Working women are also choosing to have fewer children to better balance work and family life. The burden of all household responsibilities, such as caring for children and the elderly, is still expected to fall almost entirely on women. This leaves women to choose between their career or their family.

Discrimination persists

The dramatic increase in the number of working women in Qatar implies that the workplace has

embraced them—creating the pretense that they are treated equally to men. But the application of cultural restrictions hidden with a legal framework is contributing to gender inequality. For example, while all work positions are open to women in principle, cultural considerations continue to determine the roles that are available to women. Legal restrictions also play a role—for example, women still need to obtain their guardian’s approval for employment and cannot travel without their guardian’s permission unless they are over 25 years of age. This, of course, completely undermines all claims of equality in opportunity, given the power of traditions and cultural considerations.

Regarding pay and compensation, Article 93 of the Qatar Labor Law dictates that women should be paid equally for performing the same job as men. But this does not happen in practice. All statistics show that men are earning more than women for performing the same job—to be sure, this is a global phenomenon and not specifically unique to Qatar. Women don’t receive the same benefits as men, either. Among couples, men obtain marriage-related allowances while women need to prove their eligibility to claim the same benefit. Again, this issue is not specific to Qatar, but it demonstrates that gender-based inequality that contravenes laws are still widely practiced in the country.

Of all the gender discrimination issues women in Qatar face, the one that most needs to be urgently addressed is that of sexual harassment in the workplace. Unfortunately, sexual harassment is a social taboo that is rarely discussed in formal or informal public conversations. Far too many incidents go unreported, resulting in women choosing to leave their jobs because of their justifiable fear of getting blamed for harassment. As is so often the case in patriarchal societies, women pay the price for men’s misconduct.

The lack of official reports on sexual harassment also leads to a lack of statistics, making it difficult for researchers to investigate and develop policy recommendations. Although some cases are leaked to alternative media outlets, mainly online

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journals and blogs, they are rarely discussed in real-life settings. That’s why there is a dire need for a sexual harassment law in Qatar that covers the workplace. Because of the cultural considerations, such a law would need to be communicated positively through a culturally-sensitive awareness campaign that draws attention to this issue.

What next?

Women’s empowerment, as much as it is a path for building capacity and ensuring women are qualified to assume leadership roles, will be difficult if a few fundamentals are not reformed first. To begin with, educating women about their rights and responsibilities is the fundamental steppingstone before a conversation about women’s empowerment can be initiated. Education can help society redefine its relationship with, and expectations of, women in general and working women in particular. The government and its official platforms needs to take responsibility for supporting working women through educating and reshaping society’s perception of women’s roles. Lastly, legislators need to develop gender-sensitive legislation that is fair to women and that protects them in both the public and private spheres.

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