

# Educated Qataris: Their Current Situation and Challenges

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## Abstract

The state of Qatar, with a population of 3 million in 2022, faces a unique demographic challenge where expatriates constitute 90%, leaving Qatari nationals (hereafter Qataris) as a minority. This demographic landscape, coupled with Qatar's stringent naturalization policy, has allowed Qataris to enjoy privileged status and comprehensive welfare. However, the country recognizes the need for economic diversification and increased participation by Qataris, especially those with higher education, to ensure sustainability amid fluctuating energy prices. While Qatar has seen success in cultivating young leaders in politics, business, and science, challenges persist in human resource development and educational quality. Granting preferential treatment to Qataris in workplaces raises concerns of elitism and a bias towards more comfortable roles, potentially hindering the country's capacity to effectively address labor market demands and prioritize development goals. This study aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the demographic, educational, and occupational characteristics of educated Qataris, examining challenges and implications for the country's future. It emphasizes the significance of improving the quality of secondary education to elevate the academic performance of Qatari men, encouraging more Qatari men to pursue higher education, promoting STEM education in tertiary institutions, enhancing women's participation in the labor force, and establishing meritocratic principles in workplaces. The findings also shed light on the broader implications for small, resource-rich Gulf countries facing similar challenges in higher education, workforce participation, and talent development.

**Keywords:** Qatari nationals, higher education, educational motivation, labor force participation, career aspiration, Qatarization

## Introduction

Qatar, a small country with a population of 3 million in 2022, grapples with a unique demographic landscape where 90% are foreigner workers and their families, leaving Qatari nationals<sup>1</sup> (hereafter Qataris) comprising only about 10 percent of the country's population. Nevertheless, similar to other resource-rich Gulf states<sup>2</sup>, Qatar has maintained a stringent naturalization policy<sup>3</sup> to keep its nationals a privileged minority entitled to receive cradle-to-grave welfare.<sup>4</sup>

The current abundant natural resources enable Qatar to depend on foreign workers for much of its economic activities while ensuring high incomes and comprehensive social security for Qataris. However, this situation may not endure due to fluctuating energy prices and depleting resources, necessitating economic diversification, and promoting active participation by Qataris in the country's economy for a sustainable future. As such, the pivotal role of Qataris, particularly those with higher education, becomes crucial in this context.

The higher education system, established in 1971, did not experienced significant growth until the 2000s, but even before that, a few but motivated Qataris with higher education at home and abroad have played a leading role in the political, economic and academic fields. For instance, Sheikh Tamim ibn Hamad Al Thani, who ascended the throne at age 33 in 2013, appointed young, educated Qataris to his cabinet. In his first cabinet, eight out of the 20 ministers, including one woman, held doctoral degrees from overseas universities, with some in their 40s (Doha News, 2013, June 26). The current cabinet, inaugurated in October 2021, also consists of young politicians, including those in their 30s and 40s.

There is also a growing cohort of young Qatari leaders in the business

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, a "Qatari" refers to a resident of Qatar who holds Qatari nationality.

<sup>2</sup> Though Gulf states have still maintained a strict naturalization policy, the UAE and Saudi Arabia decided to grant citizenship to a selected group of foreigners with exceptional skills. For details, see Svetlova (2021, November 19).

<sup>3</sup> For details on the acquisition of Qatari nationality, see Qatar Legal Portal (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Qatar tried to increase its population by encouraging a high natural increase rate. For details, see Winkler (2015).

world. In 2022, the World Economic Forum selected three Qataris<sup>5</sup>, one of whom was a woman, as young global leaders. Two of the three held master's degrees from foreign universities (World Economic Forum, 2022, April 13). In the field of science and technology, two female Qatari scientists<sup>6</sup> working at the Qatar University were awarded the L'Oréal-UNESCO for Women in Science Young Talent Award in 2022.

Despite these successes, Qatar faced challenges in human resource development. For example, the Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 states that, “despite its efforts to advance student learnings, Qatar still ranks lower than expected in international tests, which raises concerns given the resources invested in this area [...] a short-term challenge is the inability to develop human capital to keep pace with labor market demands and national development priorities” (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2018, pp. 180, 184). Although the Qataris' level of education is improving, this indicates that there are still issues to be addressed in terms of qualitative improvement.

Another challenge facing Qatar is that the policies for ensuring the domination of Qataris in workplaces, have resulted in “nationals see themselves as elite” and “they mainly want to attain comfortable white-collar jobs in managerial roles, whether or not they are qualified for such positions” (Al-Mejren & Erumban, 2021, p.92).

The role of Qataris, particularly educated Qataris, is crucial to Qatar's future. While existing studies are helpful in understanding various issues in the education and employment of Qataris, there is a need for a more comprehensive picture, especially concerning the relatively young generation of Qataris with higher education. In light of this situation, this paper aims to present the demographic, educational, and occupational characteristics of

<sup>5</sup> The three selected Qataris are as follows:

Ahmed Ali Al-Hammadi, <https://biography.omicsonline.org/qatar/qia-investco-holding-llc/ahmed-ali-h-a-alhammad-357629>

Sheikha Alanoud bint Hamad Al-Thani, <https://www.thebusinessyear.com/interview/sheikha-alanoud-bint-hamad-al-thani-qatar-2020>

Abdulrahman Essa Al-Mannai, <https://www.thebusinessyear.com/interview/abdulrahman-essa-al-mannai-qatar-2020> (Accessed 22 January, 2024)

<sup>6</sup> Two selected Qataris are Dr. Nura Adam Mohamed and Dr. Arij Yehya. See *The Peninsula* (2022, Feb. 17).

educated Qataris and to identify the challenges they face. This will be achieved by utilizing previous research findings, official documents, and statistics. This study also employs conversations and interviews conducted with both Qataris and non-Qataris in Doha to convey the nuanced aspects of the Qataris perception of occupational choices and what it means to be Qatari, albeit to a limited extent.<sup>7</sup>

## Literature review

Studies related to Qatar University, the country's largest and oldest university, where the majority of Qataris pursue university degrees domestically, have examined the characteristics of higher education in Qatar. These studies encompass aspects ranging from the institution itself to the quality of education. (e.g., Moini et al., 2009; Al-Attiyah et al., 2009; Badry & Willoughby, 2016).

The language of instruction has also garnered significant attention concerning the purpose of education at Qatar University. While English was adopted as the medium of instruction from the 2003-2004 academic year, in 2012, the Supreme Education Council of the State of Qatar issued a decree to revert to Arabic in four of the colleges within Qatar University. This decision

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<sup>7</sup> The qualitative data for our study consisted of a sample of 12 Qataris, ranging in age from their 20s to 60s, with a gender composition of 10 women and 2 men. Our methodological approach integrated semi-structured in-depth interviews, both one-to-one and in group settings, with moderate participant observations. This approach facilitated a flexible and comprehensive exploration of individual experiences and perceptions, with a particular focus on themes related to academic degrees and career aspirations. Fieldwork conducted in Doha from 29 January to 20 February 2022 included participant observations to gain insights into the daily experiences of Qataris, thereby enriching our understanding of the cultural and social environment influencing educational and career choices. Snowball sampling was utilized to identify interviewees within the Qatari community, acknowledging the potential biases inherent in this method. All interviews were conducted in person in English, a choice reflecting the prevalence of the language in Qatar's academic and professional fields and considered to be of no significant concern regarding the authenticity of the responses. With some interviews recorded and others documented through detailed notes, post obtaining consent, we ensured comprehensive data collection. We adhered to strict ethical standards, focusing on preserving participant anonymity and confidentiality, modifying personal details, and obscuring identifying information to maintain privacy without compromising the integrity of the analysis.

sparked considerable discussion, given its potential impact on the learning and career prospects of Qataris. (e.g., Mustafawi & Kassim, 2019; Ellili-Cherif & Alkhateeb, 2015; Pessoa & Rajakumar, 2011, Badry & Willoughby, 2016).

The establishment of branch campuses of Western universities in Qatar has also significantly impacted its future by producing a group of small but highly educated elites (e.g., Walsh, 2019; Ibnouf et al., 2014; Hillman et al., 2019).

One of the research topics that garner attention is the “reverse” gender gap in education. The factors that lead women to succeed and men to underachieve in education have been extensively studied (e.g., Al-Misnad, 2012, June 20; Ridge, 2014; Ridge et al., 2017). Research has also been conducted on the shortage of Qataris majoring in STEM subjects, even though STEM subjects are essential to building a knowledge-based economy (e.g., Creel et al., 2017; Sellami et al., 2017).

The employment patterns of Qataris, the labor participation rates of Qatari women, and the examination of policies favoring Qataris in the workplace, including their shortcomings, are crucial topics for understanding the role of Qataris in economic activity. Existing studies focusing on these topics provide valuable insights into the economic contributions of Qataris and the challenges they face. (e.g., Martorell et al., 2008, e.g., Asghar et al., 2015; Felder & Vuollo, 2008; Salem & Yount, 2019, e.g., Al-Subaiey, n.d.; Randeree, 2012; Williams et al., 2011; Elbanna & Fatima, 2023).

## Educated Qataris<sup>8</sup>

In 1970, a year before gaining independence, Qatar had a population of 111,133 people, with 45,039 being Qataris, accounting for 40.5 percent of the country’s total population. (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2022). Despite the increase in the number of Qataris, continued heavy reliance on foreign workers led to a decline in the proportion of Qataris in the total national population, dropping to 24.1 percent in 2004 and 9.1 percent in 2017 (Baabood, 2017). According to the Qatar Census 2020, Qataris account for 246,256 (9.7

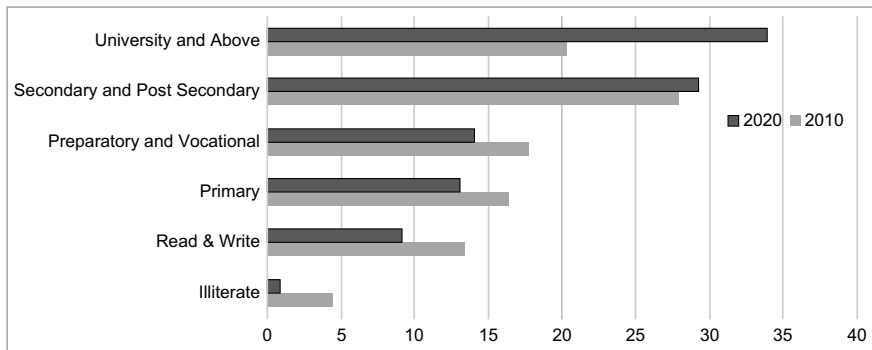
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<sup>8</sup> Law No. 38 of 2005 stipulates that Qataris are those who hold Qatari nationality. For details, see Qatar Legal Portal (2005).

percent) of the country's total population of 2,525,552 (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2021b). Thus, according to these numbers, although the population of Qataris has increased approximately 5.5 times over 50 years, the proportion of Qataris in the total population has fallen by more than 30 percentage points.

The population structure of Qataris in 2019 had a typical pyramid shape, with the median age being 21 years, indicating that Qatari society is a young society. Qatari people belonging to the working-age group (between 15 and 64 years) represent 59.3 percent of the total Qatari population. Conversely, among the foreigners living in Qatar, 83.4 percent belong to the working-age group. As of 2021, Qatar has the world's lowest age dependency ratio of 18 percent, while the world average is 55 percent (World Bank, 2022). Therefore, theoretically, Qatar's demographic composition is favorable for economic development; however, the overwhelmingly low proportion of Qataris in the overall labor force persists as a risk. Regardless of that, Qatar is unwilling to naturalize foreign workers out of the fear of weakening the indigenous culture, including the legitimacy of the royal house, and incurring further financial burden due to an increase in the number of welfare service beneficiaries (Winckler, 2015; Kovessy, 2014, October 9). Therefore, the only way to avoid the aforementioned risk is to invest in education and professional training to empower Qataris. Thanks to government investment in higher education, Qataris' enrolment has improved drastically. As indicated in Figure 1, Qataris with a university degree and above increased from 20.3 percent in 2010 to 33.9 percent in 2020. (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2021b).

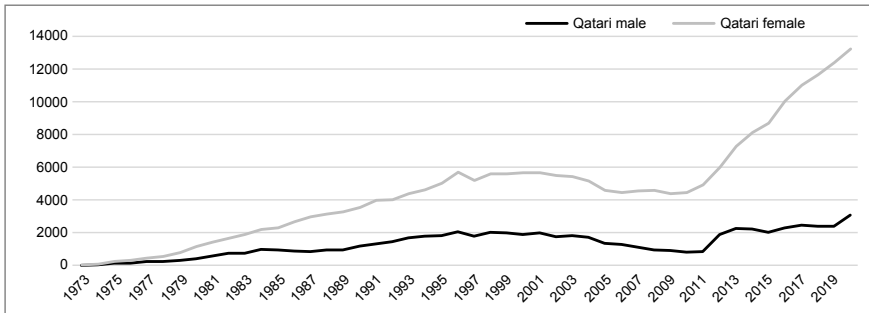
Figure 1. Educational Attainment of Qataris (10 years and above) (%)



Source: Planning and Statistics Authority (2021b, p. 8)

Overall, the education level of Qataris has improved, but it should be noted that there are deep-seated gender disparities in higher education. From Figure 2, it can be seen that more women enrolled in Qatar University than men throughout this period. Interestingly, the gap between men and women has widened in recent years. In 1973, 60 percent of all Qatari students were women, which increased to more than 80 percent in 2020. The sluggish male education is a serious social issue that could impede the balanced development of Qatar society in the future.

Figure 2. Total Number of Registered Qatari Male and Female Students at Qatar University (1973–2020)



Source: Data for 1973–2010 from Qatar University (2016, pp. 66–67);

Data for each year from 2010 to 2020 were extracted from the Qatar University Fact Book<sup>9</sup>

Gender disparity in higher education can be attributed to differences in the views of men and women about the benefits of higher education. Qatari male students have low academic incentives because they can get a well-paid job in the public sector, especially in the military or police, without a university degree (Ridge et. al, 2017). A Qatari male student at Qatar University admitted that military salaries are good but they have been declining in recent years.

It was and still is well-paid. But these days, military payments are reducing, while payments for jobs requiring higher education are increasing. So, it is a kind of balance these days. Most people used to go into the military because it is very [...] It is well- paid, like much higher.

<sup>9</sup> Fact books from 2010 to 2021 can be obtained at <https://www.qu.edu.qa/offices/CSDO/departments/Institutional-Research-and-Analytic/studies-and-reports>

As opposed to Qatari men, Qatari women find that education is right and that pursuing higher education is the new norm. Qatari women believe that a university degree is necessary for career and financial independence and security in the event of a divorce. (James-Hawkins et al., 2017).

## Educational Trajectories of Educated Qataris

Qataris' choice of university education is closely linked to the kind of secondary education they received. In 2019–2020, 19,536 Qatari students were studying in secondary school, and 76.6 percent of them attended public school, while 23.4 percent were enrolled in private schools (Department of the Educational Policy and Research, 2020). Public secondary schools are state-funded, single-gender schools. Private schools are divided into three categories: community, international, and ministry standards-based schools. Among them, international schools represent 81.8 percent (Department of the Educational Policy and Research, 2020).

In 2019, Qatar's secondary schools shifted from a two-track system (sciences and arts) to a three-track system (sciences, arts, and technology) for Grade 11 and Grade 12 students (Qatar Tribune, January 8, 2019). As of 2019–20, only 13.8 percent of Grade 11 Qatari students in public schools were enrolled in the science stream. Furthermore, fewer than half as many Qatari men choose the science stream compared to Qatari women (Department of the Educational Policy and Research, 2020). The fact that high achievers generally pursue sciences suggests that males are underperforming.

Qatar Second National Development Strategy 2018–2020 noted “low rates of transition from secondary to post-secondary education, especially for males” as a challenge (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2018, p. 178; Ridge et al., 2017). Research also highlights Qatari men's underperformance; for instance, studies have shown that “Qatari boys are not only doing worse academically compared to the global trend, but they are also doing poorly in comparison to Qatari females” (Al-Thani, 2017, p. 15; Cheema, 2014).

The percentage of success in secondary-stage examination of male Grade 12 students in public schools is lower than that of their female counterparts but no noticeable gender gap can be observed among Grade 12 students in



private schools (Department of the Educational Policy and Research, 2020).

The difference between public and private schools, especially international schools, lies in the language of instruction and curriculum (Cheema, 2016). The language of instruction in public schools is Arabic, while private schools choose the language of instruction based on the curriculum. (Shakespeare, 2014 June 05). Naturally, students who receive secondary education in English have the advantage of being accepted into prestigious foreign universities in Education City or abroad, as well as into the science and technology departments at Qatar University, as the language of instruction in those institutions or departments is English. Therefore, Qatari families who believe that English is instrumental to their children receiving quality education and enhancing their employability choose secondary schools where the language of instruction is English (Hillman & Ocampo, 2018).

Qatar's recent investments in higher education have resulted in the doubling of the number of institutions from 16 in 2014 to 32 in 2020. Despite the increase in the number of institutions, Qatar University is still the only comprehensive public university and enrolls the highest number of students among all institutions.

In 2019–20, Qatari students accounted for 66.1 percent of the student population at Qatar University. The remaining students were non-Qataris, who were mostly children of foreign workers or international students.<sup>10</sup>

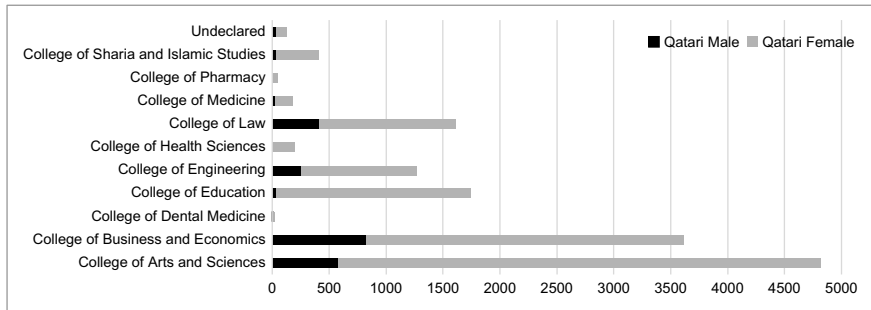
Among Qatari students, 96.9 percent were undergraduates, 2.4 percent were master's students, and the remaining 0.4 percent were Ph.D. students (Qatar University, 2021). Unlike other Gulf countries, where graduate education is growing, these figures show that the demand for graduate education is low in Qatar.

Figure 3 illustrates that the College of Arts and Sciences has the highest proportion of Qatari undergraduate students (34.3 percent), followed by the College of Business and Economics at 25.8 percent, the College of Education at 12.4 percent, and the College of Engineering at 9.1 percent. With 83.7 percent of Qatari students at Qatar University being women, there are

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<sup>10</sup> Among registered non-Qatari students, 68.2 percent were from non-GCC Arab countries, 15.3 percent from Asia, 12.7 percent from GCC countries, and the rest were from various countries. For details, see Qatar University (2021).

Figure 3. Qatari Undergraduate Students by Gender and Major at Qatar University, 2019–2020



Source: Qatar University (2021, pp. 28–29)

significantly more female Qatari students than male in all fields of study, including engineering, business, and law.

It cannot be overlooked that while Qataris acknowledge that English proficiency improves employment prospects, the Qatar government is anxious about excessive westernization, including the language of instruction being English, thinking it might erode the cultural traditions and national identity of Qataris. Accordingly, in 2012, the Supreme Educational Council of Qatar rescinded the 2003–4 decision to make English the language of instruction at Qatar University and ordered the reintroduction of teaching in Arabic by the humanities faculty (Badry & Willoughby, 2016).

The Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development<sup>11</sup> established Education City in 1997 to attract world-class Western universities. Under this initiative, eight universities were established in Education City, including Virginia Commonwealth University (est. 1998), Weill Cornell Medicine (est. 2001), Texas A&M University (est. 2003), Carnegie Mellon University (est. 2004), Georgetown University (est. 2005), Northwestern University (est. 2008), HEC Paris (est. 2010), University College of London (est. 2012), and Hamad Bin Khalifa University (est. 2010). However, the capacity of these universities is much less than that of Qatar University. Due to the rigorous admission process, high standards of

<sup>11</sup> It is a non-profit organization established in 1995 by the former Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and his wife Sheikha Moza (Qatar e-Government, 2021, November 9).

teaching, small class sizes, and English instruction, graduates of these universities are highly valued in the labor market. It is reported that 1,078 Qatari women and 371 Qatari men were enrolled in the 2019–20 academic year at the universities in Education City (Hala, 2021, March 17).

Although higher education opportunities in Qatar have increased, studying abroad is more advantageous for employment and promotion. Scholarships are provided by the government and Qatar institutions to support education abroad. The most prestigious scholarship, the Emiri Scholarship, is awarded to students who gain acceptance to one of the world's 30 most prestigious universities, including Harvard, Yale, and Oxford (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2020a). In 2017–18, 67 percent beneficiaries were men. Only a few Qatari women receive scholarships to study overseas since many Qataris consider it culturally unacceptable for women to go abroad alone to study. Therefore, in most cases, women can study abroad only if they have family or relatives in the destination country or if they study abroad with their husbands. Most Qataris who study abroad with scholarships are enrolled in undergraduate programs, and only a small percentage of scholarship-recipient students study abroad for a master's or doctoral degree (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2019).

Qatar Vision 2030 identifies human development as the first pillar of development, followed by social, economic, and environmental development. Qatar's emphasis on educational development is aimed at preparing for a post-hydrocarbon and knowledge-based economy. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the number of Qatari students who have completed their graduate education, either domestically or internationally.

## Motivation to Attend University

The consistent and significant gender disparity in Qatari university enrolment points to a considerable difference in the opinions of Qatari men and women about higher education. Joining the army after secondary education has been the most popular employment option for Qatari men, especially if their fathers or brothers are in the military or in the police. Moreover, employment in the military with a high salary is perceived as a privilege for Qatari men. Furthermore, it is desirable for Qatari men to

experience the dignity and admiration of wearing military uniforms adorned with medals.

However, a growing number of Qatari men are now finding it more attractive to enroll in universities than to join the military. One reason for this shift, as mentioned earlier, is that the government is lowering the salary of military personnel and raising the wages of university graduates. Another reason is that a university degree provides more freedom of choice in a career, as mentioned by a Qatari male university student. The student cited the example of a married cousin in his late twenties who was in the military.

He was after the money then but when the situation changed, he was no longer happy about it as there is a lot of work on top of stress and anxiety [...] but he has to stay within the military [...] he is now 27 or 28-years-old. He is already married. He cannot leave a regular job and only study.

For women, the motivation to go to a university is often not related to employment. Unlike men who have to work for their families, Qatari women, particularly, older-generation women, were less likely to get jobs. Many women marry and become mothers while attending university, which discourages them from pursuing a career. They see a university degree as insurance to prepare themselves for an uncertain future.

However, the number of educated Qatari women who want to work or advance their careers is steadily increasing. The motivation for many Qatari women to work is to make an income. Salaries of Qataris are higher than those of non-Qataris, yet the younger generation finds it increasingly difficult to maintain their desired standard of living with the husbands' income alone due to rising prices (Ibrahim, 2022, January 12).<sup>12</sup> One Qatari woman, a mother of three children and a full-time working researcher while pursuing a doctorate degree, stated that if she had not worked after graduation, her mother would have questioned why she got a degree if she wanted to sit at home. She emphasized that her mother, who was a schoolteacher, taught her

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to high inflation rates, the extravagant lifestyles of Qataris are also putting pressure on household budgets. For details, see Finn (2016).

the importance of being financially independent. Continuing further, she said the following about the implications of having her own income:

This is my money; no one has any right to say what you are going to do with the money. Even if I purchase something that is expensive, which my mother would disagree with, I would think it is something that I worked toward and maybe I deserve it.

However, she asserted that she was not seeking women's independence as it is advocated in the West: 'I'm not talking about women's freedom.' The combination of her effort and strong will, her family's understanding, the short working hours, and several maids to help with child-rearing and housework allowed her to keep working after having children. Nevertheless, as a working Qatari mother who loves her work, she expressed her inner conflict, saying, "I always struggle, not for my husband's lack of support but because of my guilt that I am not being there for my children."

## Occupations of Educated Qataris

According to 2019 statistics, the overwhelming majority of Qatar's labor force is comprised of non-Qataris, and Qataris represent only five percent of economically active people (15 years and above). This is the lowest rate among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In 2020, the labor force participation rates of Qatari men and women were 67.0 percent and 37.2 percent, respectively (GCC-STAT, 2020).

As of 2020, among the economically active population (Qataris and non-Qataris), aged 15 years and above, 78.9 percent work in the private sector, while only 8.1 percent work in the public sector. Notably, there is a clear divide between Qataris and non-Qataris in the Qatari labor market. The private and domestic sectors are for non-Qataris, whereas Qataris primarily work in the public sector, albeit about half of those working in the public sector are non-Qataris. The low presence of Qataris in the private sector is due to their unwillingness to work in this sector. According to a survey of the reasons for unemployed Qataris' unwillingness to work in the private sector despite having secondary education, 100 percent of respondents cited the long working hours,

while 51.1 percent cited low wages (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2021a). Their responses make it evident that the private sector's working conditions are inferior to those in the public sector.

As of 2020, 73.6 percent of Qatari men and 70.3 percent of Qatari women work in the ministry and government departments. Furthermore, 10.7 percent of Qatari men and 14.1 percent of Qatari women work for government establishments and companies. Over 80 percent of Qataris work in the public sector, indicating that this sector is the primary source of employment for Qataris, both with or without university education (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2019).

Qataris' occupational distribution is symmetrical with that of non-Qataris. Qataris predominantly engage in white-collar jobs, while most non-Qataris are blue-collar workers. The common occupations of Qatari men in 2020 were clerks (31.9 percent), associates (20.6 percent), professionals (26.1 percent), and legislators, senior officials, and managers (14.7 percent). Qatari women's common occupations were professionals (46.5 percent), clerks (31.5 percent), associates (14.0 percent), and legislators, senior officials, and managers (7.1 percent), among others (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2021b). Nearly half of working Qatari women have professional occupations, as many of them have university degrees. This female concentration of professional occupation is because Qataris believe that it is culturally desirable for women to work in gender-segregated workplaces and many professional workplaces, such as schools, hospitals, and libraries, are gender-segregated (Gremm et al., 2018).

Conversely, the presence of Qatari men is conspicuous in decision-making professions, such as those of legislators, senior officials, and managers (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2020). Although the Emir of Qatar appointed two women as members of the Shura Council in 2021, female Qataris remain underrepresented in legislative authorities. In addition, much fewer Qatari women work as business managers compared to Qatari men—though the number of female business managers has been increasing—particularly in the public sector. Although more educated, Qatari women are underrepresented in decision-making positions due to the patriarchal culture of Qatar.

## Career Aspirations of Educated Qataris

During the fieldwork, when exploring what constitutes a good career for Qataris, their responses were, without exception, ‘six hours of work, no overtime’ and ‘good salary.’ However, some also expressed their desire to work in a job that is ‘not too demanding’ or in a ‘good working environment.’

Most Qataris are state employees because the public sector provides what Qataris consider a good career. However, it must not be forgotten that the Qatari government is paying “the highest financial cost” (Babar, 2014, p. 415) to satisfy its nationals. This is a burden that will only increase as the number of Qatari degree holders expectedly increases.

Qataris who graduate from a university abroad or from a university in Education City are deemed elites in Qatar, as they are considered to have high academic achievements that meet international standards. More importantly, they learn about performance-oriented work culture by exposing themselves to a competitive environment. A Qatari woman who graduated from a foreign university mentioned self-fulfillment and challenging but rewarding when describing her work.

A female Qatari graduate from a university in the UK emphasized the significance of being able to speak English fluently in her career. She pointed out that only a limited number of colleagues in her workplace possess the ability to speak and write professional English fluently. Additionally, another young female Qatari graduate from a university in Education City mentioned her capacity to apply her studies. She explained that she has been entrusted with tasks like preparing materials and drafting speeches for conferences, highlighting the scarcity of individuals proficient in writing English smoothly. Another female Qatari graduate from a university in Education City enjoys her responsibilities in an education project. She is working with a female Qatari colleague who had earned an MA degree from a university in the US. The pair said that they are optimistic about the future of Qatari education and referred to two young female leaders in education: H. E. Sheikha Hind Bint Hamad Al-Thani, the daughter of a former Emir, who is the vice chairperson and CEO of Qatar Foundation, and Buthaina bint Ali Al-Nuaimi, who was appointed the Minister of Education and Higher Education in 2021.

Young, educated Qatari women instill new breath and vitality into Qatari

society. Nonetheless, with a few exceptions, Qatari men continue to dominate decision-making positions due to the persistence of the patriarchal culture in Qatar.

## **Qatarization**

Qatar's economic development has heavily relied on the contribution of foreigners, from highly skilled to unskilled workers. The demographic imbalance in the labor force has aggravated as the proportion of Qataris in the labor market has decreased from 11.6 percent in 2005 to 5.8 percent in 2021 (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2018). Facing the growing dependence on foreign workers, Qatar National Vision 2030 asserts "Qatar must determine a suitable size and quality of its expatriate labor force" as accepting them based solely on economic benefits may negatively impact national identity (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008, p. 7). Furthermore, as mentioned before, Qatar is unwilling to change its naturalization policy; hence, the only way to compensate for the Qatari population shortage is to raise Qataris' education level and place them in leadership positions, particularly in the private sector, where Qataris are underrepresented. The policy of Qatarization has been implemented to achieve this goal.

Qatarization refers to "the national strategy of developing a competent Qatari workforce through education and training" (Qatar e-Government, 2020, September 6). Qatarization is closely linked to the employment guidelines presented in the National Vision 2030, which declares, "Qatar will strive to increase the effective labor force participation of its citizens" (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008, p. 14). It emphasizes the need for "a capable and motivated workforce," "increased and diversified participation of Qataris in the workforce," and "incentives for Qataris to enter professional and management roles in business, health, and educational sectors" (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008, p. 18).

The Strategic Qatarization Plan, approved and signed by the Minister of Energy and Industry in June 2000, set the Qatarization target of reaching a 50 percent Qatari workforce in the energy industry, including operating and non-operating companies, by the end of 2005 (Ibp Inc. 2015). Based on this



plan, the Energy Sector set a goal of achieving 50 percent Qatarization and declared a plan to “produce competent Qataris holding permanent established positions in key, sensitive positions tied to company business plans” (Energy Sector, Strategic Qatarization Plan, 2022).

So, how much Qatarization has been achieved so far? In 2019, Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation announced, “Our Qatarization rate was 37 percent. We are proud that our senior management positions were held 100 percent by Qatari employees, with 87 percent Qatarization in middle management” (Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation, 2020, p. 45). Qatar National Bank (QNB Group), the largest financial institution in the Middle East and Africa, boasts on its website that “QNB’s Qatarization program has achieved a local Qatari workforce of more than 50 percent, one of the highest in the Qatari banking sector. The percentage of Qataris in top management positions exceeded 77 percent, with more than 82 percent in branch management” (Qatar National Bank, 2019, September 9). The increase in Qatarization varies considerably from industry to industry. In the case of Qatar Steel (Qatar Steel, 2022), the Qatarization rate was 10 percent in 2017 with no Qatari senior management. To increase the proportion of Qataris, in 2020, the Qatari cabinet approved a draft resolution to “raise the percentage of Qataris working at state- owned companies or where the state is an investor to 60 percent” (Reuters, 2020, July 9).

As in other Gulf countries, there is a law in Qatar prioritizing Qataris over non-Qataris in the appointment to government and public sector jobs.<sup>13</sup> Law No. 8 of 2009 on Human Resources Management, Article 14 stipulates the priority order for job appointments as follows: “Any person appointed in one of the jobs shall be a Qatari national, and if not, priority shall be given first to the offspring of a Qatari woman married to a non-Qatari man, a non-Qatari man or woman married to a Qatari person, then the nationals of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, then nationals of the Arab countries, then to nationals of other countries” (Qatar Legal Portal, 2009).

Law No.15 of 2016 on Human Resources Management was issued to accelerate Qatarization. In this provision, the appointment order stipulated in

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<sup>13</sup> Further information about workforce localization in GCC countries, see Randeree (2012).

2009 was reiterated. In addition, Law No. 15 boosted the base salaries of Qatari government employees, widening the salary gap between Qatari and non-Qatari employees (Qatar Legal Portal, 2016).

Overemphasis on quantitative Qatarization is misleading, as Qatarization is not just aimed at increasing the proportion of Qatari workers in the total workforce. The state also wants “to reduce reliance on expatriate skills in the public sector without affecting its performance” while ensuring that Qatarization is “based on quality rather than quantity” (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2018, p. 54).

To upgrade the skills and knowledge of Qatari workers, as stated in National Vision 2030, the provision of education and training for Qatari people is essential. It is an integral part of Qatarization.

An important pillar of Qatarization is capacity-building among Qataris. Therefore, it is essential to have a sufficient number of Qataris working in the education sector, both public and private. According to the 2019–2020 statistics, the percentage of Qatari teachers in the primary stage was approximately 32 percent (male: 0.7 percent; female: 32.0 percent), in the preparatory stage was approximately 20 percent (male: 3.0 percent; female: 17.1 percent), and in the secondary stage was approximately 13 percent (male: 1.9 percent; female: 11.2 percent). Further, all public school principals and 57.4 percent of administrative staff are Qataris. In contrast, Qatari teachers represent only 0.2 percent of the teachers in private schools, from the preprimary to secondary stages (Department of the Educational Policy and Research, 2020).

Qatarization in higher education is the top priority of the government. Qatar University strived to substitute expatriates with Qatari Ph.D. holders returning from abroad. Between 1986 and 2022, five Qataris were appointed presidents, all of whom have a Ph.D. from an overseas university (Qatar University, 2016).

## Being a Qatari

Being a Qatari has a special meaning in Qatari society. Qataris are privileged minorities in the workplace and in everyday life. They are entitled to receive comprehensive welfare from cradle to grave. Contrary to the government’s efforts to enhance the labor force participation rate of Qataris,

particularly in the underrepresented private sector, through the implementation of Qatarization “locals would rather be unemployed than pursue employment in the private sector given its accompanying low status and low pay” (Elbanna & Fatima, 2023: 300). This implies the meaning of being a Qatari.

A Gulf country woman who obtained Qatar nationality a few years after marrying a Qatari man eloquently shares the meaning of being a Qatari. She was working in her home country after college until she got married and moved to Qatar. She stopped working as she was unhappy about the salary gap between Qataris and non-Qataris, despite she did the same job as Qataris did. After obtaining a Qatar nationality, she resumed her career as a Qatari at a new workplace, where her salary was almost doubled.

Being a Qatari is not limited to receiving special treatment, such as a higher salary. It is also a social and cultural status. The same woman shares her experience by giving examples. She usually wore comfortable clothes and sneakers, when she was in her home country. However, to look like a real Qatari, now, she is using a Qatar accent, wearing high heels, carrying branded bags, and commuting in a luxury car as they do. Both her Qatari and non-Qatari colleagues' attitudes toward her were clearly different from when she was not a Qatari.

Since she did not want her colleagues to know her origin, she refrained from socializing with them outside of work and tried not to frequent places outside where she might run into them. Currently, she is in a graduate school pursuing an MBA to complement her handicap of not being born a Qatari.

In return for enjoying different types of social benefits, Qataris have an obligation to support the rule of Al-Thani and maintain national unity and Qatari culture. The fundamental duty imposed on Qataris is conscription. Law No. 5 of 2014 on National Service Qatar subjects men aged between 18 and 35 to mandatory national service.

Being a Qatari means that one is entitled to generous support for receiving education. For instance, Qataris can send their children to public schools for free. In the case of licensed K-12 private schools, since 2012, Qataris have been exempted from a part of the tuition fees on utilizing educational vouchers (Qatar Legal Portal, 2012). Moreover, Qataris are eligible to apply for generous scholarships to study at Qatar University

(Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2020b) as well as abroad.

Notably, these privileges are only granted to Qataris, that is, those whose father is a Qatari. A Qatari woman shares the story of a Qatari female relative who married then divorced a Jordanian man in the UAE. This woman returned to her parents' home in Qatar with her children after a divorce. However, because the children inherited their father's nationality in Qatar, they were not eligible for free education. She had a hard time paying her children's tuition because her children had years to acquire Qatar's nationality.

## Conclusions

As mentioned, the share of foreign workers in the labor force continues to rise, bringing the proportion of Qataris in the labor market down to 5.8 percent in 2021. Under such circumstances, it is essential for the country to enhance the capacity of Qataris, who are at a numerical disadvantage, to maintain their leadership in Qatari society. This is why the Qatari government has invested in higher education to increase the number of young Qataris pursuing advanced degrees. However, the current pace of growth is insufficient both in quantity and quality. As indicated by an analysis of statistics and previous studies, the issue of stagnant growth in university enrollment among Qatari men remains unresolved. To address this and to potentially increase the university entrance rate of Qatari men, it might be beneficial to consider improvements in the secondary education environment. These improvements could include increasing the number of Qatari male teachers and introducing career education programs, which may inspire young Qatari men to improve their academic performance and consider pursuing higher education.

Higher education becomes meaningful when it serves a purpose beyond obtaining an academic degree. The knowledge acquired in university must be applicable in the professional realm. However, as illustrated in Figure 3, Qatari students tend to concentrate their studies in arts & sciences, business & economics, with a notable absence in the fields of engineering and medicine. Consequently, there is a pressing need for educational initiatives to promote the study of STEM subjects among Qataris (Sellami et al., 2017; The Peninsula, 2022, March 9). As mentioned earlier, the number of Qatari women enrolled in university has consistently exceeded that of men since the

inception of higher education. Nevertheless, their labor force participation rate has remained below that of men. Therefore, measures are necessary to enhance women's labor force participation.

More fundamental than anything else is the importance of establishing a meritocratic principle in workplaces by encouraging fair competition among Qataris as well as between Qataris and non-Qataris. Thanks to Qatarization, Qataris have been given preferential treatment in recruitment and promotion, which has effectively increased the presence of Qataris in various workplaces. However, this system does not guarantee the assignment of personnel according to ability and aptitude. In addition, the privileging of Qataris through preferential policies might weaken the incentives of both Qataris and non-Qataris to improve their abilities and work harder, and it might discourage the development of talented people. Additionally, Qatarization runs the risk of social discontent, as the preferential treatment the current generation of Qataris is receiving in recruitment and promotion as well as working condition, including higher salary and shorter working hours, may not be guaranteed to the next educated generation.

The challenges identified in this study regarding educated Qatari youth have implications for the study of nationals in small, resource-rich Gulf countries heavily reliant on expatriate workers, such as the UAE, Kuwait, and, to a lesser extent, Bahrain. These countries have also invested in higher education to reduce dependence on foreign workers but have failed to motivate their men to enroll in higher education (Ridge, 2014). Additionally, they have struggled to effectively utilize their highly educated women in the labor market (Young, 2017). Thus, this study represents a small but important step toward identifying and illuminating the social phenomena at work in small Gulf countries.

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