

Qatari Women's Perceived Rights in Light of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

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Abstract: This study investigates Qatari women's perceptions of their rights regarding educational, economic, social, cultural, civil and fundamental freedoms on the basis of sex. Here, the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women was used to develop an instrument to measure women's perceptions. This study also measures perceptions of the barriers to those rights. The statistically significant findings suggest that women believe they have rights across educational, economic, social, cultural, civil and fundamental freedoms on the basis of sex. Women also feel that these rights are limited because of lack of knowledge of these rights, their desire to preserve social status and the current behavioral structure that perpetuate the public and perceived social role of women. This study is the first empirical study in Qatar that finds that women's beliefs about their rights far exceed the level and entitlements they currently are disposed to. National policy makers need to place strategies in place to integrate women in all aspects of economic, educational, social, cultural, civil and fundamental freedoms on equitable basis of the globalized world.

Key words: Qatar, convention, women, barriers, perception of women rights, civil and fundamental freedoms, globalized world

INTRODUCTION

Despite the increased awareness of female status in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), men's situational advantage of patriarchy, power and autonomy allows them to control and manage resources, thus manipulating women's role in society (Dyson and Moore, 1983; Dixon, 1978). This notion of men's superiority and status has been challenged in the MENA (El-Masri, 2012). In Qatar, for instance national goals aim to engage women in national development to empower them to participate in decision making processes and to promote their status in society (SCFASA, 2012). In a contemporary and modern world women's contribution to society is believed to be equal to men. Thus, integrating women in the social, political and economic life of nations under the folds and principles of human development (UN, 2011) underlines the philosophical-ontological perspective that men and women have the ability to become productive individuals with equal roles (UN, 2011).

The interest in women living in MENA comes from Western discourses and Western neopatriarchal analyses of women in the region. This interest among policy makers and think tanks in the West, specifically among Anglo-American nations, rests on the notion of inequalities that fit comfortably within cultural theories, as neopatriarchy is also fed by orientalism, leading to deep

seated Western notions that the East is backward and archaic in nature (Al Kharouf and Weir, 2008). However, local practices and behaviors have shown that women have taken substantial progressive roles, even though women do not stand out and are not easily characterized in simple, neo-patriarchal discourses and the oppressed-oppressor dichotomy. The great strides made by women in the Gulf are demonstrated by the increased number of women graduates and the labor participation in both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In Qatar, for example women constitute 35% of the labor sector and 50% of all investors in the Doha securities market (Al Kubaisi, 2010). Al Attiyah (2010) reported that women superseded men in education and training activities. There are observable deeper socio-historical antecedents in women's current educational, economic, political and social status that cannot be discounted, nor can the Western analyses of the MENA. Certainly, a wave of social change commitments from the Arab states toward the observance of women's rights has improved women's status, suggesting the need for an institutional and legal framework to support these initiatives of women's rights.

Background: The question of women's rights has become a key national agenda and social strategy of the global system. In Qatar, the belief in the empowerment of women is in line with the global commitment to the idea of

progress and it is directly linked to economic viability, high economic performance and increase the ranking in national league performance metrics (Ball, 1990). A legal framework has been established within the United Nations (2011) to protect women's roles. One such instrument that many of the MENA countries have adopted is the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (CEDAW, 1995, 1998; El-Masri, 2012). This convention has legal provisions in legal articles that provide greater equality and empowerment of women to advance their economic, educational, political and social engagement and progress. Legally, it attempts to allow signatory countries to abrogate laws, regulations, customs and practices that discriminate against women to ensure that women's rights are protected. Many of the MENA countries have partially accepted the convention due to their national esteem as being part of global integration (Ball, 1990).

Prior to the initiation of the CEDAW, many MENA countries had incorporated individual rights that addressed neither men's nor women's roles specifically (Hajjar, 2004). However, the CEDAW has no legal bearing or enforcement thus, it falters as a legal instrument of international law. Women still find themselves unprotected in the undersigned convention in many MENA countries. The convention is set to correct discrimination against women whether manifested in the form of exclusion, distinction or restrictions.

Although, the language of the CEDAW is inclusive, it has revealed that different MENA countries have different degrees of protecting women's rights (Kelly and Breslin, 2010). A CEDAW signature grants states, through Article 28, the right to place reservations as long as they are not in line with the mission of the convention and that such incompatibility could be removed at any time by notice to the secretary general of the United Nations. While more than one-third of the United Nations member states currently have reservations to the convention, mostly within the 2 provisions of articles 2-16 (matters relating to marriage and family relations), the acceptance to reserve the rights on the 2 provisions has made the CEDAW nonbinding to these articles by a large number of countries (Brandt and Kaplan, 1995). The provisions address issues sensitive to many cultures, namely, women's reproductive rights, equal rights in guardianship, the choice of family names and inheritance. Interestingly, a strong correlation is provided in Landman (2005) that suggests that democracies with better human rights records have shown less serious reservations to the CEDAW and politically constrained countries which have more obstacles in

implementing the conventions and are likely to have more reservations to the CEDAW (Neumayer, 2005).

Qatar signed the CEDAW convention on April 29, 2009 with reservations. Some of the controversy around the convention is generally reflected in its interpretation that enforces and maintains men's superiority to women measured against Islamic Law (Islamic Sharia) and local laws and traditions (Hajjar, 2004). Some of these rights particular to Qatar include:

- Inheritance
- Citizen rights (a woman's right to pass her citizenship to her offspring)
- Women's rights to stand to testify and in the court of law
- Women's rights to move freely and live outside their family home and lastly
- Women's rights of passage and family relations

While these articles remain contested, it remains to be seen whether women have supported and advocated some of these universal rights, especially considering that few empirical studies have emerged to contest or support the CEDAW.

Women's equal footing to men has been hampered due to a number of barriers documented in the literature (Omair, 2008; Sikdar and Mitra, 2012; Romanowski and Al-Hassan, 2013). While women's productive role cannot be stressed, further women's childrearing nature has a direct impact on the family. It is general cultural knowledge that women's primary role is nurturing a family and raising children and thus, many employers may feel that it is within the cultural framework that in the MENA region employers may choose men over women (McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003). With obvious economic barriers, there are truncating educational, health and social barriers to women. Thus, having some knowledge of the attributions of these barriers is significant to understanding why women are restricted from playing a larger role in society compared with men.

Despite the onset of globalization in many places in the world and the number of initiatives to support women, the CEDAW initiative has been rarely studied, particularly in quantitative studies. Some qualitative studies (McPhedran and Erickson, 2000; Cho, 2010) have documented national cases where participation in the convention has led to progress in women's rights. It is significant that international consensus and advocacy revolves around the convention but there have been few studies that provide empirical data to policy makers about how women perceive those rights. Thus, this study investigates women's perceptions of their rights and what

barriers they face in achieving those rights. The context of this study is Qatar where much debate and progress has taken shape regarding women's role in society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research strategy in this study was quantitative. Researchers adapted the CEDAW conventions for an item questionnaire. The CEDAW convention was based on the elimination of distinction, exclusion or restriction of women's educational, economic, social, cultural, civil and fundamental freedoms on the basis of sex. In brief, the CEDAW includes the following aims: To modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that discriminate against women to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions effective protection of women against any act of discrimination, including political rights, education, employment, legal status, nationality, marriage, mortgages and other forms of credit, recreational, health and social services, trafficking and prostitution and special problems among women in rural areas. It also requires the principle of equality of men and women in their constitutions or appropriate legislations, participation in the formulation of government policy and in non-governmental organizations, the same opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants and the same opportunities for access to programs in continuing education, sports and physical education. These articles were turned into statements in which participants were asked to rate them on a 3 point scale: 3 = Agree, 2 = Neutral and 1 = Disagree. The CEDAW had 31 articles but not all of them were turned into items.

Researchers also developed a 21 item questionnaire that addressed the barriers faced in achieving educational, economic, social, cultural and political rights. The items were developed based on the review of literature found in Al Ghanim (2008, 2010), Al Kharouf and Weir (2008), Al Attiyah (2010) and Al Kubaisi (2010). Participants were also asked to rate these items on a 3 point scale: 3 = Agree, 2 = Neutral and 1 = Disagree.

Sample: A random sample was taken of 140 university students attending the only national public university in Qatar. These students were all females and came from the College of Arts and Sciences (n = 45) the College of Education (n = 33) the College of Law (n = 13) the College

of Engineering (n = 10) the College of Sharia and Islamic Studies (n = 10) and undecided (n = 33). The sample had 45 Qataris and 95 Arab students from different nationalities. The average age of the women in the sample was 20.63.

Instrument and analysis: The instrument was developed in Arabic and translated to English for presentation in this study. The women's rights instrument was divided into 4 main dimensions: Women's civic rights, women's wellbeing, discrimination and legal rights and women's education and economic rights. The questionnaire items were adapted from the 30 studies. For instance, the statement adoption by states parties of special measures including those measures contained in the present convention, aimed at protecting maternity shall not be considered discriminatory was transformed into the following questionnaire item: Women's right to maternity protection and provisions. The items in the articles were developed by the 2 researcher and then validated by 3 academics and Qatari nationals to see whether they are appropriate for the culture. The statements were provided to the three academics to review and determine whether they were appropriately situated in the Qatari culture. The reviewers went through the items and rated them as appropriate, slightly appropriate and inappropriate. In the case of disagreement, the judges were asked to confer to rewrite the items until there was agreement on the appropriateness of the items.

The final questionnaire had 31 questions including 8 on women's civic rights, 7 on women's wellbeing, 4 on discrimination and the legal rights of women and 14 on women's education and economic rights. Researchers ran a t-test between the mean on each questionnaire and the ideal mean of the middle point or neutral point. The 3 main dimensions were established to address barriers:

- Women's distress and lack of knowledge (7 items)
- Desire to preserve social status (7 items)
- The public and perceived social role of women (7 items)

The barriers items were developed based on the content analysis of literature in this area (Al Ghanim, 2008, 2010; Al Attiyah, 2010; Al Kubaisi, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women's civic rights: The mean of each item on both questionnaires was obtained by adding the rating on each item and dividing it by the number of ratings. Qatari women rated all the items on the civic rights dimension in the high agreement direction. The highest mean rating

on women's civic rights appeared on the item Qatar women have the right to vote in all elections and public referendums on equal footing with men, women also rated in high agreement the right to participate in non-governmental organizations and various associations in accordance with the law of the State of Qatar and women's right of freedom to express themselves. However, the lowest rating appeared for women's right to run for election to all publicly elected bodies. Perhaps, women felt that public office and political leadership was not a role that would confer equality with men. Women generally felt they would have the right to be able to choose political office to vote and to have an equal role in governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

Wellbeing: All women agreed they had a right to health care, social care, protection and all other services. The lowest ratings appeared for information counseling services in family planning. Perhaps within the context of Qatar and the Middle East, closely knit family structures value women in the guardianship of children while men have undeniable authority as the breadwinner and represent the family in public places. Women may believe they have equal rights and see the limitation of their

authority beyond the bounds of the family. Women may also believe that the organizational structure of society may be to their advantage in supporting and reinforcing their guardian authority and the wellbeing of their children and dependent family members. Women may feel that given their nurturing role, they are equally entitled to social, health, protection and family services.

Discrimination and legal rights of women: Women believed they needed to be protected against any exploitation and discriminative acts. The highest mean in the agree direction appeared for protection against discrimination of women in the workplace. The lowest mean rating appeared for social services for pregnant women. This low mean suggests that women in the Middle East and specifically in Qatar, enjoy a close-knit and in-group culture that replaces institutional support found in Western Nations. However, culture and identity draws individuals closer to the altruistic motivation for the family to seek a natural and existing fabric of support from the extended family. Additionally, one finds a universality in the altruistic motivation for the family care of elderly and young, specifically where society cherishes human closeness and interactions (Table 1).

Table 1: Perception of women on the 4 dimensions of civic rights, wellbeing, legal rights and economic and educational rights

Rights	Mean	SD	t-value
Women's civic rights			
In Qatar, women have the right to vote in all elections and public referendums on an equal footing with men	2.75	0.61	14.07*
In Qatar, women are eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies	2.57	0.64	10.42*
In Qatar, women have the right to participate in public affairs and to be nominated in all elections	2.68	0.66	12.05*
Women have the right to participate in non-governmental organizations and various associations in accordance with the law of the State of Qatar	2.72	0.55	15.18*
Women have the right to participate in the planning and implementation of national development plans	2.86	0.39	26.47*
Opportunities to represent the state in regional and global forums	2.64	0.64	11.57*
Equality with men before the law	2.68	0.60	13.19*
Freedom of expression	2.96	0.24	47.63*
Women's wellbeing			
Women's equal rights for social insurance	2.93	0.33	32.88
Women's rights for health insurance	2.94	0.30	36.76*
Granting protection and care of needy mothers and children	2.90	0.35	30.58*
Women's equal rights to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health	2.93	0.31	35.27*
Women's right to care for and protect their children	2.88	0.43	24.35*
Women's right to enjoy access to information, counseling and services in family planning	2.78	0.60	15.59*
Women's right to maternity protection and provisions	2.89	0.33	31.50
Women's right to health care services and family care	2.81	0.41	23.41*
Discrimination and legal rights of women			
Women's legal protection from discriminative acts	2.82	0.49	19.92*
Legal protection against trafficking and exploitation of women	2.85	0.45	22.29*
Legal protection and social services for pregnant women	2.75	0.53	16.77*
Elimination of discrimination in employment and the workplace	2.96	0.19	56.79*
Women's education and economic rights			
Women's right to a bank loan	2.97	0.17	64.25*
Women's right in choice of career and work	2.89	0.34	30.53*
Women's equal rights in career development and professional development activities	2.96	0.21	54.91
Women's right to equal pay with men and rights in the workplace	2.95	0.22	50.64*
Equal economic, social and cultural rights	2.98	0.15	75.63
Equal rights to pursue free education	2.96	0.20	55.31*
Equal rights in cultural life, scientific progress, freedom of scientific research and creative work	2.99	0.12	97.23*
Equal rights to available scholarships and study grants	2.99	0.12	95.81*
Equal rights to continuing life-long education	2.96	0.21	49.19*
Equal rights to participation in recreation and sports activities	2.98	0.13	84.50*

*Significant at 0.05 α -level

Table 2: Women's perception of barriers to their rights

Rights	Mean	SD	t-value
Women's distress and lack of knowledge			
Women's ignorance of their rights within society	2.57	0.72	9.27*
Ignorance of constitutional law and how to claim the rights guaranteed	2.68	0.51	15.52*
Women's notion of their own permissiveness	2.19	0.79	2.91*
Fear of criticism of women of claiming their rights	2.77	0.52	17.61*
Fear of claiming women's rights goes against customs and traditions	2.63	0.61	12.19*
Asking for one's right may lower one's self-esteem	2.64	0.61	12.30*
Women's fatalistic dispositions and lack of belief in change	2.29	0.69	5.07*
Public and family perceived social role of women			
Family's indirect denial of women's rights	2.45	0.68	7.70*
Male family members (e.g., father/brother/husband) denial of women's rights	2.47	0.72	7.71*
Women's capitulation and subservience to a male dominated society	2.51	0.68	8.79*
Women's rights seen from the viewpoint of males	2.36	0.67	6.33*
Unconnected participation between men and women	2.35	0.80	5.21*
The unbalanced role of females and males the subordination of women to males	2.49	0.72	8.06*
Societally defined and accepted female and male roles	2.44	0.67	7.70*
Desire to preserve social status			
The stereotypical image of the superiority of men	2.54	0.69	9.16*
Women's call for their rights and freedom of expression without respect to tradition and customs	2.19	0.83	2.66*
Women's rights are seen as rebellion against men	2.45	0.76	7.00*
Women's image in popular culture as being rebellious toward men	2.55	0.70	9.15*
Predominant public images of women	2.58	0.70	9.80*
A common understanding of rights being incompatible with Islamic law	2.27	0.80	3.90*
Women's image and roles in child rearing and family nurturing	2.47	0.70	8.05*

*Significant at 0.05 α -level

Women's barriers: The 3 main dimensions were established to address barriers:

- Women's distress and lack of knowledge
- The desire to preserve social status
- The public and perceived social role of women

Women rated all barrier items in the agreement direction. All item means were compared with the ideal mean and the findings suggested that women believed there were barriers that ran across the 3 dimensions. Women believed their social and perceived public image was a major barrier. The notion of women as rebellious toward customs, men and traditions when they ask for their rights was apparent. Some women even felt that men have denied these rights or that they were limited to their knowledge of those rights. In addition, women felt that there were some dispositions that women held that worked against their rights in terms of subservience and fatalism (Table 2).

CONCLUSION

Women within MENA are experiencing greater freedom than a decade ago with the highest gains reported in Gulf nations (Kelly and Breslin, 2010). However, women are still stifled and lack the rights men have regarding economic participation, educational attainment, health, wellbeing and political empowerment and women are still stifled from the full equality envisioned in the CEDAW.

Women rights have become legal and global issues, as highlighted in an international United Nations

convention. Some of the Gulf States have invoked tradition and cultural particularism to concede to women rights but also to place reservations on a number of articles. Some Middle Eastern governments have made deliberate attempts to stifle dissenting women's voices arguing for the changeless nature of Islam and other centralized and governmental interests. However within some of the CEDAW dissenting nations, there have been community debates with substantial steps taken to improve women's rights. Certainly, women in many parts of the Middle East are deprived of the right to vote they are barred from the legal profession, judiciary roles, testimony or even travel alone. It would be difficult to conceive such attempts as anything other than discrimination in light of the international norms. The CEDAW requires that all states pursue appropriate methods to eliminate all discrimination against women. Recent community struggle and individual and dissenting voices within the Middle East have brought substantive changes to the life of women. Few studies have addressed what women perceive in terms of their rights that could lead to empirical and hard evidence for policy makers. It is also significant to understand the barriers women face in achieving those rights.

One of the conclusive results of this study is that a large majority of women in Qatar attending the national universities believe they have civic, economic, educational and health rights equal to those of men. Women feel there were barriers to fulfilling their rights. One of the highest rated barriers was fear of criticism by others regarding their rights. It was also apparent that

women believed that struggling for those rights would subject them to the stereotypes of being unorthodox, rebellious and non-conforming which may be considered as an aberration in a collectivist, conservative and close-knit society. Qatari women also to some extent, internalize those barriers, saying they may have acted fatalistically and permissively when it came to seeking their own rights. Conclusively, women need to be assertive and develop a language and discourse of emancipation to obtain a better and fairer share of what they perceive is their equal rights with the other sex.

Future studies in this area should investigate the differences between men and women regarding women's rights and the barriers to these rights. Researchers should also expand the research to examine a cross-section of age groups to understand these perceptions within this Gulf nation.

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