

## Patterns, Trends and Issues in Qatar's Higher Education Sector

by *Nada Abdelkader Benmansour*

*From universities to the labor market*

**I**n the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economy, education plays an important role in preparing new labor market entrants for the workforce. The State of Qatar understands this well. According to the Ministry of Finance, last year QAR 20.4 billion was allocated for the educational sector. Yet higher levels of educational attainment have not increased Qatari youth economic participation or made pursuing a private sector career any more desirable.

Many initiatives have also been introduced to improve the educational attainment of Qatari nationals. These include the inauguration of Education City, which has attracted world-class higher education institutions to establish branch campuses in Doha, as well as the implementation of a comprehensive reform of Qatar University. As a result, there has been an increase in the educational performance of Qatari citizens, especially women.

Along the same lines, Qatar National Vision 2030 seeks to transform a rapidly growing hydrocarbon-based economy into a sustainable economy that sees most of its growth through knowledge-intensive sectors. Qatar has thus moved to diversify its industry, strengthen the private sector and engage more Qatari citizens in the labor force.

### Education trends

According to the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics (MDPS), the number of students in the country, both in public and private universities, has increased significantly. The number of Qatari students, both male and female nationals, in public and private universities, jumped from 9,164 to 17,503 between 2010-2011 and 2014-2015. Women

accounted for 68 percent of Qatari students in 2010-2011, rising to 70.5 percent in 2014-2015. Of those, 87 percent are enrolled in public institutions.

The Qatari government also provides generous scholarship support for study abroad programs, and the number of students participating in them has significantly increased. Almost eight times more students were studying abroad in 2014-2015 (1,591 students) compared to 2010-2011 (191 students). Consistently, at least twice as many men are benefiting from the program than women.

Cultural traditions and social attitudes continue to limit many women from taking advantage of this opportunity. At the same time, Qatari women have good access to education at home, and they are graduating from university in larger numbers than men.

### Employment patterns

The labor force participation<sup>1</sup> rate is low for Qatari nationals throughout the economy. In 2016, 64 percent of men and 36 percent of women over the age of 15 are currently employed. Forty-six percent of these economically inactive Qatari women are homemakers, whereas 38 percent are students. In general, there has been an upward trend in labor force participation for men, as fewer are continuing on with their studies. For the 15 to 24 age group, for example, there are 5,264 women compared to 11,200 men who are economically active.

Unemployed Qataris cite lack of job opportunities as the most important cause of unemployment (see Figure 1 for other reasons of unemployment). The lack of educational requirements does not appear to be a contributing factor to unemployment in Qatar as much as the fact that many are simply waiting for government jobs. A public sector post is a key component of the social contract, and there is a certain prestige that comes with holding these jobs.

For these reasons, private sector employment remains low among nationals. According to MPDS, 54 percent of unemployed Qataris 15 years of age and older are unwilling to work in the private sector. Of those, 71 percent are female. The barriers to fe-

---

<sup>1</sup> The labor force participation rate is defined as the percentage of the total working age population who are either employed, or currently looking for work.

<sup>2</sup> Rutledge E., Al Shamsi F., Bassioni Y., and Al Sheikh H. "Women, Labour Market Nationalization Policies and Human Resource Development in the Arab Gulf States." *Human Resource Development International*. 14, no. 2 (2011): 183-98.

male labor participation are not legal in nature. Qatar has made important political, educational and social reforms that have expanded the opportunities available to women. The Qatari constitution guarantees gender equality in the workplace and the Qatarization policy, aimed at increasing the percentage of nationals in the workforce, does not differentiate based on gender. That being said, the goals of Qatarization, as originally envisioned, have not been achieved and there seems to be some cultural factors at play. According to the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI), 70 percent of female respondents agreed with the statement that “there is social pressure for women to focus on family instead of work.”

#### Economic and institutional issues

Although roughly 60 percent of university graduates in Qatar today are women, only a small percentage of these graduates ever enter the workforce. In 2016, of the total Qatari labor force, 68.4 percent are men and 36.8 percent are women. The high rates of educational attainment for women and the contradictory low participation in the labor market is striking. In a study on women and nationalization policies in the GCC, Emilie Rutledge and her colleagues claim that the level of educational attainment is not the obstacle to women’s economic participation. The main barriers are social and cultural.<sup>2</sup>

However, the overall low Qatari employment rate in the private sector is the broader context. For women in particular, increasing levels of educational attainment have not made pursuing a private-sector career any more desirable—and government jobs remain in short supply.

But there are signs that positive social attitudes to-

Although roughly 60 percent of university graduates in Qatar today are female, only a small percentage of these graduates ever enter the workforce.

ward working women are developing. Important female role models including H.H. Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser have emerged and are vectors for changing attitudes toward the role of women in society. In addition, the need for a second income due to economic reasons means that women face new pressures to enter the workforce.

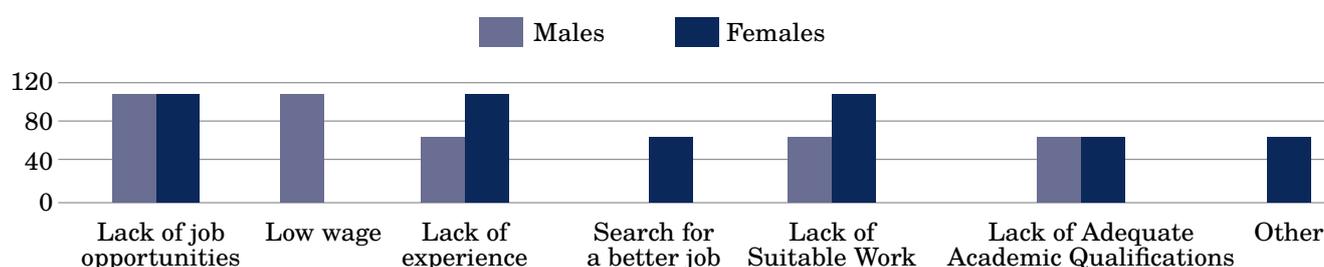
#### Policy recommendations

Qatar has robust economic development goals, and encouraging both male and female youth to participate in the workforce could help achieve all these goals. Fortunately, there are a number of steps Qatari authorities can take. These include: offering better education and career counselling, creating incentives for men to pursue tertiary education and providing more incentives for youth—particularly women—to take up employment in the private sector.

The government has already tackled many of the legal and social barriers to employment and female labor participation. Sustaining and expanding on these efforts will be important for the nation to benefit more fully from their potential contributions.

*Dr. Nada Abdelkader Benmansour is a Policy Analyst at the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI), Qatar University.*

**Figure 1: Unemployed Qataris (15 years of age & above) by sex and reasons for unemployment**



**Source: Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics (MDPS), Q3, 2016.**