

Qatari Women in a Corporatized Higher Education Setting: International Reforms and their Local Bearings

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Abstract

Discussions of the difficulties Qatari women experience in higher educational settings are unlikely to be found in international organization or government reports on the State of Qatar. Instead, recent reports have tended to gloss over gender inequalities raising a “successful girl discourse.” Drawing on my own teaching experience at the national university in Qatar, focus-groups data, and in-depth interviews with the female students there, I try to highlight the disproportionate bearings “international” neoliberal reforms have specifically had on women. I use a critical feminist approach to policy analysis to shed light on those policies that have impacted the female students. By doing so, I try to problematize the state’s limited discourse on women education and contribute to the growing body of literature examining the intersections of gender and education policy in an increasingly neoliberal context.

Keywords: *Qatar, gender, women, neoliberalism, higher education*

Introduction

Women’s school enrollment rates are often cited and compared with those of men in reports by international organizations and national agencies in the Gulf Cooperation Council States (GCC). For example, the ratio of Qatari women to men is often mentioned to demonstrate that in higher education, the ratio grew to two women for every one man between 2003 and 2013. As a result, some have argued that this so-called reverse gender gap necessitates shifting the focus from women’s education to the question of why men are falling behind (Ridge 2015).

In spite of the statistics, there continues to be issues that must be addressed related to women’s education. For example, in a recent ethnography, researchers stated that “most girls” in Qatari women’s *majlises* “expressed discontent with the unfairness of being driven by parents, schools and society towards higher education,” especially when they later “realized that most men wanted a wife who did not go beyond secondary school” (Mitchell, Paschyn, Mir, Pike & Kane 2015, p. 12). In this same society, 35% of married female respondents surveyed said they exited the educational ladder after getting married (Social and Economic Survey Research Institute 2011).

And while the number of Qatari women entering the national workforce has steadily increased between 2001 and 2013 by 35%, they only comprise 34% of the total national workforce, making them an “untapped reservoir of knowledge and skills” which the state has been advised to capitalize on (Qatar Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics 2015, p. 55-6). Previously, many women were socially restricted to working in schools or specific ministries that were gender segregated, and their educational choices were therefore also limited. Nonetheless, gradually, women started to enter different work fields as different university specializations opened to them, though reaching top managerial positions remains still a struggle (Al-Nasr 2011; Al Muftah 2010).

As such, the “reverse gender gap,” which is often cited to discredit the need to discuss women’s education in the region, needs to be revisited. Attempts to gloss over gender inequalities and a rise in what Ringrose (2007) called the “successful girl discourse”—that is, misconceptions about “successful girls”—have become more evident in the media and even in some women’s own understandings of their educational attainments (Kassem & Al-Muftah 2016; Mitchell et al. 2015). The “girl” in this neoliberal discourse is placed as a metaphor for “personal performance, choice, and freedom,” and this in turn reinforces the “discourse or ‘rationale’ of individual responsibility for self-failure in the ‘global education race’” (Ringrose 2007, p. 481).

This is increasingly relevant to the Qatari context, where years of oil revenue has reinforced what Valentine Moghadam (2005) termed the “patriarchal gender contract,” which postulates either implicitly or explicitly that “men are the breadwinners and are responsible for financially maintaining wives, children, and elderly parents, and that women are wives, homemakers, mothers, and care-givers” (p. 117-8). In the context of Qatar and other GCC states, oil revenues enabled governments to build gender segregated spaces that further marginalized women, even when if it allowed them to work without the fear of violating cultural customs (Foley 2010). Similarly, with the income per family increasing the need for women to work, which was visible among women from certain social strata, became no longer necessary as men’s income become sufficient to fulfill household needs in early oil boom period (Al-Muftah 2016).

Hence, although the discourse surrounding women’s empowerment has increased in state documents to cater to an international audience, especially development organizations such as UNESCO or the World Bank, there remain cultural and structural barriers that prevent women from pursuing further education or entering fields that are considered as male-suitable jobs in the labor market. Some of these barriers have been documented in a shadow report submitted to the Convention of

Elimination of Discrimination Against Women review committee (Independent Group of Concerned Citizens 2014). They vary from basic citizenship rights, such as the right to pass a women's citizenship to her offspring and spouse, to "customary" human resources' practices that requires a "no objection letter" from a women's legal guardian before becoming employed.

In the paper's next section, I will demonstrate how the neoliberal restructuring of the national university—which began in early 2000 to accommodate global market needs and that might be similar to changes occurring across the world—interacted or ignored other structures of domination, most notably, a patriarchal culture. Consequently, the university continues to fail the women who compose the majority of the student body at Qatar University and of higher education programs sponsored by the state overall.

Background on development of women's educational opportunities in Qatar

Educational opportunities for women in the formal education domain began with inception of the first school, based at the home of leading female educator Amna Mahmoud Al-Jaidah. In 1955, the government formally included her school under the Department of Education's auspices, making it the first female school in the state. Before that, in 1938, Al-Jaidah had had an informal *kuttab* based in her house, where boys and girls were taught to read the Qur'an and to write. Many parents were hesitant to send their daughters to Al-Jaidah's school, and it was reported that she approached and spoke with families in her neighborhood to convince them of the importance of sending their daughters to school (Al-Amari 2004).

This reluctance about sending girls to school was also present in the ruling Emir of the time's attitude, but was ultimately overcome when Mohammed Abdulaziz Almana, a leading religious figure, issued a *fatwa* clarifying the importance of educating women according to Islam (Al-Amari 2004). This opened the door for schools to expand, especially as oil revenues began to trickle into the state's budget in the late 1950s.

When it came to higher education, and before the initiation of the first higher education institution in the country, students used to continue their education abroad, e.g. in Egypt and Lebanon (Al-Kobaisi 1979; Al-Misnad 1984). From 1960 to 1966, not a single case was recorded for female students, whereas 89 males were enrolled in universities abroad (Al-Misnad 1984). Meanwhile, from 1968–1979, the number began increasing to become 299 women students to 721 men; nearly a ratio of 2.5 men for every woman. This was largely achieved with the support of the government, which began offering scholarships to study abroad for females in the 1970s "as long as their families raised no objection" (Al-Misnad 1984, p. 353).

The Ministry of Education at the time was aware of possible hesitance from the women's families and hence opened dormitories in cities with high concentrations of existing students, such as Cairo. This eased parents' resistance and facilitated the growth of female students in the study abroad program. In addition, a family member that wished to accompany a female student was permitted and financed by the Ministry of Education. It is important in this example to underline the sensitivity shown by the Ministry of Education, regarding issues that women could face in society, which were then reflected in these educational policies and decisions.

Nonetheless, this financial support ceased when the first higher education institution in Qatar opened its doors, complicating women's education opportunities further (Al-Misnad 1987). The first higher education institution to open up its doors in Qatar was the Teacher's Training School in 1973, which later evolved into Qatar University with extended colleges in 1977. From its opening, the university was gender segregated, leaving no reason for families to have reservations about allowing female family members to enter the college based on the patriarchal norms that oppose mixed-gender classrooms. This allowed the number of women enrolled to surpass the number of the number of men: 93 women were enrolled compared with 57 male students in 1977 (Qatar University 2014). Nonetheless, this had a negative effect on the study abroad program, as the Ministry of Education suspended the support it had offered women in 1967, announcing:

For the sake of public welfare and the common will, we decided that first, university scholarship abroad will be restricted to boy students only. Secondly, girls' scholarships will be confined to Doha College for teacher training, any scholarship for girls and university awards abroad are not allowed. (Ministry of Education, Qatar. Decree No. 9/17, dated 21.6.1396 [corresponding to 19.6.1976] as cited in Al-Misnad 1984, p. 355)

The way this reversal of policy was justified was considered a setback for women's educational opportunities, as Al-Misnad explains:

The irony of the situation is that these official policies not only deprived women of their constitution rights of equal educational opportunities, but also gave rise to superstitions among the conservative Qatari society that, perhaps, higher education for women as full-time students in advanced universities in countries abroad is 'against the public welfare and common good.'" (Al-Misnad 1985, p. 355)

The purpose of this brief historical overview of women's education is to demonstrate that the fight for women education was not necessarily top-down, but rather that women played a role in opening up spaces for their own education. Similarly, this section sheds light on educational policy, which was designed with the best interest of

women at the time where attention was paid to the question of gender—but other times, policy failed to do so. It also demonstrates how ill-conceived policies and decisions had negatively affected women’s opportunities and shaped societal attitudes regarding women’s education. In the next section, I offer a brief description of the reform at Qatar University, during the era in which the state witnessed a rise in the supposed women empowerment programs.

Higher Education transformations in Qatar

Starting from the late 1990s, when the ruler Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani took over power from his father in 1995, efforts to open up the country’s economy and to realign it with the global market soared. At the same time, women’s empowerment was added to the state’s agenda. This was represented in particular through the Emir’s wife, Sheikha Moza bint Nassir Al-Misnad, who took a prominent role in the public sphere, making her the first ruler’s wife to publically engage in the government (Satterfield 2015). Her presence in media among other things challenged patriarchal cultural norms and opened up new spaces for women (Satterfield 2015).

One of those spaces, which Sheikha Moza added to the mix of educational opportunities available to women, was American universities’ branch campuses, which then began operating in Qatar. Through her state-funded non-governmental foundation—the Qatar Foundation—American universities such as Georgetown University’s Edmund G. Walsh School of Foreign Service and Weill Cornell’s Medical School opened. Today, even British, and French graduate schools have opened up in the Education City under Qatar Foundation. Some saw this step as a way of bringing high-class education to those unable to travel abroad and access it (Moini, Bikson, Neu & DeSisto 2009). Of course, most notably, it was women who were subject to cultural barriers that prevented them from traveling alone and studying abroad. This remains the case today, as women occupy a lower percentage of those studying aboard on government scholarship—at 32% (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics 2013).

To work toward meeting the aspirations of the new ruler, the Rand Corporation (hereafter referred to as Rand) was invited in 2001 to start reforming the K–12 education system, and later, in 2003, QU’s leadership also consulted with Rand to transform the national university. In the words of the Rand researchers, there was a concern “that the small population of Qatari nationals must be particularly well educated if they are to fill effectively the top managerial positions” in Qatar (Moini, et al. 2009, p. 9). Therefore, “[r]ecognizing the need for a better-suited workforce, the Emir has made reform and strengthening of education in Qatar a high priority since

the early years of his rule and directed a number of initiatives aimed at improving educational opportunities for young Qataris” (Moini et al. 2009, p. xvii).

The most notable of reforms to have occurred on the national education level was the switch from Arabic as the main language of instruction to English, starting in 2003. This accompanied the creation a Foundation program at the University level to prepare the newly enrolled students to pass English proficiency exams before starting their University programs. What is interesting about this reform, as noted in the findings section later, is that the question of gender was of no concern to policy makers. The Rand report, which was meant to describe the reform efforts, provided a gender-neutral tone consistently throughout the report, even though it recognizes that women make up the largest percentage of the student body, “about three-quarters” (Moini et al. 2009, p. xix). Furthermore, the only time this is discussed in the report is when the authors note the Rand advisers’ concern expressed following their 2003 visit to Qatar University—as they were “struck by the contrast between a lively women’s campus and a largely deserted men’s campus.” However, the reports fails to consider what this could possibly mean for the quality of education women receive in the overcrowded classrooms that plague the female campus.

More broadly, the reforms that began in 2003 were market driven in nature. They were solely focused on the input and output of the university, using international standards to assess the educational quality the students were receiving. This approach brought about important change to the university structure. For example, the restructuring enabled the university to overcome bureaucratic processes that in the past had restrained its autonomy. However, it also started the corporatization of the national university, making it follow the path of many universities worldwide (Giroux 2002). This was intensified with the hopes that the “expansion of higher education opportunities, and the spread of credentialism” would lead to “‘development’ in an automatic fashion” (Mazawi 2008, p. 69). Questions of what the students’ education meant to notions of equality and citizenship, which were evident in the early university documents, went ignored. Mazawi (2010) explains that these policies introduced by Rand are similar to those introduced by free-trade agreements across Arab states. In both cases, what is marketed is within “neoliberal and free-market discourses dominated by international consultancies, aid and development agencies and sponsored think tanks” (p. 217). In this context, education reform comes with a “subtext emphasiz[ing] the need to ‘depoliticize’ educational context by highlighting their contribution to students acquisition of globally competitive skills and knowledges” (Mazawi 2010, p. 217).

The second more recent “reform” occurred in 2013 when the language policy was retracted, and Arabic was reintroduced as the mode of instruction in all programs except the sciences. This came at a time when uprisings, often critical of the Western powers and their support of dictators, were sweeping the region. Some read this return to Arabic as a way to gain political legitimacy by the ruling family at a time that political turmoil was increasing in neighboring states (Mitchell 2013; Gangler 2013). Although the switch to Arabic was perceived by many as an important step to widen accessibility to the university, it did not necessarily mean substantial changes were made to other aspects of the educational structure. Most notably, the drive for aligning the university’s “output” with market needs continues to be the primary concern of the individual colleges at the university.

Research questions

Based on this history, in this study, I use a feminist critical policy analysis (Shaw 2004; Marshall 1999; Bensimon & Marhsall 1997) to address the following questions:

- How do women perceive the neoliberal reforms that were introduced at Qatar University over the past decade?
- What are some threats these women perceive facing their education, and is the university in its current form able to address such issues?

Methodological and conceptual note

Feminist critical policy analysis “encourages us to understand the broader context in which policy is developed and enacted and to understand as well the particularities of the lives of those most affected by policy” (Shaw 2004, p. 75). It departs from conventional policy analysis, which tends to be androcentric in terms of: (1) its disregard of the homogeneity among different groups the policy is affecting, viewing them as “undifferentiated, disembodied and sexless;” (2) the tendency to approach policy from an ahistorical and decontextualized lens, forcing an assumption that all groups have the same relationship with their social environment; (3) an assumption of “objectivity and observer neutrality,” which disregards how gender, race, and class, among other factors, influence the way knowledge is constructed; and (4) evaluating women “on the basis of male norms” and expectations (Bensimon & Marhsall 1997, p. 11).

To avoid this issues, this paper recognizes policies as being political in nature (Ball 1993) because they unfold in nested political contexts (Malen 2006). In other words, even when we assume these policies are standardized across the globe, they roll out and have different outcomes depending on the social, political, economic, and historical context in which they are implemented (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Lingard 2010). Qualitative work coming out of the Arab world has already begun to point to

the complexities in the education system and its response to global changes (Herrera & Torres 2006; Adely 2012).

Further, I will resort to some of literature on women and development to highlight the gendered nature of the discussed international reforms, which often come as part of wholesale development and modernization packages, critiqued by transnational feminists (e.g. Moghadam 1999; Moghadam 2005). In this body of literature debates of gender and class are not confined within the borders of specific nation-state but also seen within broader “center-periphery debates” (Blackmore 2000, p. 485). This is especially illuminating in the Qatari context where it is evident certain globalization discourses on “women empowerment” might be welcomed but others are perceived as “westernization” requiring reactive policies to maintain the “status quo” for women (Al-Muftah 2016).

As such in the proceeding sections, when speaking of neoliberal reforms, I will not just be speaking of neoliberalism as an economic doctrine “that seeks to limit the scope and activity of governing”, but instead, conceptualize it as “a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as non-political and non-ideological problems that need technical solutions” (Ong 2001, p. 3). This definition allows us to see the role that think-tanks and consultants, such as RAND, play in reconfiguring not just educational spaces but also gender relations within a global web of geopolitical interactions.

Method

This exploratory investigation is fueled by my own experience as a Qatari woman, my teaching experience at Qatar University, and qualitative focus group and in-depth interview data. I started working at Qatar University as a teaching assistant in Fall 2012, and after the completion of my master’s degree in 2014, I was appointed to serve as a lecturer. I taught two core education courses: Education and Social Problems and Education Foundation in Qatar and School Reform. The timing of my employment at Qatar University coincided with the return to Arabic as a language of instruction in 2013. This meant that I had many female students in my classes who had originally dropped out of university because of the language barrier introduced by the first reform in 2003—but who now, following the language change, were able to continue working on their degrees. The discussions and my encounters with these students, inside and outside the classroom, pushed me to conduct this research. I remain indebted to these students who were never hesitant to critically challenge readings and assumptions introduced in class, often making me question my own preconceived notions of the education system in Qatar and the opportunities available to us women.

Sample

To prepare this study, 1-hour focus groups were conducted in summer 2015 with 14 women at Qatar University who were enrolled in summer education courses with a variety of instructors. One focus group consisted of 8 women while the other contained 6. Although sampling was not random—instructors encouraged students to volunteer at the end of the class to join the focus groups—the sample was diverse. The women came from an array of programs including law, Sharia, Arabic, statistics, social services, and so on. Their parents and siblings also had contrasting educational attainments; some had family members with doctoral degrees, whereas others had parents who had never received any formal education. Their ages also ranged from young freshmen students who had just graduated from high school to older mothers who had recently repeated their high school exams to enroll in university after their certificate expired. Some of those stated that they had waited for their youngest child to enter school before enrolling in university.

These students were already sensitized to issues surrounding education because of the nature of the course they were enrolled in. The focus group interviews were then followed by six in-depth interviews conducted in the hope of collecting data to support and verify the themes that emerged from the focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were structured around the following questions and were conducted in Arabic:

- Have you experienced policy changes in Qatar University? What are they, and how do you perceive them (positive/negative)?
- How is the education you receive today different from the one that your older relatives received from Qatar University?
- Why do you think such reforms have taken place? (How was it rationalized by the leadership?)
- What are some intended and unintended consequences?
- Do you think these reforms have affected women in any way?
- Why do you wish to obtain a degree? What plans do you have once you have earned it?

Finally, it is important to note that this paper's focus was Qatari women enrolled at the national university. Therefore, the voices of non-Qatari women who are often living in Qatar as temporary residents and with a weaker social safety net are not addressed. Future research needs to consider how these women are often unaccounted for in educational research in Qatar, as they are portrayed as “temporary” residents even though many have been lived there long-term.

Data analysis

The focus group sessions were recorded and later transcribed into English, and thematic analysis was used to locate emerging themes. Using those emerging themes, I structured my interviews, which were often conducted in a conversational manner, allowing both the interviewer and interviewees to reflect on what had emerged from the focus group interviews. This data analysis approach, although sometimes informal, is described by social researchers as a recursive process that continues “until a fully developed and well-supported interpretation of the entire cultural scene emerges, ready to be communicated to others” (Le Compte & Schensul 2010, p. 199). The rich descriptions generated through this process allowed me to gain understandings of the respondents’ perspectives, and different themes emerged. In the next section, I will describe some of the major themes, using quotes obtained from the students to support those points.

Findings

The women described changes at the university in relation to the two major reforms indicated by the switch in the language of instruction described earlier. The first of was the university’s shift to English as a mode of instruction, which took place in 2003, and the second more recent reform was the return to Arabic in 2013. The students sometimes referred to these reforms as “bad reform” and “good reform” during the focus group interviews. The following section gives examples of some of recurring comments the women brought up regarding these changes. The names of the students below were changed to maintain the students’ anonymity.

The impact of the first “bad” reform: the switch to English and the Foundation Program in 2003

“Feeling trapped”: Delay in graduation while boys fly off. Most female students, whether they could see the reforms that took place as justifiable or not, pointed to the idea that the implementation of the policies was the biggest problem. That was, they saw the reform as too hasty (impetuous) and not aligned with the changes taking place in K–12. Therefore the language was not the biggest challenge these women faced as much as it was the rules and regulations were not consistent and clear to them. According to the participants, this resulted in a disproportionate effect on the female students, who happen to make up the majority of students at the University. In the words of focus group participants, Hend and Muneera:

Hend: Women decided to stay home because of these [English] reforms. Meanwhile, the guys traveled abroad and completed their studies.

Muneera: Right—the guys had the opportunity to go abroad and study [amid this chaos], but the girls had no opportunity.

Both Hend and Muneera also pointed to the other higher education avenue available to Qatari students, which is receiving scholarships to continue their education abroad. According to them and other participants, not all women had the chance to escape the negative consequences of the reforms by going abroad because of the cultural barriers that continue to disadvantage them in this scholarship program.

Moreover, in relation to men's being able to study abroad, the women students often said they felt "trapped" while they were forced to stay longer periods in university, trying to master English or navigate themselves around the new policies enacted at that time. This resulted in delays of marriage for some or needing to leave university and then possibly reenroll when their children were older. This is partly as a result of a stigma against unmarried women, as the expected age of marriage tends to be early 20's. The mean age for women's first marriage in 2013 in Qatar was 23.5 (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics 2015), meaning that many of them ended up having children toward the end of their time in university. Below is an example of some of the focus group discussion sorrowing this.

Noor: ... it [the switch to English] stretched the number of years spent in school: Previously, you could graduate when you were 21 and still get married. But now, I am 24, and I am married and pregnant, and I am struggling and suffering . . .
Reem: . . . My sister is a year younger than I am; She entered [Qatar] university and could not take it for more than 1 year, and that's why she went abroad, and now she has graduated. Meanwhile, I am still here living at the university [metaphorically speaking], and I still have not graduated.

In another interview, Sheikha an ambitious law student, whose parents were not encouraging her interest in studying abroad, told me:

Sheikha: My brother and I both wanted to study law, and we started the same time at the College of Law [at Qatar University], but after the first semester, he got frustrated with the changes and the contradictions in the system and applied to study abroad [in the UK]. He finished last year, and I have one more semester to go still. He was lucky that he did not have to endure all the confusion at the university here.

Being a Mother and Having Children.

This phenomenon of women studying for longer periods in university is compounded by the fact that they often perceived the university's policies and professors as being insensitive to specific women's needs—related to when these students were mothers or pregnant. This is of serious concern given the policy makers are well aware the university serves a large number of women students. These two students point out these issues in a discussion on absence following giving birth.

Zeina: This [students have two weeks after delivery] is mandatory, but [the professor] does not necessarily need to take that into account when it comes to exam scheduling and grades. So if they have an exam scheduled, he might postpone it a day or two, and then she needs to come and take the exam at a time when she can't even sit down—imagine. She has stitches and is not feeling well.

Fatima: And anyway, there are some professors who begin the course by saying, "If you are pregnant, you should drop the course because I will not take that into account . . . But just imagine, first day of classes, and you enter class, and you say Salam 'Alaikom (greetings), and you hear this kind of talk. You definitely panic and ultimately drop the course.

During the discussion of the professors' attitude, the professor's gender also came up as playing a role in how "sympathetic" the instructor was. Although during the discussions the unsympathetic professor was often referred to using male pronouns, the participants later broke out into a discussion about how the female professors were specifically "tough." This is something I have also heard from many of my own students and received in their course evaluations, saying I was not like other "women" instructors who are usually "tougher" than the male instructors are. However, other students did not say that this was necessarily always the case, but when asked to explain what could possibly be the reason for this "toughness," Latifa pointed out the following:

Latifa: [Female instructors] went through a lot to become [instructors], and they think it is only fair to make us suffer like they did. I do not understand why... it's like their goal in life is to make us suffer like that.

Blame and self-responsibilization.

During the focus group interviews, and perhaps as a result of the diversity in the group, there was some tension among the students about whether pregnant women deserve "special treatment." Some of the women in the focus groups and interviews felt that some of their classmates abuse their pregnancy to demand much leniency. This discussion did not refer to the basic university guidelines, with regard to students' time off after giving birth, but was related to extra measures that professors sometimes needed to consider. For example, after some students brought up the insensitivity of some professors, the following discussion arose:

Sara: [Professors have] the kind of attitude, that "I do not want to hear about your problems and morning sickness."

Dina: Yeah, so he doesn't want to hear any excuses.

Sara: So yeah, if you are like that, drop the course.

Hatoon: . . . but honestly, some girls exaggerate.

Dina: Yeah, some do.

...

Hatoon: For example, she might skip a month of class. What is this? “Oh, I am tired; I am pregnant . . .” OK?

Sara: OK. But it could be her first pregnancy.

Below is another example, but this time it was from an in-depth interview with one of the mothers. Alaa was one of the students who had enrolled in the university in 2003 when the reform had just begun, but who later dropped out because, according to her, she could not navigate the system and “everyone was confused.” This also coincided with the birth of her first child who suffered from a medical condition and required consistent doctor visits. Alaa however repeated high school a couple of years later to reenroll in university and was graduating the semester I was interviewing her—while she was six months’ pregnant with her fifth child. After all she had been through, she maintained:

I’m thankful to everything, even though some professors were harsh, I am thankful. Throughout my years, I never used the excuse that I am pregnant or have children. I wanted to be treated like everyone else.

This sentiment of not wanting to be “treated differently” was repeated by most of the mothers I interviewed, and it supports my own experience of teaching students who gave birth during the semester. They hardly asked for deadline extensions or days off, and they were some of my most outstanding students. It does appear however that some women echo the thoughts and feelings of the professors who discriminate, blaming students who complain about university insensitivity and criticizing them for not being “eager enough” or not having the “will” to continue. That was coupled with a sense of self-responsibilization among some of the women in the focus group and interviews. For example, in regard to the question of why some women do not enter the labor market after graduating, even after obtaining a PhD, or why some women do not continue their education abroad, the reasons were often attached to “her choice” or “lack of will.” The following discussion provides examples of that:

Nasim: . . . I feel a woman . . . when she has a goal, she can successfully achieve it. [In] any field the women wants to enter. They even can study abroad. Even those who are from good [conservative] families are now aware of the nature of the work [being mix-gendered] and so on. They [are allowed to] go to study abroad.

In another exchange:

Farah: There are some traditions that we are still stuck at; it is still hard; who is going to continue . . .? Some think that they earned great GPAs, and they asked to go abroad to continue their degrees, but these traditions stand in their way.

Lara: But I also feel that it is personal; if a person really wants to continue to a higher degree, he or she will do it, regardless of the traditions. For example, she can study at home. Those that only want a degree [and] stay home, they stay home. Others, they want the degree to help people, so they help people.

This theme of a “woman’s will” and her own motivation was always matched to the idea that women have “all opportunities” now. Some even pointed to the fact that some are taking “way too much advantage of these opportunities” and disregarding their family responsibilities. Hadeel, who is one of the mothers who waited for her children to enroll in school before returning to school stated:

Hadeel: The government, thank God, gave a woman all her rights ... If anything, [women] are overdoing it... She wants to be the man in the relationship; the poor men are the ones who are suffering now... At the end of the day, a woman is a woman; she needs to take care of her home.

In this sense, the success of women is ascribed negative connotations, often in relation to men’s suffering.

The “good reform” in 2013: Not so good?

The women also brought up additional current issues, including: (a) the return to using Arabic in the classroom and what that means for women’s future work opportunities and (b) the need to learn outside the formal classroom setting to compete in today’s labor market. What was interesting in this case is that even though many students noted that the switch to English in the first place affected them or their older relatives negatively, there was a near consensus among the students in stating that the shift was justified for Qatar to meet its economic needs and ambitions. This was often followed with a clarification that it was the implementation of the policy that created the issues: It was too sudden, and it disregarded that Arabic was the chief language in the public schools and English was basic, at the time that the state required English proficiency at university.

Disadvantage in the labor market. When the return to Arabic mentioned, the women expressed that it was justified. On the one hand, they did say that it enabled many women to return to school, and many said it was necessary because Qatar is an Arab state and needed to “protect its Arab identity.” On the other hand, other women who were eager to continue graduate school in English or who were career oriented also mentioned that it was an impractical policy, as it disadvantaged them, especially relative to students enrolled in the American universities hosted in Qatar and those who had come from studying abroad, primarily graduating from Western institutions

of higher education. Below are examples of why some women felt the switch back served as a liability:

Aisha: . . . Yesterday we were [in a meeting] with directors, big directors, and everything was in English—and I had studied everything in Arabic. So I was just sitting there, and I could not participate in the discussion because I had studied everything in Arabic . . .
Zainab: You know, when a manager gets the CV of a student coming from Qatar Foundation (where the American universities are hosted) and mine, they will pick the Qatar Foundation student, even though we work harder.

Aisha and Zainab bring up something that often arose in my classroom discussion as well. As part of a classroom activity, I would give students newspaper articles covering complaints made by students at Qatar University to the press. Although the articles often pertained to the overcrowded parking lots and the difficulty in registering for classes needed for graduation, the discussion always reverted to a comparison between them—Qatar University students and the “others” at the more privileged Western university campuses, a 20-minute drive from them. This was expressed with a concerning unfortunate defeatist attitude.

Taking charge and learning outside the classroom. Even though many of these students complained that they were not receiving an education that enabled them to compete in the labor market, others continued to point out that the opportunity to learn was “out there” and that those who were eager to learn English could do so outside the formal classrooms if they had the “will” or desire. In my interview with Ghada, a highly motivated student completing her BA at Qatar University and applying study abroad and earn another BA in architecture in the United Kingdom, she told me the following:

Ghada: I feel the university offers so many opportunities for students to learn English. There are so many English courses on campus.

When I challenged her on the accessibility of these programs to all students, she noted:

Ghada: Yes, [the courses] are open to anyone . . . It works very well for me because I have long breaks, and I am always on campus, so I can take them.

Yet the married women, even those who insisted that a woman can achieve anything “she puts her mind to doing,” pointed out that these courses do not suit their needs.

Alaa: You know I have a husband and children, not to mention social [extended family] responsibilities. It is very hard for me to take computer courses or English courses after

classes. During my last semester, I felt I had no social life; you can't expect me to take more courses.

Hence, as seen above, many women were adamant that they could access all the opportunities “out there,” and for many of them, it was mostly personal choice that made some not take advantage of the opportunities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper engaged in a critical feminist reading of the reform that took place at Qatar University in 2003 by drawing on the lived realities of Qatari women. The reforms that took place sought to align Qatar University with market needs and international standards. Whereas these policies were often perceived to be technical and neutral, following a rational market-driven model, the conversations I had with these women suggest otherwise. These international policy reforms seemed to interact with an array of factors, leading to the minoritization of this majority of student at the national university and within higher education in Qatar in general, namely the female students.

Bensimon and Marshall (1997) noted that “even though gender may appear to be absent or irrelevant, ultimately decisions that emerge from such studies do have gendered consequences” (Bensimon & Marshall 1997, p. 6). In the context of the reforms that occurred at Qatar University starting in 2003 and moving forward, even though they were ostensibly similar to those taking place across the globe—focused on accountability and a market-driven agenda—they had a gendered effect unique to the Qatari context. This is not surprising because the historical overview demonstrated that Qatari women have often struggled to access learning opportunities abroad in the face of cultural norms that have expanded in GCC states thanks to the “patriarchal gender contract” (Moghadam 2005, p. 117).

With the more recent switch to Arabic, and the push for more internships as part of the accreditation demands of many colleges, Qatar University students are finding themselves needing to compete with students coming from English speaking universities in the state or from overseas universities. What is evident in this context is these reforms were designed with a focus on “successful girls” that are often assumed to be “white, heterosexual, middle-class, academically capable and childless demographic” (Baker 2010, p. 4). Mothers are therefore doubly disadvantaged as they struggle to find time to participate in these learning spaces outside the formal classroom to keep up with the rest of their single peers. As noted above, the reforms began at a time in which few alternatives were available to female students because not all parents were willing to support their daughters in enrolling in mixed-gender

American universities in Doha or in the study abroad scholarship program. However, the male students were able to study abroad, with few family restrictions. In the academic year 2012–2013, the government had sent 750 males to study abroad for both undergraduate and graduate programs but only 238 women (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistic 2014). In addition to the cultural norms in place, there are laws that prevent women from leaving the country without the approval of their “legal guardian” until they reach 25 years of age. This could be problematic for some women, such as those with fraught relationships with their fathers and brothers (that play the role of the father and so can an uncle), for whatever the reason. Reports of abuse of legal guardianship rights have been raised in the past to the CEDAW committee: Women have pointed out the need to obtain a “no objection letter,” a customary Human Resources Department practice for a new employee, which has been a way for fathers and brothers to blackmail their daughters or sisters (Independent Group of Concerned Citizens, 2014). Even though this abuse was specific to the right to work in Qatar, one may assume similar abuses happen when it comes to studying abroad that are frowned upon further.

Paradoxically, this is occurring at a time when the state has been vocal about “women’s empowerment.” Nonetheless, most of these empowerment policies have been “carved in ways which do not challenge local cultural mores” (Mazawi, 2008, p. 67). Instead, some perceive these policies as symbolic in nature and directed at an international audience more than at the local one (Mazawi 2008; Kassem & Al-Muftah 2016). In addition to that, as women have started to increasingly enter different fields in education and the labor market there is also growing “fears of competition with men, leading to calls for the redomestication of women” (Moghadam 1999, p. 373; Kassem & Al-Muftah 2016). Unfortunately, such symbolic policy, one that comes with ample rhetoric but little enforcement, such as changing to policies and laws that directly discriminate against women, serves as a placebo that “gives only the pretense of treatment” (Marshall 1999, p. 62).

As demonstrated by the above discussion, despite that many of the women sense that they are disadvantaged by the shifts in both English and Arabic policy reforms that occurred at Qatar University, when they compare the policies’ results for them to those for males who can study abroad or for students who can attend the mixed-gender American elite campuses in Qatar, they, as Qatari women, were adamant that they have ample opportunities and choice—if the “will” to do so exists. In this context, when in the focus groups or in the interviews, the problems that were brought up by these same women were often accompanied by an explanation that these reasons were not valid and that women had to be responsible for their own choices. It is therefore fair to say that the image of the “successful girl” with an array of opportunities in

“modern” Qatar seems to have been internalized by many of the women—who argued that the opportunities are “out there” and that those that do not succeed fail because of a lack of effort.

However, little attention is paid to the serious structural challenges that still face Qatari women. One of the interviewees, Sehkha, who was enrolled in the law program, said she would never work as an intern in the courts because the courts are “not fit” for women, which is supported by the limited number of female lawyers that practice law, but she nonetheless maintains a positive outlook for Qatari women. Some students even took this “successful girl” ideal to another level and blamed women for being overly successful—to the point that it is men who are the disadvantaged ones. This could partly explain why in polls that measure attitudes, women are nearly just as likely as men are to view the success of women, especially financially, negatively. For example, 79% of respondents to the World Value Survey conducted by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (2010), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that women’s employment negatively affects children, and another 35% agreed or strongly agreed that when a woman’s income is higher than her husband’s, that is likely to cause marital problems. As mentioned earlier, this is similar to the state narrative on women’s status in education, which often frames women’s success in relation to men’s falling behind. Unfortunately, other negative stereotypes seem to be associated with the educational attainment of women, including a drop in fertility rates, divorce rates, and so on, which has added to the negative perception associated with women’s education (Kassem & Al-Muftah 2016).

These findings are in no way an isolated case in Qatar, as other studies have reported similar findings, for example, with women in Australia and the United Kingdom (Baker, 2008; 2010; Ringrose, 2007). Ringrose (2007) noted that the claims “that girls have reached unparalleled levels of success and feminist interventions into schooling have been met, and may have gone ‘too far,’ so that girls’ achievements are continuously positioned as won at the expense of boys.” (p. 471–472). This aligned with the conceptualization of gender issues via a narrow focus “on letting girls into male domains” (Marshall 1999, p. 61).

As such, there remains a need for research “examining the complex, contradictory effects of the successful girls discourse” (Ringrose 2007, p. 474), especially when basic rights such as those of citizenship have yet to be achieved for women in the Qatari context, as is the case in most Arab states. As Joseph and Slyomovics (2011) wrote with respect to women in the region, generally, the “continuities among family, civil society, and state mean that [women] confront patriarchy in every sphere” (p. 5).

Therefore, there is a need to remain cautious and to resist the growing discourse feeding off “neoliberal formulas and fantasies of girls as ‘metaphors’ for educational success and equality” (Ringrose 2007, p. 474). Furthermore, this highlights a need to reexamine what the university can mean to these students and how classrooms can be settings for these women to explore their issues and societal concerns. It is my hope that this type of attention will shed light on how “pedagogical conditions” can be structured to enable women to become more visible and taken more seriously (Giroux 2002, p. 451).

In conclusion, by conducting a feminist critical policy analysis, I argue that the ways in which higher education policy has intersected with other structures of domination, most notably patriarchal norms, has meant that women in the national university have been marginalized. Although Qatar continues to hire foreign organizations to assess and design education reforms, giving the impression that many of these issues are purely technical, little attention is paid to how those policies have a direct effect on the realities of many women from different strata of Qatari society. The restructuring policies that seem to be standard across the region, though often framed as emancipatory for women, hardly tackle the patriarchal barriers these women are faced with while pursuing their education in the social and legal sense. Furthermore, the university’s mission, which primarily focuses on fulfilling the needs of the national labor market, does not address the needs of many of the women students, including those who do not enter the labor market after graduating, or the barriers they face in the labor market and in society. Hence, the gender-neutral lens accompanied by discourse on women’s choices and opportunity, if taken at face value, can further exacerbate gender inequalities in Qatar and needs to be revisited using a more critical lens.

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