

POLICY REPORT

Attitudes towards Female Labor Force Participation in Qatar

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The Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI), a social scientific survey research initiative of Qatar University, was established in October 2008 with enthusiastic support from the leadership of Qatar University. SESRI's mission is to provide sound and reliable data to guide policy formulation, priority-setting, and evidence-based planning in the social and economic sectors.

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Executive Summary

This brief summarizes the results of a national survey of public attitudes toward female labor force participation (FLFP) – women working outside the home – in Qatar. The data come from a representative telephone poll conducted by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University in January and February 2020. The survey captured various orientations toward FLFP, including general acceptance, perceptions of peer acceptance, support for FLFP under specific job scenarios, perceived barriers and problems associated with FLFP, and support for quotas as a policy measure to boost female employment, promotion, and compensation. A total of 660 Qataris and 889 white-collar expatriates were interviewed for the survey. Key findings include the following:

- Qatari society is quite supportive of FLFP, with two-thirds of both citizens and expats being “strongly” supportive and around 90% supportive overall
- Women in Qatar are substantially more supportive of FLFP than men
- Individuals do not significantly vary in support for FLFP according to the specific female family member in question (i.e., a daughter, a sister, or a wife)
- Individuals in Qatar tend to misperceive their peers (family, friends, and society in general) as being substantially *less* supportive of FLFP than they actually are
- Qatari men are especially likely to believe that their peers oppose FLFP
- The most commonly identified problem related to FLFP is marital/family issues, rather than the idea that FLFP undermines Qatari traditions and values
- Qataris cite inflexible working hours, lack of suitable jobs, and insufficient educational qualifications as key practical obstacles to FLFP
- Qatari citizens and Arab expats, especially males, are much more likely to support a female family member working in a women-only office environment
- More educated and wealthier Qataris are more accepting of a mixed-gender office
- Qataris are more likely to support a female family member working outside the home if the job pays a higher salary

- Qatari men and women disagree over the ease with which females are promoted to top administrative positions in Qatar, with men perceiving an advantage and women perceiving a disadvantage for female candidates for promotion
- More than 70% of Qataris “strongly” support a policy guaranteeing equal pay for men and women who do the same work
- Qataris are less likely to strongly support a quota guaranteeing places for women in government (41%) or executive positions in companies and ministries (35%)
- A significant number of individuals agreed that a lack of adequate paid maternity leave affects women’s decisions to seek employment.
- Flexible work opportunities are readily available in the labor market, allowing women to reconcile their domestic responsibilities with their jobs.
- Qataris expressed more agreement than non-Qataris with the statement that women are well equipped with essential skills in the workplace.

Introduction

Qatar's long-term policy plans outlined in the *Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030* rest on the goal of developing a skilled workforce that is a key driving force in a flourishing, sustainable knowledge-based society. *QNV 2030* emphasizes the importance of human capital development and calls for an education system and labor market that provides citizens with the skills required to achieve their educational and career aspirations and to meet the current and future needs of the economy. With a small number of nationals, Qatar's leadership views labor force participation by Qatari women as a key element of achieving *QNV 2030* and progressing toward a post-hydrocarbon economy. For this purpose, decision-makers in Qatar have placed the promotion of FLFP high on the policy agenda, and prominent examples of female leaders in Qatar serve as inspiration to others.

Yet, despite some recent progress in boosting the proportion of employed female citizens, Qatari men continue to be employed at nearly twice the rate as women. The latest Qatar Labor Force Survey reports that 38,428 Qatari women were working in 2018, compared to 67,610 Qatari men.¹ Some impediments to female employment may lie in structural factors such as lack of suitable jobs, a mismatch in professional skills and educational qualifications, and other obstacles. However, another type of barrier to FLFP in Qatar relates to lack of societal acceptance of women working outside the home among some individuals and groups in society. Better understanding the degree and substance of this hesitation toward women working in Qatar is an essential task to assessing its effects on FLFP and devising policy approaches to help overcome it. This is the aim of the SESRI survey on public attitudes toward female labor participation in Qatar.

General Support for FLFP

The survey results reveal that Qatari society is quite supportive of FLFP. Around two thirds of both citizens and expats say that they “strongly” agree with the statement that “women should be able to work outside the home if they wish,” and around 90% agree overall. Both citizens and non-citizens in Qatar are similarly supportive when asked whether they would support their own female family members working outside the home. These findings are depicted in Figure 1.

¹ Summarized in “Qatar: Population aged 15 and above by nationality (Qatari/ non-Qatari), sex and relation to labour force (2018),” Gulf Labour Markets and Migration, European University Institute, October 2019. Available at: <https://gulfmigration.org/qatar-population-aged-15-and-above-by-nationality-qatari-non-qatari-sex-and-relation-to-labour-force-2018>.

Meanwhile, support for FLFP in Qatar does differ significantly between men and women. As illustrated in Figure 2, only 55% of surveyed men report strong support for FLFP in general, compared to 82% of women. These male and female proportions are very similar in the case of support for FLFP in one’s own family. Here again, the data show no difference in attitudes between Qatari and non-Qatari respondents.

Overall, then, both nationals and non-nationals in Qatar are quite supportive of FLFP; yet, as one might expect, support is substantially higher among women than among men.

Figure 1. Support for FLFP in General and in Respondent’s Family, by Citizenship

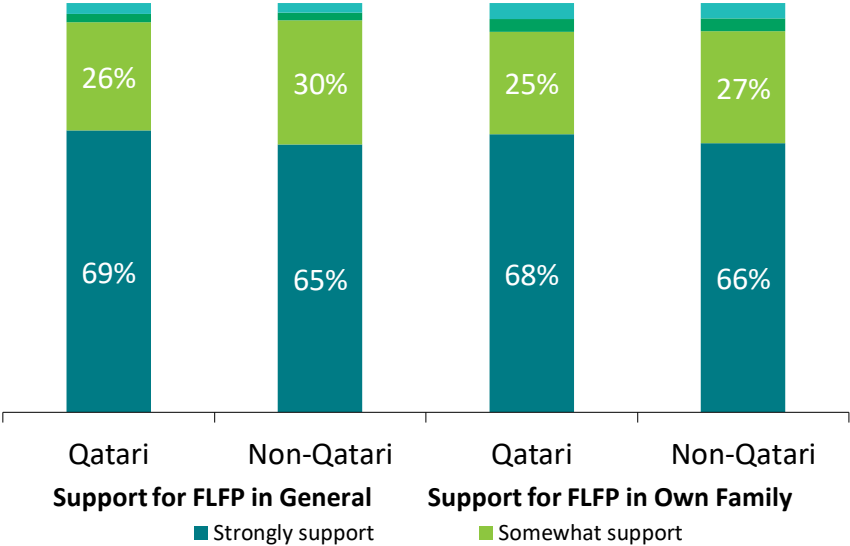
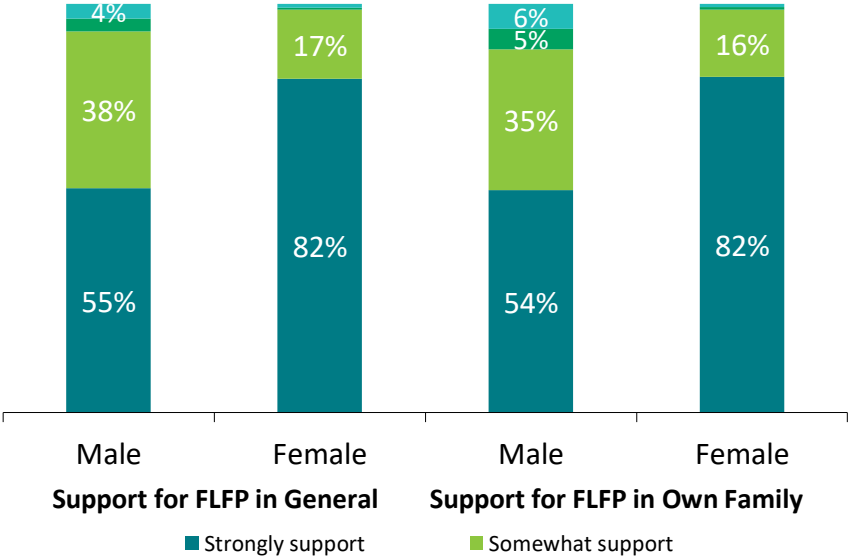


Figure 2. Support for FLFP in General and in Respondent’s Family, by Gender



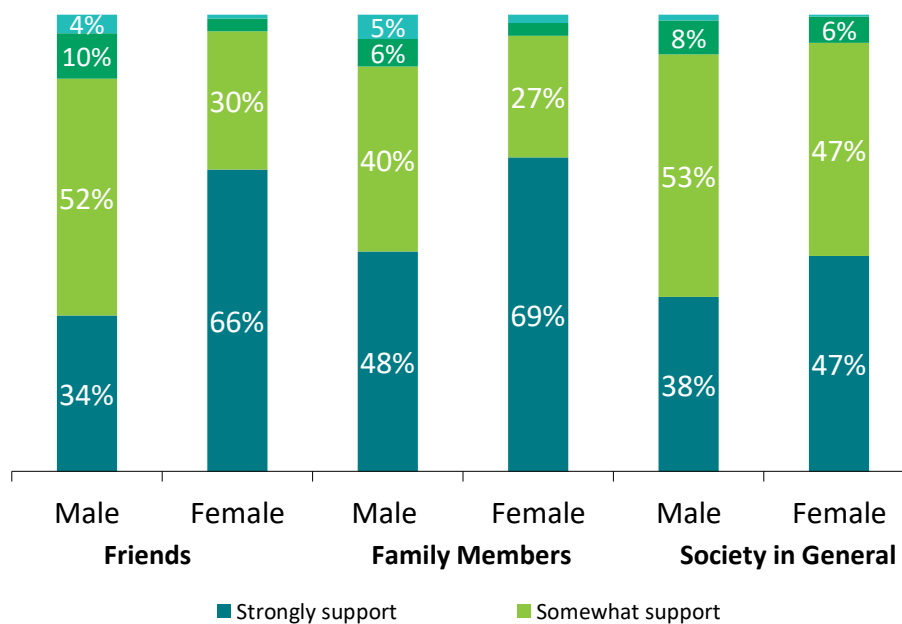
Perceived Support for FLFP among Peer Groups

One of the aims of the survey was to examine the ways that people in Qatar seek to coordinate their behaviors surrounding FLFP in light of the perceived attitudes and behaviors of their peers. Research from other Arab Gulf countries has shown that individuals may adopt more negative orientations regarding women working outside the home if they perceive opposition to FLFP among those who are important to them and who serve as a public opinion reference: for example, friends, family members, a particular age cohort, or ‘society’ in general.

The survey of public attitudes toward FLFP in Qatar therefore included questions that asked respondents to assess the views of three peer groups: their friends, members of their immediate family, and “society in general.” The findings are reported in Figure 3.

Several conclusions stand out. Most importantly, individuals in Qatar tend to rate peer support for FLFP at levels substantially lower than that of themselves. In other words, people in Qatar substantially *underestimate* societal support for women working outside the home, perceiving friends, family, and society as being more opposed to FLFP than they are in reality. A second notable result is that perceptions of peer orientations differ by gender: males in Qatar are much less likely to view friends (34%), family (48%), or society in general (38%) as being very supportive of FLFP as compared to women (66%, 69%, and 47%, respectively).

Figure 3. Perceived Support for FLFP among Peer Groups, by Gender



Third, females in particular perceive a qualitative gap in support between people they know personally –friends and family – and Qatari society in general, whereas males see overall society as being much more closely aligned with the views of their friends and family. Finally, the results depicted in Figure 3 do not differ significantly between Qataris and non-Qataris.

Problems and Obstacles Associated with FLFP

The survey asked respondents to identify the main problems and obstacles they believed to be associated with FLFP. These included both structural/practical issues related to working outside the home such as lack of available jobs, as well as social/cultural issues such as lack of familial support and fear of negative judgment by peers. Overall, Qataris and non-Qataris mainly cited the former, practical obstacles and problems as being more significant than cultural barriers.

This result is visualized in Figure 4. Approximately two-thirds of respondents identify a structural rather than social impediment to women participating in the workforce: inflexible working hours (27%), lack of suitable jobs available (20%), insufficient educational qualifications (13%), and low wages compared to men (7%). Meanwhile, a total of 33% of Qataris and non-Qataris cite social obstacles, including lack of agreement from family (23%), fear of negative marriage implications for the working woman (5%), and fear of negative peer judgment of the woman and/or her family (5%). These responses do not vary substantially according to respondent gender or among Qataris versus expats.

Figure 4. Main Obstacle Associated with FLFP

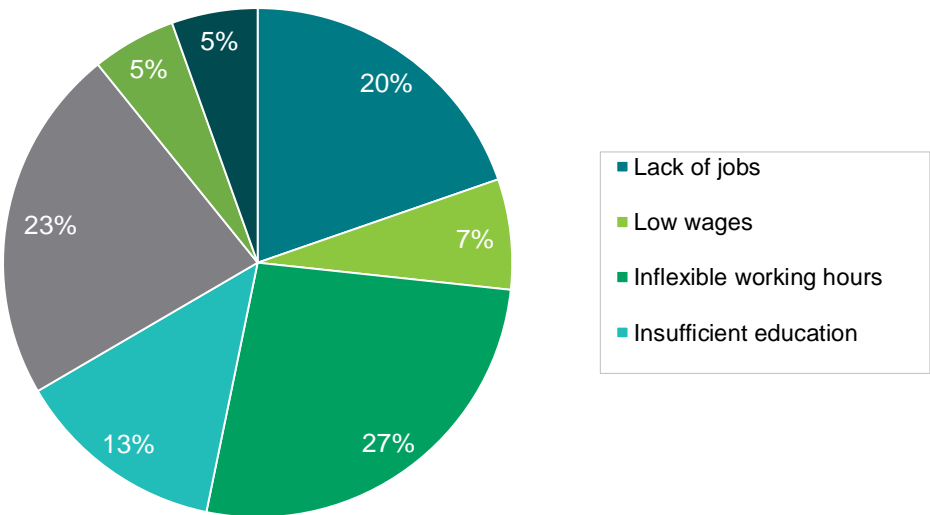
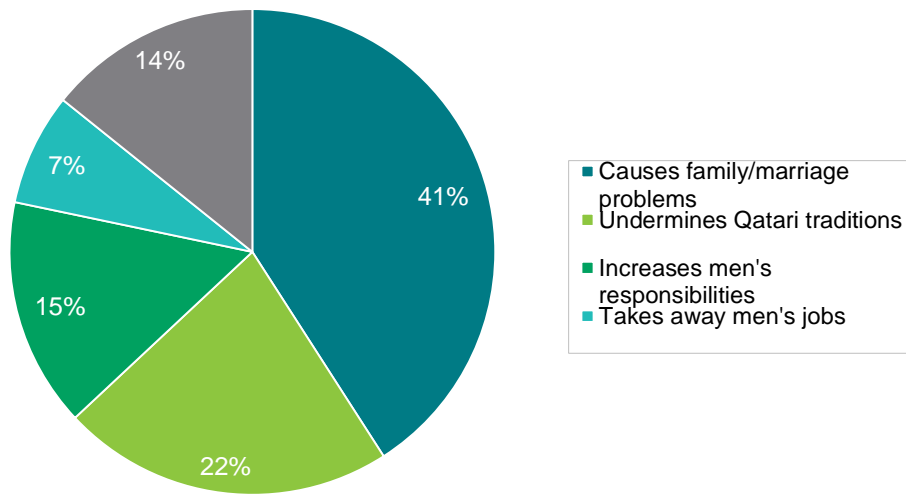


Figure 5. Main Problem Associated with FLFP



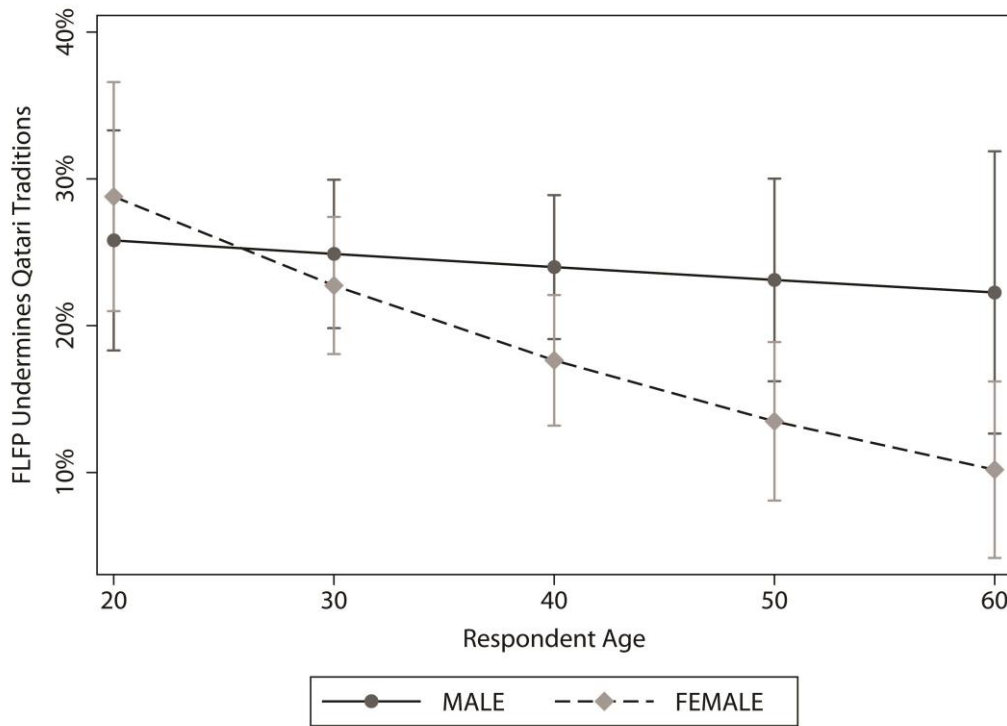
The main problems identified as being associated with FLFP show a similar pattern of concern for the practical barriers to women working outside the home rather than social considerations. As depicted in Figure 5, almost half of individuals in Qatar (41%) cite family and marital issues as their biggest concern connected with FLFP, while only half that proportion (22%) believe that women working outside the home undermines Qatari traditions and values. Another quarter of respondents are mainly concerned with gender dynamics, with 15% viewing FLFP as increasing men's household responsibilities and 7% responding that working women take away jobs from men. Finally, 14% of those interviewed replied that there is no problem at all related to FLFP.

It is worth considering further the distinction between those Qataris who are skeptical of FLFP because it may pose practical difficulties for the family or marriage, and those who instead oppose FLFP in principle as being contrary to traditional values. Figure 6 reports the likelihood that a respondent identifies undermining traditional Qatari values as the main problem associated with FLFP, according to age and gender and controlling for education.

The figure shows that each of these variables has a substantial but conditional impact. More specifically, about a quarter of Qatari men subscribe to the view that FLFP is against traditional values, and this is true irrespective of their age. Among Qatari women, by contrast, concern over the cultural impacts of women working is most prevalent among the youngest generation: a 20 year-old Qatari female is an estimated 3 times as likely as a 60 year-old to cite FLFP's effect on Qatari values as being its most important drawback. That it is older Qatari

women who are the most accepting of females working outside the home is a notable and perhaps surprising result.

Figure 6. Undermining Qatari Values as Main Problem of FLFP, by Age and Gender



Job Attributes and Support for FLFP

It is likely that many individuals' degree of support for women working outside the home will depend on the specific characteristics of the job being considered. While some men or women may have a baseline level of acceptance or rejection of FLFP based on principle, the decision to support or not support a female family member (like: sister or wife) to enter the labor force is likely to be contingent upon the details of a particular scenario. For instance, in which sector might the woman work? Would the job in a mixed-gender or women-only office environment? What would be the level of financial compensation for the work? And so on.

In order to simulate this type of complex choice surrounding individual support for FLFP, the survey included a conjoint experiment in which respondents were presented with a hypothetical job offer that a female family member might receive and asked to assess the extent to which they would support their family member pursuing such a position. The particular attributes of the hypothetical job offer were randomized so that the data would reveal the effect of each attribute on the respondent's overall assessment. Four attributes were varied in the

hypothetical vignettes: the sector, the office environment, the salary, and the female family member in question (Sister, wife,...).

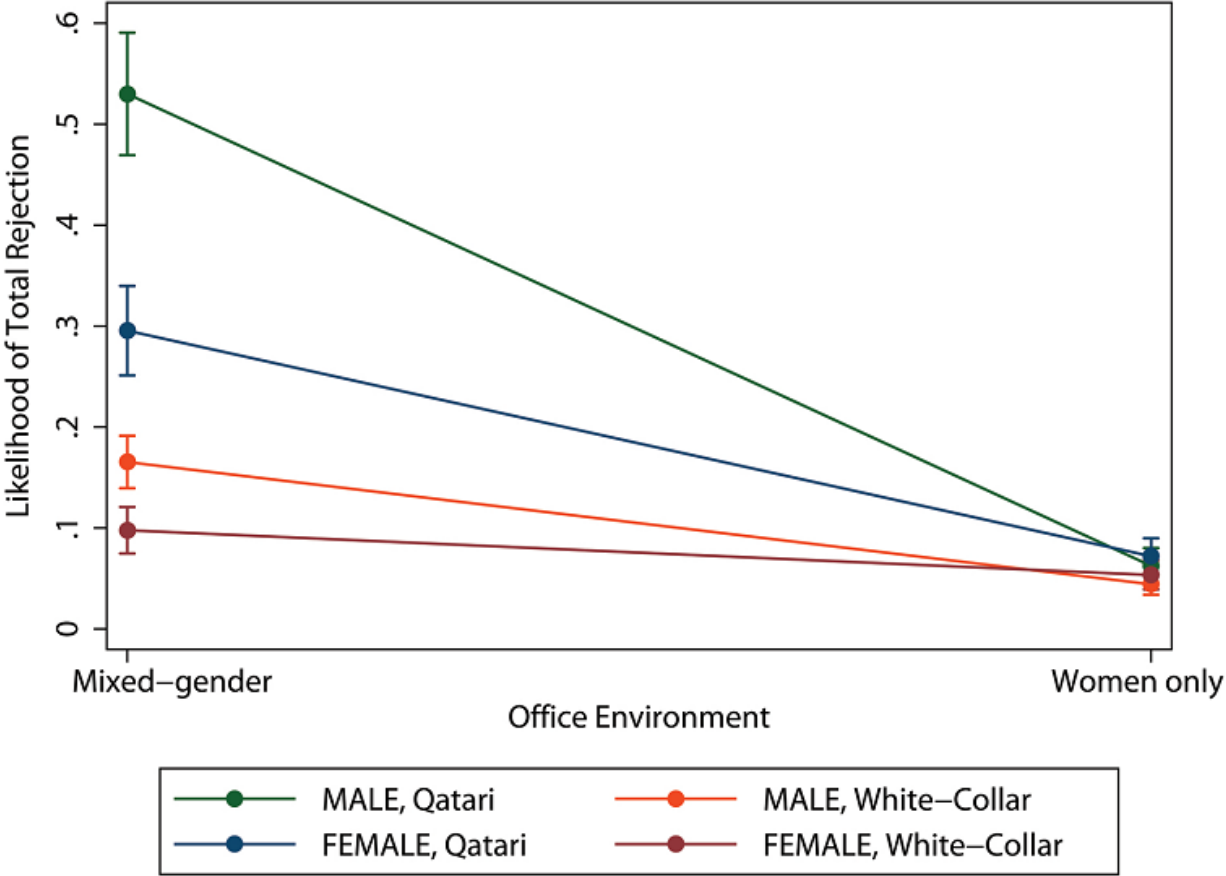
Figure 7. Factors Influencing Support for Female Family Member Working



Figure 7 illustrates the findings of the conjoint analysis. As is plain from the figure, the attribute that plays the largest role in determining support for a female family member is whether the office is mixed-gender or instead women only. A women-only office is associated with a substantially higher likelihood of support. The second most important attribute in shaping attitudes of Qataris and non-Qataris toward FLFP is the sector of employment, with work in the education sector judged to be the most acceptable and the oil and gas sector the least acceptable. As one might expect, a higher salary also boosts support for a female family member accepting a hypothetical job offer; however, the effect of this economic factor is, perhaps surprisingly, quite modest compared to those of the preceding factors. Finally, the experiment reveals no statistically significant difference in support for a daughter versus a sister, although there is some evidence that individuals may be less likely to support the former compared to the latter.

Given the critical importance of the office environment on familial support for FLFP in Qatar, it is worth understanding its effects further. Figure 8 depicts the likelihood that a respondent totally rejects a hypothetical job scenario, depending on its office environment. As can be seen in the lower-right hand concern of the figure, all types of respondents—men and women, Qataris and non-Qataris—are very unlikely (at less than 10%) to strongly oppose a female family member assuming a hypothetical position if the office is women-only. However, the picture changes dramatically in the case of a mixed-gender workplace.

Figure 8. Effect of Office Environment on Support for FLFP, by Gender and Nationality



In the case of a mixed office environment, complete rejection of FLFP rises to above 50% among Qatari men and to 30% among Qatari women. Non-Qataris, by contrast, are much less influenced by workplace gender segregation. Indeed, among female expatriates in Qatar, a mixed-gender office has no impact at all on support for FLFP, while among men rejection of the hypothetical FLFP scenario increases only somewhat to around 15%.

Support for Legislation to Encourage FLFP

Many countries around the world have introduced legal measures aimed at encouraging female workforce participation (and improving gender equality more generally) by setting aside places for women in government and in the public and private sector, and by guaranteeing equal pay for men and women who are employed in the same work. Such legislative measures have not been implemented or seriously considered in the Arab Gulf region; nonetheless, the survey included items to gauge public support for policies designed to encourage female participation in the economy and society.

Figure 9. Support for Legislation to Encourage FLFP, by Gender

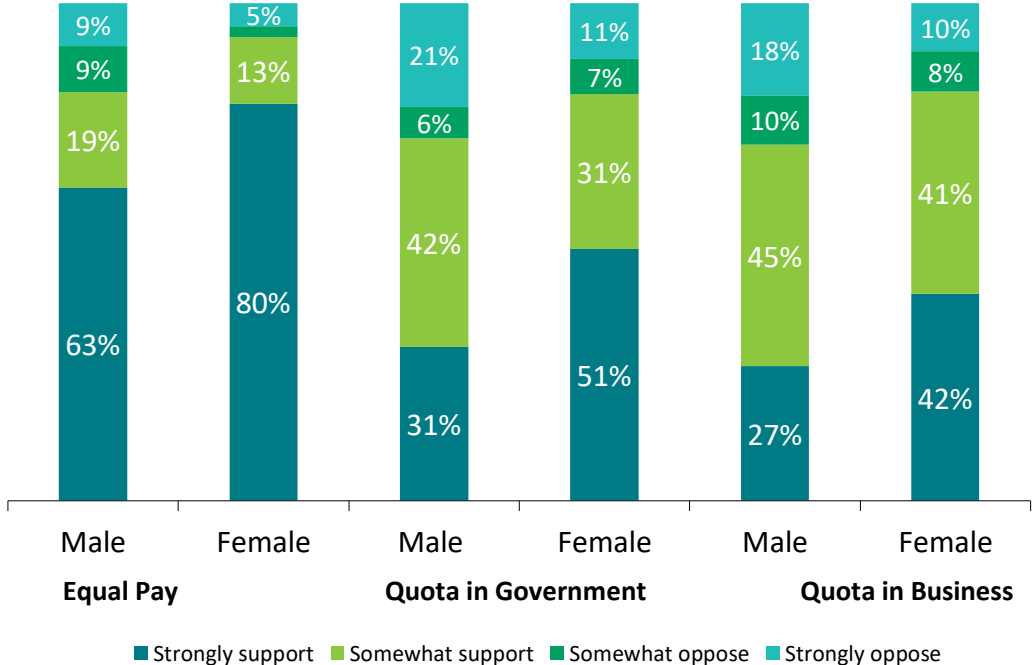
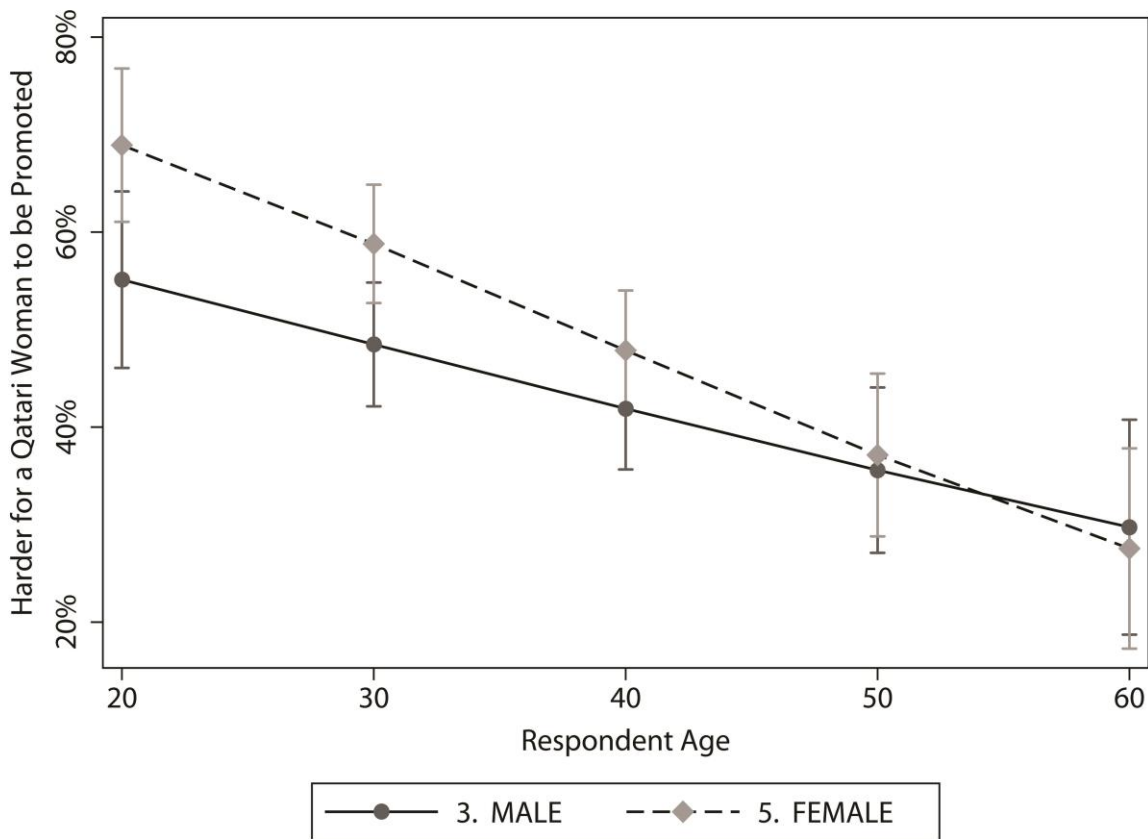


Figure 9 shows support among Qatari citizens for three different policies: equal pay for women and men, a quota for women in top government positions, and a quota for women in top executive positions in companies and public entities/ministries. Overall, the data show substantial levels of popular support for gender equality in salaries, but less support for quotas. As witnessed in other FLFP-related attitudes, a principle distinction emerges between male and female survey respondents, with Qatari women being substantially more supportive of all three policies relative to men. Interestingly, both women and to a lesser extent men express greater support for a gender quota in government than in the workplace.

Perceptions of Promotion Opportunities for Women

The perception of limitations on the promotion opportunities for women – so-called “glass ceiling” effects – are known to affect women’s employment, educational, and other choices. If women believe they will be unable to surpass a certain level of professional advancement in the future, they may forego educational or training opportunities in the present. This can result in truncated skills development or perhaps a lack of participation in the labor market altogether. Research has identified barriers to female career advancement in Qatar and the Gulf region. Our survey of public attitudes toward FLFP asked respondents about their perceptions of the difficulty faced by female candidates for promotion in Qatar.

Figure 10. Perceptions of Barriers to Female Promotion, by Gender and Age



Overall, respondents were quite evenly split between those who judged that it is harder or much harder for women in Qatar to reach top positions in business and government relative to men (53%), and those who thought that it is *easier* for women to advance in business and government

organizations compared to men (47%). However, closer analysis of the data uncovers, as observed previously, substantial variation by respondent gender and age.

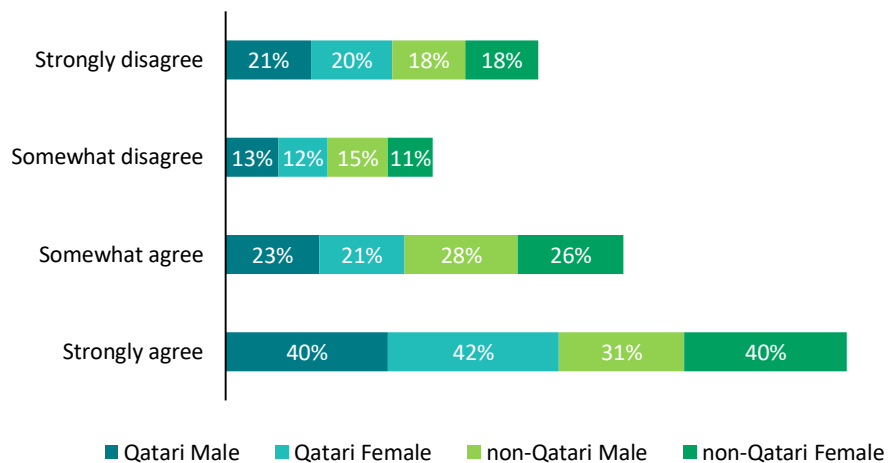
Figure 10 shows how perceptions of the ease of female promotion differ across these key demographic categories. The most important difference is based on age: older individuals are much less likely than younger people to perceive a disadvantage for Qatari women when it comes to promotion. A secondary difference occurs along gender lines, with younger females more likely than younger men to see a female disadvantage. Still, the gap in views between young men and women is relatively small compared to the primary, age-based discrepancy, meaning that generational and not gender differences help explain most of the variation in views regarding female promotion in Qatar.

Promoting Work-Family Balance Policies

The survey measured public attitudes toward work-family balance policies, including job training opportunities and benefit availability in terms of flexible work for working mothers. Understanding public attitudes towards these policies can help in explaining female labor force participation outcomes in Qatar. Specifically, respondents were asked about the extent of their agreement with statements regarding the impact of several factors on women's employment opportunities, such as the availability of adequate paid maternity leave policies, flexible work, and training programs for women the workforce. Participants responded using a 4-point Likert scale with the following choices: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.

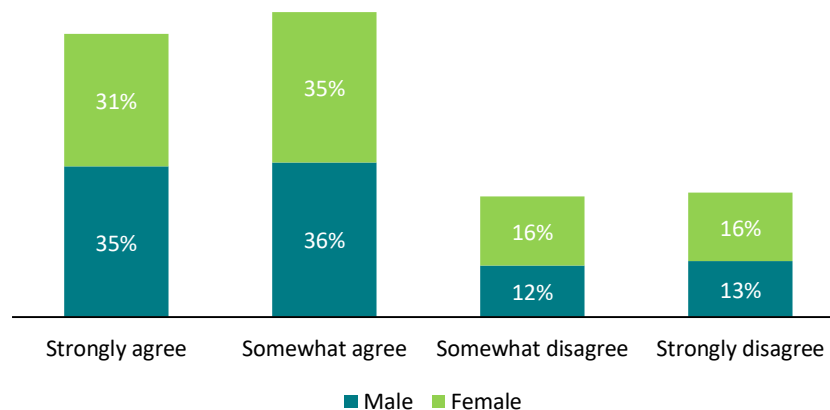
Most respondents strongly agreed with the negatively framed statement that "lack of adequate paid maternity leave forces some working mothers to remain at home at the expense of seeking employment in Qatar." Specifically, approximately 40% of Qatari male respondents and 42% of Qatari female respondents strongly agreed with this statement, regardless of the industry sector whether it was public or private-sector. Figure 11 details the level of agreement with this statement by respondent nationality and gender.

Figure 11. Level of Agreement with the Lack of Adequate Paid Maternity, by Respondents' Nationality and Gender



In the broader public sector of Qatar, the provisions of the Human Resources Law of 2016 apply to ministries and government agencies, wherein working mothers are entitled to 60 days of paid maternity leave (or 90 days for twins). However, the Labor Law of 2004 pertains to the private sector, wherein women can only apply for 50 days of paid maternity leave. The lack of adequate paid maternity leave as a benefit is regarded as an influential factor in family-work reconciliation and could restrict mothers' opportunities to seek employment.

Figure 12. Perceptions of Work-Family Balance, by Gender



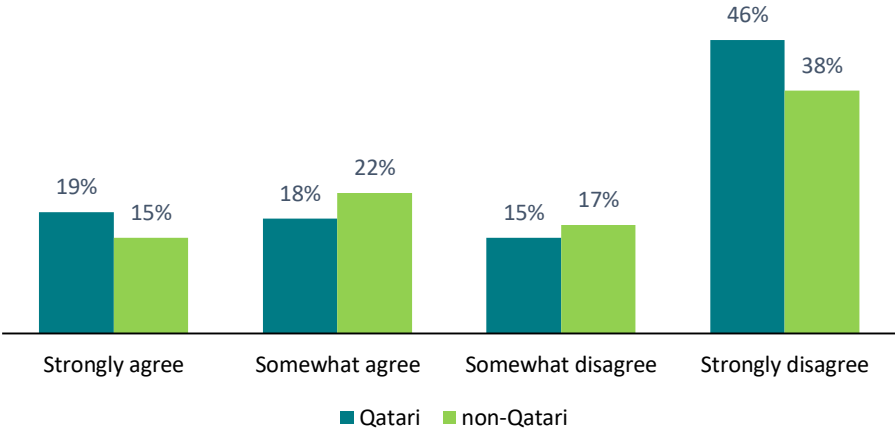
When asked whether “most available work in Qatar is flexible enough to allow women to balance between work and domestic obligations,” slightly more male respondents than female respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (71% and 66%, respectively; Figure 12). These findings indicate that most respondents believed that flexible work opportunities are

readily available in the labor market, allowing women to reconcile their domestic responsibilities with their jobs. In other words, participants did not appear to believe that the type of jobs available limits women’s workforce participation and opportunities.

To assess participant attitudes toward the availability of women’s educational training in the workplace, participants were asked about their level of agreement with the following negatively framed statement: “opportunities for women’s educational training are not enough to equip them with the necessary skills required in the labor market in Qatar.” As shown in Figure 13, the results demonstrated that the vast majority of Qatari and non-Qatari respondents strongly disagreed that the education and training opportunities available for women are insufficient. In fact, 61% of Qataris and 55% of non-Qataris either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (Figure 13).

Apparently, participants believed that women are equipped with the skills required in the labor market and that the workforce provides the necessary training to boost women’s labor force participation. These findings may be explained by the foundation of the labour law that supports gender equality policies in the workforce, in terms of the equalized rights and duties of male and female employees.

Figure 13. Perceptions of the Adequacy of Support for Women’s Education and Training, by Nationality



Notably, the results of this section demonstrated that mothers’ employment opportunities are highly impacted by the inadequacy of maternity leave policies, which continues to pose a serious problem to their labor market participation. In contrast, many respondents reported that the types of jobs available in the labor market facilitate work-family balance for women. Further, many respondents reported that women are well equipped with essential skills in the workplace.

Policy Recommendations

- Disseminate accurate information about the high degree of public support for FLFP in Qatar, in order to correct widespread misperceptions of peer attitudes.
- Raise awareness among young Qatari females in particular about the high level of societal support for women working outside the home.
- Maintain a database of open positions suitable for female applicants.
- Encourage employers to offer more flexible working hours and/or off-site work options for female employees.
- Study the feasibility of supporting child care and/or transportation costs of working mothers.
- Where possible, adopt physical office layouts that are sensitive to concerns about gender mixing.
- Capitalize on high public support for legal measures guaranteeing equal pay for men and women engaged in the same type of work.
- Mandate employers to establish and disseminate explicit criteria for promotion in order to counter perceptions of decisions based on candidate gender.
- Flexible jobs (e.g., part-time, job-sharing, and other options allowing reduced working hours), should be established so that working mothers can simultaneously perform domestic roles and career roles.
- Support for working mothers should be continued by granting paid maternity leave of at least seven months, so that women can build families of any size.
- Mentor programs should be offered for working women to help them develop the skills needed to achieve a balance between work and family domains.

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