

Understanding Cultural Constraints to Female Labor Force Participation: How Family Dynamics Influence Women’s Employment in Qatar and the Arab Gulf States

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Abstract

Under what conditions do cultural constraints limit women’s opportunities to participate in the labor force? A core challenge associated with understanding how culture impacts economic decision-making is that it is virtually impossible to separate the influence of cultural beliefs from the effects of economic conditions and institutions. We examine the cultural constraints to female labor force participation in Qatar, a conservative country where state revenue from natural resource rents means that virtually any citizen can secure a public sector job should they seek employment. We find that although Qataris are generally in support of female labor force participation — both in principle and for their own relatives — concerns remain about the impact of women working for marriage, family, and traditional Qatari values. Reservations are amplified when Qataris are prompted to consider mixed-gender work environments for female family members. Qualitative insights from focus groups of Qatari men and women suggest that within-family concerns may be more salient than apprehension about how the decision to work outside the home will be judged by others in society. We propose a new conceptual framework for reconciling recent advances in the literature on remedies for overcoming cultural constraints to female labor force participation in Arab Gulf societies.

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The convergence of male and female roles in social, political, and economic life around the world has been described as among the most important human advances of the last hundred years (Goldin 2014). The movement toward gender equality has been uneven, however, with some societies exhibiting a more rapid move toward egalitarian views than others (e.g., Inglehart and Norris 2003). No issue has been more central to the ideological struggle over gender equality than the question of female labor force participation (FLFP). Although regions around the world have seen significant advances in this area, there continue to be impediments to women in the workplace, particularly in Arab societies where women’s labor force participation is lower than other world regions. This project explores how Arab men and women develop their beliefs about female labor force participation in Qatar, a conservative Gulf Cooperation Council country that is presently undertaking a transformative process of fiscal and social reforms as part of a transition away from a hydrocarbon-based economy. Effecting greater female employment and employability is a key element of this diversification strategy.

The cross-national determinants of FLFP have been the focus of an influential literature in the social sciences. While Inglehart and Norris (2003) argue that Islamic traditions have suppressed female labor force participation in the Middle East, Ross (2008) suggests that oil — not Islam — has been responsible for low levels of women working in resource-rich countries around the world.¹ Yet relatively little scholarship has sought to explore the individual and family-level factors that are associated with support for women working outside of the home. This paper focuses on how family structure and personal attributes are associated with support for FLFP in Qatar. By doing so, we are able to sidestep some of the challenges associated with understanding variation observed at the cross-national level through an exploration of how cultural constraints influence individual-level thinking about this issue.

Despite government support for greater female employment in Qatar, only 37 percent of Qatari women are economically active compared to 67 percent of Qatari men (Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority 2020) — a trend that extends across societies of the Arabian Peninsula. This disparity is especially puzzling given the fact that women outnumber men two-to-one in Qatari universities. Qatar is a uniquely good location for examining the cultural constraints to female labor force participation since government revenue from natural gas means that virtually any citizen can secure state employment should they desire it. In addition, a generous welfare state and a large foreign labor force of domestic workers means that there exists an infrastructure to provide working women with childcare and housework support. As a result, studying these issues in Qatar allows us to isolate the cultural and social impediments to women’s labor force participation from the myriad of economic factors that may stymie women from working in other contexts.

In addition, recent advances in the scholarship on attitudes toward female labor force participation suggest new directions for understanding why patriarchal social norms persist in conservative societies, even as individual attitudes liberalize. Bursztyn et al. (2020) find that in Saudi Arabia, 87 percent of young, married Saudi men support women working outside of the home and a straightforward informational treatment about these high levels of support for FLFP more than doubles the number of men willing to enroll their wives in a job matching service. These results provide tremendous reason for op-

¹Subsequent scholarly work has sought to adjudicate between religion and culture versus political economy factors as the core explanation for low levels of female employment in the Middle East (e.g., Charrad 2009; Spierings et al. 2009; Alexander and Welzel 2011; Groh and Rothschild 2012; Bayanpourtehrani and Sylwester 2013; Solati 2017; Simmons 2019).

timism; if only erroneous beliefs about social norms could be corrected, might we observe high levels of female employment in conservative societies like Saudi Arabia? While informational treatments about societal support for female labor force participation may increase acceptance for women working, what happens when concern about second-order beliefs (i.e., beliefs about others’ beliefs) are not the major hindrance to female employment? Our findings suggest that conservative societies also struggle to offset family-level concerns related to women working. Indeed, our analyses suggest that misperceived social norms may play a small role in the considerations of Qataris regarding support for FLFP relative to worries about how to manage burdens and expectations within households.

To demonstrate this we use an original survey and embedded survey experiments to consider the constellation of cultural constraints to FLFP in Qatar. Although Qataris on the whole support female labor force participation, at least in principle, they remain concerned about the impact of women working for marriage, family, and traditional values. When asked to consider real-world employment circumstances for one’s female family members, levels of support decline considerably, and especially so for employment in a mixed-gender workplace. When Qataris are asked whether they fear others will view a working woman or her family negatively as a result of her employment, the vast majority of Qataris indicate that this is not an issue that concerns them. Furthermore, Qataris overwhelmingly believe that their friends and fellow citizens share their views related to women working, reducing the prospect that misperceived social norms play a large role in their decisionmaking on this issue.

We propose a new conceptual framework for reconciling recent advances in the literature on remedies for overcoming cultural constraints to FLFP in Arab Gulf societies, with applicability to social change in conservative societies more generally. We argue that conservative societies move through successive opening of domains for women — including educational, single-sex employment spaces, and mixed-gender employment spaces — as well as a progression of stages of acceptance within each domain. Early moves into each new public domain trigger concern about *levels of societal acceptance*. But as common knowledge develops about the generalized acceptability of female participation in that public sphere increases, objections to women’s participation turn to more *practical concerns within households*. This pattern is repeated as women gain access to a greater number of public spaces. Our two stages — social norm convergence and household-level implementation — speak to core concerns in conservative societies. Conservative societies strongly value moral conformity, a fact that stresses the importance of conventions and the respectability of social practice. In addition, conservative societies rest strongly on the sanctity of family structures and roles, suggesting ways that economic activity can lead to household conflict. By being attentive to these two factors, our framework more fully accounts for cultural constraints to female participation in the economy of conservative societies than studies focused on social norms alone.

The sections to follow establish key context for the case of Qatar; report results from our original survey of Qatari nationals; provide qualitative evidence from focus groups of Qatari men and women; and introduce a new conceptual model of social change in conservative societies, with application to the Arab Gulf states.

1 Modernizing Rentier Economies

With the prospect of declining demand for oil and a need to diversify domestic economies, states of the Arab Gulf have introduced “national vision” plans that seek to provide a strategic framework for

economic development over the coming decades. Advancing female labor force participation has been identified as a core national priority as part of these programs.² For example, Qatar’s National Vision 2030 seeks to increase the number of Qatari women who work, in part because doing so allows Qatar to decrease reliance on foreign workers who currently occupy a large number of white-collar positions in the country. This section reviews some of the major themes related to gender and development in the Arab Gulf states and provides contextual details regarding the Qatari case.

1.1 Gender, Family, and Development in the Arab Gulf States

The rapid drive to modernity has impacted social structures of Arab Gulf societies, especially as related to family life (Sabra 2018).³ Scholars have argued that in many Muslim societies, “the family has become the ground on which ideological battles are waged” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 88), with particular contestation about the role of women. In Gulf societies, most citizens continue to see motherhood as a woman’s most important role and the core component of her identity (Mohammed 2016, 75). This observation also applies to the Qatari case where family enjoys a central place in public debate regarding the externalities associated with modernization of the economy (Caeiro 2018).⁴

Some of the most influential scholarly work on this subject has focused on the case of Saudi Arabia, a country that is undertaking a similar set of reforms with the goal of diversifying the national economy; increasing the number of nationals in the workforce relative to foreign laborers; and preparing its workforce for participation in a knowledge-based economy. The persistence of female exclusion from public life — particularly as related to employment — is a hotly debated issues in Saudi society (Hamdan 2005). Elamin and Omair (2010) have argued that Saudi males report traditional attitudes towards working females and those attitudes are most pronounced among married, older, and less educated men.

An important recent study on the subject of female labor force participation in the Gulf considers how informational treatments impact attitudes and behaviors in Saudi Arabia. Bursztyn et al. (2020) found that in a sample of 500 Saudi men aged 18 to 35, most substantially underestimated support for women working outside of the home by other men with their demographic profile. The authors show that when these views are randomly corrected (to show the full level of support for women working), men are more willing to help their wives search for a job. Bursztyn et al. (2020) validate their lab-in-the-field experimental findings with data from an online survey of 1,500 young, married Saudi men and find that 92 percent of respondents underestimated the true share of their neighbors who supported women working outside of the home.

The results presented by Bursztyn et al. (2020) suggest the possibility for a magic bullet in the campaign to reduce barriers to FLFP in conservative societies, like Saudi Arabia or Qatar. A core implication is that if Saudi Arabia undertook a widespread public service campaign, the kingdom would be able to reduce and maybe even eliminate stigma felt by husbands of working wives. But do second-order beliefs constitute the most important barrier to FLFP in Saudi Arabia? And can increasing support for FLFP be so easily and inexpensively achieved? Although there is no perceived

²Scholars have suggested that cultural restrictions on women’s labor endanger Gulf economies particularly since women have been recipients of high levels of state educational investment (Hamdan 2005).

³In response to social concerns, national governments have founded research organizations focused on family issues, such as the UAE’s Family Development Foundation and Qatar’s Doha International Family Institute (Sabra 2018).

⁴Similarly, Wang and Kassam (2016) describe motherhood as a “fault line” when it comes to attitudes toward women’s workforce participation among Emiratis.

contradiction between being a mother and a working professional in Saudi society (Hamdan 2005, 58), this does not eliminate the relevant household-level trade-offs, even in a setting where those trade-offs are minimized to the greatest extent possible.

In this paper, we explore the importance of second-order beliefs while also considering a broader set of factors that impact decisions related to FLFP. We argue that to understand hesitations surrounding women working, we need to consider the opinions of women (as well as their male relatives) who are solving an optimization problem under a wide set of constraints, including those related to the social setting, family pressures, and disruptions to marital life.

1.2 The Case of Qatar

A main challenge with understanding culture as an explanatory variable for economic outcomes is that it is virtually impossible to separate the effects of culture from those of institutions and traditional economic variables (Fernandez 2008). Qatar provides an ideal setting for investigating cultural constraints on female employment, in part because government-sponsored incentive programs have drastically lowered the economic costs of bringing women into the workforce. Public sector jobs are widely available and highly desirable for Qatari nationals as they provide job security, generous benefits, favorable working hours, and good salaries (Golkowska 2014). One empirical fact consistent with this perspective is that the unemployment rate for Qatari women was only 0.9 percent at the start of 2020, with a mere 372 individuals seeking work (Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority 2020, 13).

Two factors facilitate the ability of Qatari women to receive the forms of domestic support needed to encourage work outside of the home. First, Qatar has among the highest per capita income in the world, suggesting levels of wealth that would allow families to afford childcare and household help. Second, conditions in Qatar have also reduced the costs of domestic labor, in particular expenses associated with housekeepers and nannies from less developed countries.⁵ Housekeepers are relatively inexpensive for Qatari households, and the Qatar Nanny Training Academy — part of the state-affiliated Qatar Foundation — provides comprehensive training for nannies on issues related to child development and Islamic religious values.

Other local conditions also support the incorporation of Qatari women into the labor force. In recent decades, Qatar has made intensive investments in human capital development as part of a state effort to offer a high standard of living for its citizen population. A full 99 percent of Qatari women are literate, and women attend university at very high rates.⁶ Indeed, women make up almost more than two-thirds of university students.⁷

The economic participation rate for Qatari women has remained fairly stable in recent years and generally exceeds that of neighboring states.⁸ What types of employment are common for Qatari women?

⁵See Golkowska (2014) for more on the widespread availability of childcare and domestic help in Qatar.

⁶While government schools and Qatar University remain gender segregated, Qatar Foundation’s Education City hosts several US branch campuses that offer co-educational teaching in the Western style (Golkowska 2014).

⁷Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority, “Woman and Man — A Statistical Portrait, 2018” (Doha, Qatar). Why are there disparities in university enrollment, both in Qatar and across the Arab Gulf states? Bahry and Marr (2005) provide some explanations, including the fact that high performing male students often study abroad; that male Qatari nationals often go into the military or the security apparatus; and that young men often go directly into the labor force, including as part of family businesses.

⁸Qatar performs relatively well compared to other Arab Gulf countries like Bahrain (30 percent), UAE (28 percent), Oman (25 percent), and Saudi Arabia (17 percent) that also struggle with this issue (Golkowska 2014). When Qataris

The vast majority of Qataris, both male and female, work in the public sector where salary increases and promotions are virtually guaranteed and maternity leave benefits are generous (Mohammed 2016, 81). Many Qatari women are K-12 teachers, while others are government clerks, doctors and nurses, university professors, and technicians; about 6 percent of Qatari women are senior officials or managers.⁹ Women’s choice of work sector reflects social and cultural limitations on the fields of work they can enter as some jobs are not considered socially acceptable.

2 Theoretical Considerations

Some of the most influential comparative work focused on FLFP has sought to explain variation at the country level, with a particular emphasis on the Middle East. Ross (2008) points to oil wealth — not Islam — as impeding progress towards gender equality in the Middle East. The Arab Gulf monarchies are especially impacted by these processes, as oil rents affect the number of women in the nonagricultural labor force. Yet Ross’s core findings have been the subject of considerable scholarly debate, with a number of critics pointing to confounding cultural factors that have the potential to undermine his key conclusions. Some scholars have found that the empirical evidence is more consistent with the idea that Islam is the most important explanatory variable for variation in FLFP (e.g., Alexander and Welzel 2011; Groh and Rothschild 2012).¹⁰ Charrad (2009) argues that kin-based solidarities focused on male relationships predominate in Middle Eastern countries, damaging the influence of women; Solati (2017) provides empirical evidence for this claim.¹¹ Simmons (2019) seeks to reconcile Ross’s argument with some of these differing perspectives by contending that while oil wealth reduces demand for female labor, cultural factors impact the female labor supply; taken together, these two sets of factors influence levels of FLFP.

One challenge with assessing the theoretical validity of these different arguments relates to the focus on countries as the unit of analysis. In this paper, we also address the cultural determinants of FLFP, but not in terms of the cross-national variation that has been the main focus of the literature. Rather, we seek to understand more about support for FLFP at the individual level.¹² As a result, our work builds on recent studies that have drawn new emphasis to questions about how patriarchal social norms influence attitudes toward women’s labor force participation at the individual level, including in Arab societies (Barnett et al. 2020; Bursztyn et al. 2020).

In this paper, we focus on cultural factors within two overarching domains. The first is related to societal expectations, including misperceived social norms. The second is related to within-family

do not work, what reasons do they give? Qatari men who are outside of the workforce are retired (34 percent), disabled (3.5 percent), or students (60 percent). For women, some are retired (10 percent), disabled (3.2 percent), students (39 percent), and housewives (45 percent). See Planning and Statistics Authority, “Woman and Man — A Statistical Portrait, 2018” (Doha, Qatar) for more details.

⁹Planning and Statistics Authority, “Woman and Man — A Statistical Portrait, 2018” (Doha, Qatar).

¹⁰Bayanpourtehrani and Sylwester (2013), on the other hand, find that the statistical association between Islam and FLFP is diminished with the inclusion of control variables.

¹¹Spierings et al. (2009) observe that absolute FLFP is higher in Muslim countries with higher levels of economic development and in oil-exporting countries, further complicating the empirical picture.

¹²By focusing on individual-level determinants of support for FLFP within a single context, we are able to build on Simmons (2019) by holding demand for female labor constant. This approach is also consistent with the logic laid out in Buttorff et al. (2018), who argue that GCC states observe relatively strong demand for female employment (relative to other Middle Eastern countries) as a result of labor nationalization policies.

dynamics, including how husbands and sons may influence attitudes toward women working outside of the home.

2.1 Matching Social Norms and Expectations

The conventional explanation for why women enter the labor force tends to focus on economic factors, particularly as related to the value of wages; the probability of finding an appropriate and acceptable job; and household income. Women in Qatar provide a wide set of motivations for their interest in labor force participation, including a desire for extra income; an interest in making use of their knowledge and training; an ambition to “prove oneself” and gain self-respect; and as a strategy for avoiding boredom (Bahry and Marr 2005).

In Qatar, and elsewhere in the Middle East, cultural determinants related to treatment by friends and the broader society impact a woman’s own beliefs as well as her FLFP status. While some individuals reference Islamic law as forbidding women from working with men, others believe that a woman’s place is in the home, caring for children and family. Social expectations are also closely tied to how women are perceived on the marriage market. Blaydes and Linzer (2008) argue that Muslim women often face a double-bind when it comes to the perpetuation of patriarchal social norms. By signaling piety through behavior and attitudes, women enjoy better outcomes on the marriage market but demonstrations of more secular beliefs advantage them in the market for high-paying employment. Karshenas et al. (2016) argue that under these types of circumstances, women come to internalize gender roles in traditionally patriarchal societies.

Women may also be concerned about societal expectations placing them in a difficult situation. Beyond the Bursztyn et al. (2020) findings that we have discussed, Rutledge et al. (2014) find that young Emirati women consider an occupation’s ‘appropriateness’ in decision making alongside parental support for her workforce participation. Mitchell et al. (2015) argue that Qatari women make complex personal and professional decisions while trying to manage conflicting pressures associated with workforce participation and traditional social norms. Finally, for some Qatari women, social pressures may also be influencing them to seek out employment. Existing survey-based research demonstrates that Qatari households are concerned about relative rather than absolute levels of wealth (Mitchell and Gengler 2019). This means that oil rents may actually have a positive impact on FLFP by encouraging rent-seeking through female employment, in order to increase the family’s relative social position and bankroll extravagant lifestyles that have come to be expected of Gulf nationals. There is a strong desire in Qatar to maintain one’s place in the social hierarchy, and much of this is economically driven.

2.2 Within Family Dynamics — Managing Husbands and Sons

There exists strong evidence to support the idea that concern about societal judgement impacts belief development in conservative societies. Yet cultural constraints to women’s decisionmaking also exist *within* rather than external to households. Families are locations of “sacred significance” around the world and particularly in Muslim societies (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 83). At the same time, rapid social change in Gulf societies has led some to be concerned about the future of “family values.” Wanucha (2018) writes that processes of modernization in Gulf societies have impacted the functions, roles, and structure of households, in some cases giving rise to insecurities about the integrity of the

family unit itself.¹³

Female workplace participation has the potential to impact dynamics within marriages, including as related to the household division of labor. For employed women, maids and nannies are relatively inexpensive and extended family can often provide free childcare, minimizing the costs associated with working (Mohammed 2016, 81). At the same time, however, some husbands complain of wives who spend too many hours working (Bahry and Marr 2005), and both Qatari men and women commonly express worry about the effects of non-Arab (and often non-Muslim) domestic workers on children’s cultural and religious values, including their Arabic language development. In this context, concerns about whether a working wife and mother spends sufficient time with her husband and children fuel within-family tension (Mitchell et al. 2015).

Working women in Qatar are acutely aware of the challenges associated with balancing domestic responsibilities with career opportunities (Liloia 2019). James-Hawkins et al. (2017, 156) argue that this leaves women in a bind as they have aspirations for future workforce participation “but also are expected to maintain customary feminine roles within the home, including primary responsibility for childbearing and childrearing.” Lari (2019) argues that this double burden is often overwhelming, contributing to conflict within families due to high levels of personal pressure. While divorce in Qatar has historically been rare, rates have risen in recent years with the emergence of increasingly complex family and life arrangements (Al-Ghanim 2009).¹⁴ Rising divorce rates have been linked to women’s workplace participation in some cases (Bahry and Marr 2005).¹⁵ Anser (2014) suggests women’s educational achievement and employment are associated with increasing consciousness of rights, potentially leading to within-family conflict.¹⁶ Lari (2019) finds that female employment is also linked to marital instability for Qatari couples, especially as related to the pressure of busy schedules.¹⁷

Beyond the husband and wife dynamic, how might preferences over FLFP be influenced by other attributes of the family? Attitudes may be conditioned on the gender of the children within a family — a variable that is largely exogenous given social prohibitions against sex-selective abortions. There is a growing literature on the effect of child gender on attitudes toward women as a strategy for causal inference. Samples of US and North American populations have been shown to be influenced by child gender (Warner 1991; Downey et al. 1994; Warner and Steel 1999; Shafer and Malhotra 2011). For example, Shafer and Malhotra (2011) find that having a daughter versus a son leads men to reduce support for traditional gender roles.¹⁸

While most studies of child gender have focused on North American respondents, how might these

¹³For example, a study of mothers and their daughters in the UAE suggests that mothers have grown increasingly concerned about the decline of the family (Schvaneveldt 2005).

¹⁴Qatar has seen up to 40 percent of marriages end in divorce (Golkowska 2014). This trend is similar to that which has been observed in the GCC more generally (Anser 2014).

¹⁵To avoid later disagreement, there is often an explicit agreement in marriage contracts among Qatari couples regarding the issue of women working outside of the home (Rajakumar and Kane 2016).

¹⁶Al-Nasr (2011) has suggested that while both men and women accept predominantly paternal values, improvements in women’s education and social status has come into conflict with some aspects of tradition and social expectation, leading to high divorce rates. In Kuwait, women have been attacked for abandoning their household responsibilities after taking paid employment (Willoughby 2008).

¹⁷Relatedly, Mansour et al. (2020) observe that rapid economic development and social transformation in Oman has led to marital instability and that women’s employment is positively associated with divorce rates.

¹⁸See Washington (2008) and Glynn and Sen (2015) for application of this inference strategy to US elites.

mechanisms relate to the context of the Middle East?¹⁹ In traditional societies, sons are often presumed to have greater economic utility than daughters since sons might provide financial support to their parents in old age. Blaydes and Platas (2020) extend this approach to the Middle East and show that first-child gender impacts attitudes toward female genital cutting in Egypt. Further, Spierings (2014) finds that there exist different perceptions regarding the care needs of boys versus girls in an analysis of households in 28 Muslim-majority countries; this is associated with a statistically significant effect of women’s participation in non-agricultural labor as a function of the male to female ratio of children in a family.²⁰

A number of studies also point to the ways male children influence within-family dynamics.²¹ In a study of familial relationships in Lebanon, Joseph (1993) finds that older sons take charge of decisions related to their female relatives. Majbouri (2020) argues that the main barrier to FLFP in the Middle East relates to the fact that women need to receive permission from their male guardians in order to work outside the home.²² Carlisle (2007) points to the way adult brothers bring pressure to bear on their female family members in the context of marital disputes. In some cases, male relatives can raise objections to the circumstances under which women work, not just the decision to seek paid employment outside of the home (Willoughby 2008). Even Qatari women who consider themselves to be highly autonomous in their decisionmaking were significantly influenced by family members when making important life decisions (Quettina et al. 2019).

3 Empirical Analysis

This section describes the results of an original survey and embedded conjoint survey experiment that aim to increase our understanding of the cultural constraints to FLFP in Qatar. The data for this telephone survey was collected by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University starting in December 2019. A total of 847 Qatari citizen respondents participated in the survey. Respondents were recruited through list-assisted random-digit dialing, using a cellular frame originating from the largest telecommunications provider in Qatar with approximately 95 percent coverage of adult citizens. The sample is made up of 52 percent women and 48 percent men. The average age is 35 for both men and women, with good balance by gender across age groups. The median respondent has a high school degree; 38 percent of respondents hold a university degree or higher.

¹⁹A variety of theoretical mechanisms have been proposed to explain the relationship between child gender and parental attitudes and behavior. These include greater exposure to issues regarding gender equality when having a daughter (Warner and Steele 1999); children’s engagement in non-gender-conforming tasks (Brody and Steeleman 1985); a preference that mothers of boys stay home rather than outsource child care (Downey et al. 1994); and greater paternal investment in children when there is at least one male child (Harris and Morgan 1991).

²⁰Another thread in the scholarly literature has drawn attention to the strength of the mother-son relationship in Middle Eastern societies. Cohen-Mor (2013) argues that a mother’s primary attachment within the Middle Eastern family is to her son, rather than other family members.

²¹One point of evidence regarding the relative value given to sons over daughters in Gulf households is discussed by Crabtree (2007). Although a higher valuing of sons contradicts Islamic values and is a sensitive issue to discuss, celebrations associated with the birth of sons in the UAE involve the killing of two goats instead of one for daughters and that the birth of a son brings high status to women (Crabtree 2007).

²²Majbouri (2020) further contends that in this context having a child is a minor issue comparatively, and will not stop a woman from working.

3.1 Attitudes toward FLFP in General and in the Family

In order to understand more about variation in attitudes toward FLFP, our survey includes a number of questions to address different aspects of the issue. Respondents are asked if they strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements:

- “Qatari women should be allowed to work outside the home if they wish.”
- “I would support my own [daughter/wife] working outside the home.”

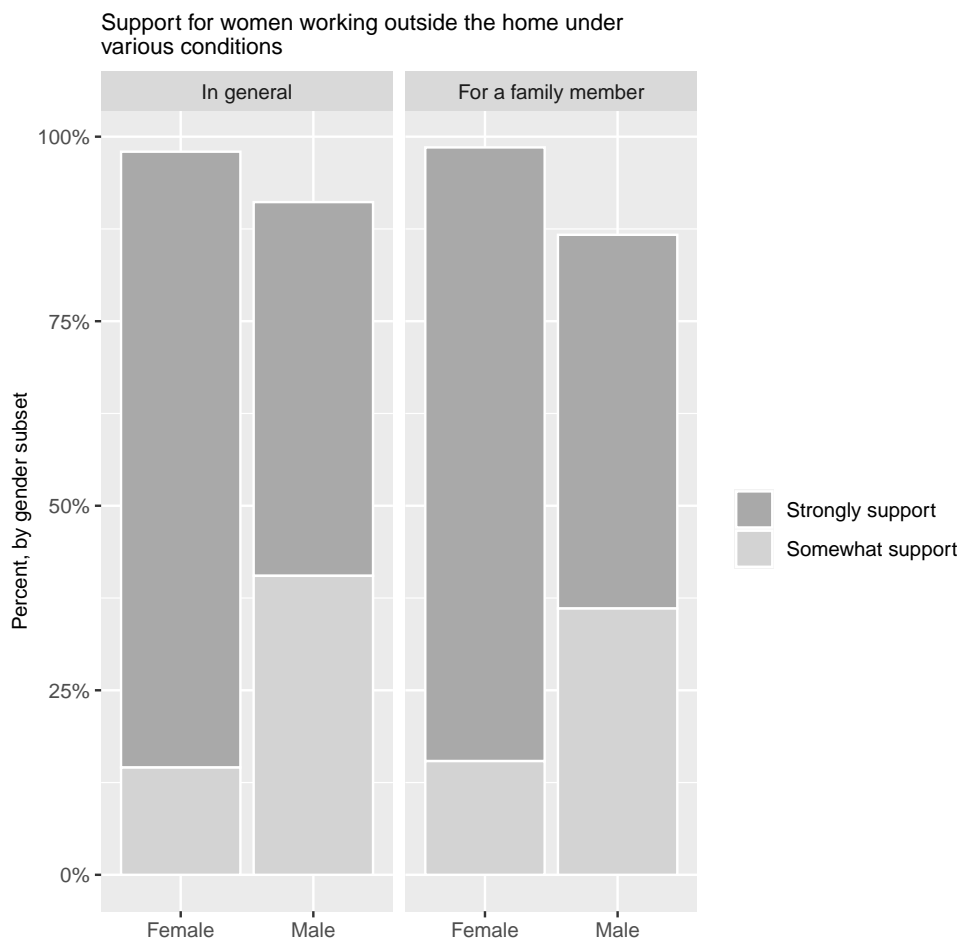


Figure 1: *Support for FLFP in general and for one’s own family members, by gender and intensity of support*

This design allows us to consider support for FLFP in the abstract and as applied to one’s family member, albeit without detailed information about the type of employment or the compensation. The

majority of Qataris support FLFP — both in the abstract and for one’s own daughter or wife — though the degree varies across demographic and social groups as well as in the extent to which that support is strongly felt or not. For example, while 82 percent of Qatari women “strongly agree” with the statement that Qatari women should be allowed to work outside of the home if they wish, this value is only 54 percent for Qatari men, who are more ambivalent (see Figure 1).²³

We also seek to assess the demographic and other factors that predict support for these two forms of support for FLFP. As reported in Table 1, we find that older Qataris and Qatari women are more likely to support FLFP in general (Column 1) but that the interaction between age and female gender dampens that support. Figure 2 conveys this statistical pattern, suggesting that younger women have the highest levels of support for FLFP followed by older women and older men. Younger men have the lowest levels of support for FLFP participation in the abstract. If we think that younger men may be most negatively impacted by within-household trade-offs associated with FLFP, this pattern is consistent with such concerns.

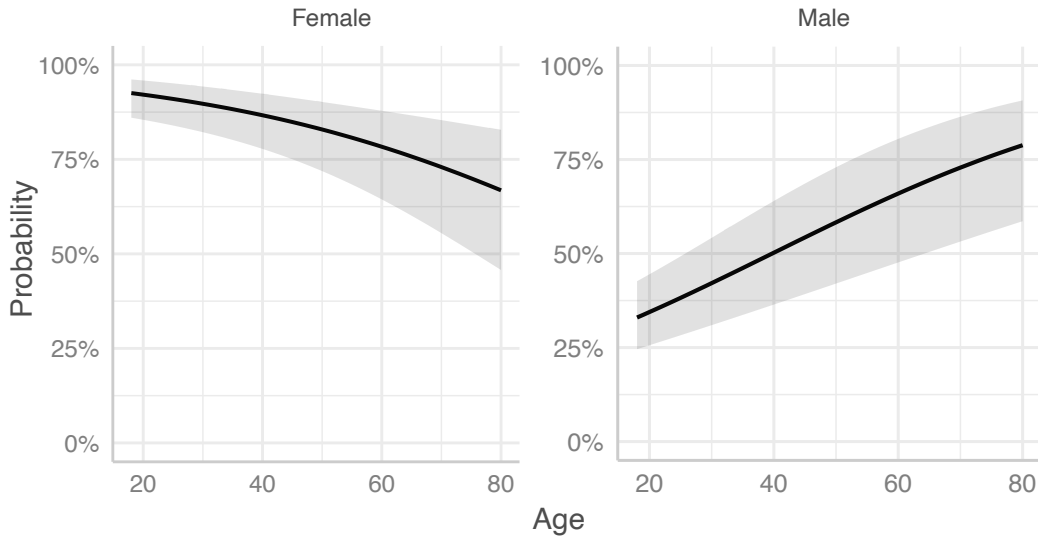


Figure 2: *Strong support for FLFP in general, by age and gender*

Column 2 reports the results of our analysis when we ask respondents to think about their support for FLFP for their own wife or daughter. While women are more likely to support FLFP for one’s

²³The importance of within-family dynamics is demonstrated when acceptance of FLFP is analyzed according to the female family member in question. As noted, the identity of the relative was randomly assigned for married Qatari male respondents, so that half the subsample was asked about support for their wife working outside the home and the other half was asked about support for a (real or hypothetical) daughter. Notably, Qatari men with any female children do not report differential levels of support for the two family members, but men who lack daughters are less supportive of their wives overall – with a combined 12 percent opposed or strongly opposed to them working outside the home, compared to less than 2 percent opposition for daughters. Moreover, only among men with no daughters does having a male child dampen support for labor participation by (hypothetical) daughters ($b = -0.26$, $p = 0.197$) and especially wives ($b = -0.41$, $p = 0.042$). Thus, Qatari mothers in particular face strong expectations from husbands to remain at home to raise sons in the absence of daughters; but this pressure is tempered when a family includes any female children.

Table 1: *Predictors of support for FLFP among married Qataris*

	(1) In General	(2) Own Family
Age	0.0371* (0.023)	0.0137 (0.377)
Female	4.302*** (0.000)	1.850 ⁺ (0.065)
Age \times Female	-0.0658** (0.009)	-0.0212 (0.387)
Education	0.0239 (0.726)	0.142* (0.046)
# Children	-0.110 ⁺ (0.073)	-0.0858 (0.137)
# Children \times Female	0.0967 (0.342)	0.105 (0.278)
% Male Children	-0.325 (0.461)	-0.903* (0.042)
% Male Children \times Female	-0.458 (0.570)	0.379 (0.628)
Cut 1	-1.724* (0.024)	-2.047** (0.008)
Cut 2	-1.108 (0.137)	-1.495 ⁺ (0.059)
Cut 3	0.995 (0.181)	0.517 (0.507)
N	418	419
Pseudo R^2	0.105	0.090

Notes: ⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$;
 p -values in parentheses; sampling weights utilized

own family members compared to men, other factors emerge as better predictors than age and gender. For example, one's level of education is a statistically significant predictor of support for FLFP in this circumstance. In addition, the percent of male children in the family reduces support for FLFP. This variable is also negatively linked to acceptance of FLFP in general (Column 1), but it is not statistically significant in that specification.

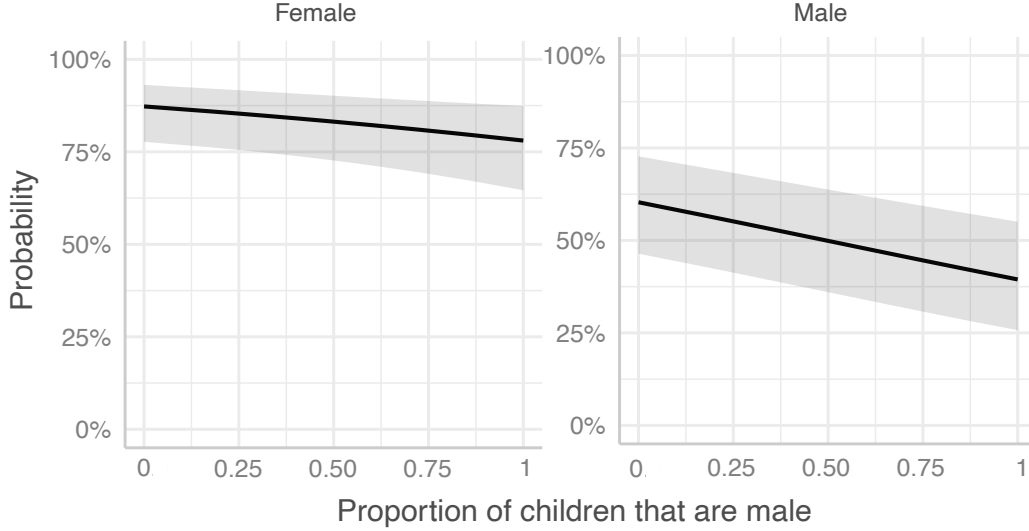


Figure 3: *Strong support for FLFP for one's female family members, by percent male children and gender*

That the proportion of male children is a robust predictor of FLFP only when the question applies to one's own relatives suggests that the factors shaping support for women working in Qatar depend on the specificity of the question. For both males and females, generalized attitudes are most strongly influenced by age, with males becoming significantly more accepting with age and, to a lesser extent, females becoming less accepting. This result suggests generational differences in the acceptability in principle of women working outside the home that may be, at least in part, related to practical concerns about the household distribution of labor. When the matter turns to one's own family, however, Qatari orientations toward FLFP become increasingly dependent upon gender dynamics within the family itself.

3.2 Support for FLFP under Specific Employment Circumstances

Support for female labor force participation in general terms provides us with important information, but it is nonetheless difficult to know exactly what people have in mind when answering survey questions about this topic. In order to understand more about the particular factors driving views of FLFP, respondents were also asked in an experimental task to consider a hypothetical job that either their sister or daughter might take. After being informed about the sector, salary, and whether the job took place in a mixed-gender or female-only office environment, the respondent was asked if they would

definitely support, possibly support, possibly not support, or definitely not support the female relative taking the described job.²⁴

Findings from the conjoint experiment provide evidence for the view that Qatari ideas about FLFP depend critically on particularized family and job conditions. The experiment shows that married Qataris are less permissive of their daughters working outside the home as compared to female siblings; that they are less accepting of jobs in sectors other than education, the traditional domain of women; and that financial incentive in the form of a higher salary only marginally boosts the likelihood of consenting to a female family member taking a job.

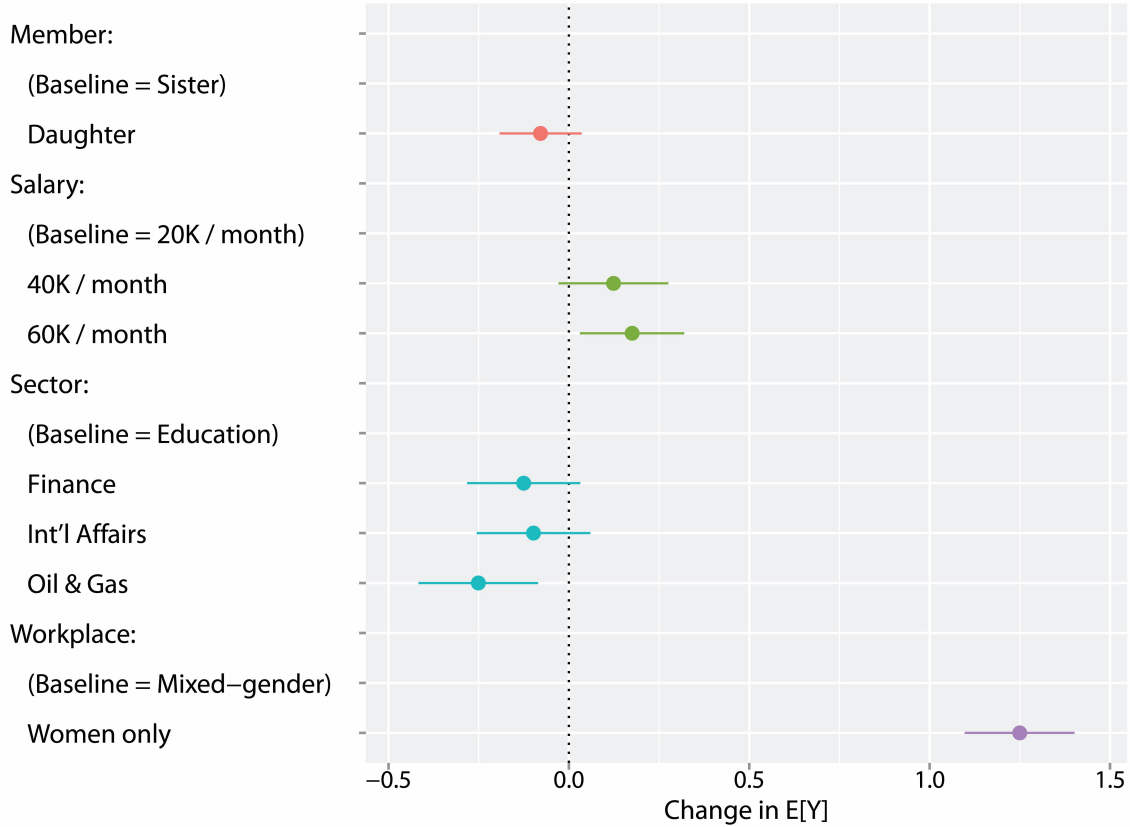


Figure 4: *Determinants of support for female family employment, conjoint analysis*

²⁴The precise question read as follows: “Now I am going to describe a hypothetical job that a woman might take. Please tell me to what extent you would support or not support her taking this job if the woman were a member of your family. Imagine that the job is a position in the [educational/financial/international relations/oil and gas] sector, in an office that is [mixed-gender/only women]. It is a full-time position, and the salary would be [20,000/40,000/60,000 QAR per month]. To what extent would you support your [sister/daughter] applying for this job?”

By far the most influential factor determining support for FLFP is the gender-mixed versus female-only character of the workplace. As depicted in Figure 4, a women-only environment increases acceptance by a factor of three, from a predicted 24 percent to 72 percent.²⁵ Thus the likelihood of supporting a female family member may approach zero or be nearly guaranteed, depending on the particulars of the position. Indeed, when combined in a basket of ‘undesirable’ job characteristics — a daughter working in a mixed-gender environment, in the oil and gas sector, with the lowest monthly salary — the likelihood of support for FLFP dips to a mere 15 percent.²⁶ This result is consistent with patterns reported by Barnett et al. (2020) who use a conjoint survey experiment with hypothetical job opportunities to assess how the prospect of higher incomes and working alongside men affect women’s job preferences. Barnett et al. (2020) find that although higher wages make jobs more desirable, mixed-sex work spaces are a strong deterrent to female employment.

Given the decisive impact of office gender environment on Qatari orientations toward FLFP, we next probe the determinants of support for employment in the hypothetical job, conditional on workplace gender. Table 2 reports the results of ordered logistic regressions, showing how estimates change when other experimental treatments are included (Models 2 and 4) versus models that include only our explanatory variables. Multiple findings are notable. First, age, gender, and their interaction strongly impact support for mixed-gender jobs, with younger males being highly unlikely to be supportive but support increasing dramatically with age to equal or exceed even that among women. The impact of having a higher proportion of male children also depends on gender and work environment: for jobs in mixed environments, more male children strongly dampens support among male Qataris ($b = -0.20$, $p = 0.002$), and the marginal effect is also negative albeit not statistically significant among females ($b = -0.10$, $p = 0.198$). But for positions in women-only workplaces, a higher proportion of male children is associated with reduced support for FLFP among *female* Qataris ($b = -0.22$, $p = 0.012$) and has no effect among males.²⁷

Results also reveal differences in the effects of the other conjoint treatments across the two workplace types. Whereas no other workplace characteristic predicts support for FLFP at the 95 percent level when the job takes place in a mixed-gender environment, acceptance of female-only positions is affected both positively and negatively by other job attributes. Among female-only workplaces, positions in Qatar’s sizable oil and gas sector are strongly disfavored, while both the medium and high salary categories bolster acceptance of female relatives working. The first observations is consistent with research by Vora (2018, 99), who suggests that certain sectors of the economy are relatively inaccessible to women, including the petroleum industry in that it is difficult to ask a woman to go out into the oil or gas fields; to ask her to mix with the workers; or to stay over night in accommodations outside of the home. On the other hand, financial motivations can entice real-world support for FLFP but only

²⁵How can we compare levels of support for FLFP under the conjoint scenarios described here with more abstract attitudes toward FLFP discussed in the previous section? Average values for men and women in response to support for FLFP in the abstract are 3.4 and 3.8, respectively; for the question about support for FLFP with regard to a wife or daughter, the values are 3.3 and 3.8, respectively, for men and women. When examining results of the conjoint experiment, we can hold the effects of all treatments (i.e., salary, sector, sex-segregated status of the workplace) at their means and find that support for FLFP fall to 2.8 and 3.1 for men and women, respectively.

²⁶The gap in predicted support under ‘undesirable’ versus ‘desirable’ working conditions is qualitative even controlling for the effect of workplace gender, at a 33 percent likelihood compared to 60 percent, respectively.

²⁷If we look at fathers with only sons, they are less supportive of FLFP (mean = 2.3) than those with only daughters (mean = 2.8), although the subsample sizes are small.

Table 2: *Determinants of support for FLFP, by workplace conditions*

	Mixed-Gender		Female-Only	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Baseline	+ Treatments	Baseline	+ Treatments
Age	0.0843*** (0.000)	0.0846*** (0.000)	-0.0140 (0.355)	-0.0121 (0.421)
Female	3.963*** (0.000)	4.018*** (0.000)	0.200 (0.787)	0.455 (0.548)
Age \times Female	-0.0864*** (0.000)	-0.0863*** (0.000)	0.00411 (0.802)	-0.00176 (0.914)
Education	0.0837 (0.173)	0.0910 (0.144)	-0.0305 (0.584)	-0.0397 (0.498)
# Children	-0.0938* (0.045)	-0.0927* (0.049)	0.0908 ⁺ (0.070)	0.0743 (0.114)
% Male Children	-1.464** (0.005)	-1.444** (0.005)	-0.221 (0.622)	-0.201 (0.649)
% Male Children \times Female	1.016 (0.115)	0.932 (0.152)	-0.889 (0.164)	-0.912 (0.155)
Sector: Finance (<i>Base = Education</i>)		-0.323 (0.130)		-0.00435 (0.988)
Sector: Foreign Affairs		-0.0711 (0.751)		-0.378 (0.126)
Sector: Oil & Gas		-0.408 ⁺ (0.056)		-0.691** (0.009)
Salary: 40K / month (<i>Base = 20K / month</i>)		-0.00420 (0.984)		0.645** (0.004)
Salary: 60K / month		0.240 (0.213)		0.592** (0.007)
Relative: Daughter (<i>Base = Sister</i>)		-0.139 (0.346)		-0.261 (0.142)
Cut 1	3.223*** (0.000)	3.112*** (0.000)	-3.249*** (0.000)	-3.357*** (0.000)
Cut 2	3.536*** (0.000)	3.426*** (0.000)	-2.912*** (0.000)	-3.015*** (0.000)
Cut 3	4.662*** (0.000)	4.565*** (0.000)	-1.377 ⁺ (0.058)	-1.432 ⁺ (0.066)
<i>N</i>	633	633	627	627
Pseudo R^2	0.061	0.066	0.011	0.036

p-values in parentheses; errors clustered by respondent⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

in the absence of deal-breaking cultural barriers such as concerns about mixed-gender interaction.

Finally, it is instructive to consider differences in overall model fit (pseudo R^2) across workplace type and the inclusion versus exclusion of the remaining conjoint treatments. Specifically, models of support for mixed-gender jobs do not benefit from the inclusion of the experimental treatments (Models 1 and 2), implying that observed variation in support owes to latent individual-level propensity to accept a family member working in mixed-gender environments, rather than the characteristics of a given job. Conversely, in Models 3 and 4, including the experimental treatments more than triples the amount of variation in support explained. Acceptance of FLFP is thus significantly impacted by the particulars of a position — its salary and to a lesser extent, sector — so long as it operates in a female-only workplace. Such a conclusion points again to the limits of increasing within-family support for women working outside the home in jobs that actually exist in Qatar and other Gulf economies, short of altering ingrained social and cultural norms that preclude female employment under a large set of real-world conditions. The current Gulf modernization visions go beyond the basic requirement of FLFP to requiring it in exactly those sectors (e.g., private), industries (e.g., tourism and entertainment), and workplaces (e.g., mixed-gender) that pose special problems for societal acceptance and within-family dynamics.

3.3 Exploring Mechanisms

In order to better understand the mechanisms associated with our results, this section presents additional data collected as part of the survey that assists us in interpreting our core findings. Respondents were asked to identify the “biggest problem related to Qatari women working outside the home.” Figure 5 presents the summary responses. Qataris view the biggest problem related to women working is, by far, that employment causes family and marital problems. Concern about family and marital problems relate directly to issues raised in the qualitative literature regarding the ways that women working can strain relationships within the family (e.g., Lari 2019), and are discussed extensively in our focus group evidence. The second biggest problem identified by respondents is that FLFP undermines Qatari traditions, a concern which may be linked to beliefs about the sanctity of the family. A minority of respondents — about 14 percent — indicated that no problem exists.

Respondents were also asked, “In your opinion, to what extent does each of the following represent an obstacle to Qatari women working outside of the home?” Figure 6 reports the extent to which Qataris are worried about four different factors. We find that low wages relative to men (upper-left quadrant) are not a particularly large concern, although some people believe this to be an issue. On the other hand, inflexible working hours (upper-right quadrant) are considered to be a concern. When respondents are asked if they are concerned with opposition from within one’s family (lower-left quadrant) compared to whether the woman or family will be negatively viewed as a result of FLFP (lower-right quadrant), we see that Qataris are much more concerned about within-family dynamics compared to how the woman or family will be viewed by peers. The fact that the most important concerns regarding FLFP relate to work hours and within-family concerns, rather than compensation or societal judgment, suggest that the major obstacles to women working in Qatar relate to practical, everyday concerns within families.

Finally, we investigate the extent to which Qataris are worried that their opinions do not conform with the opinions of others — the factor emphasized by Burzstyn et al. (2020) in their study of Saudi Arabia. As indicated in Figure 6, Qataris are not particularly concerned about being negatively viewed

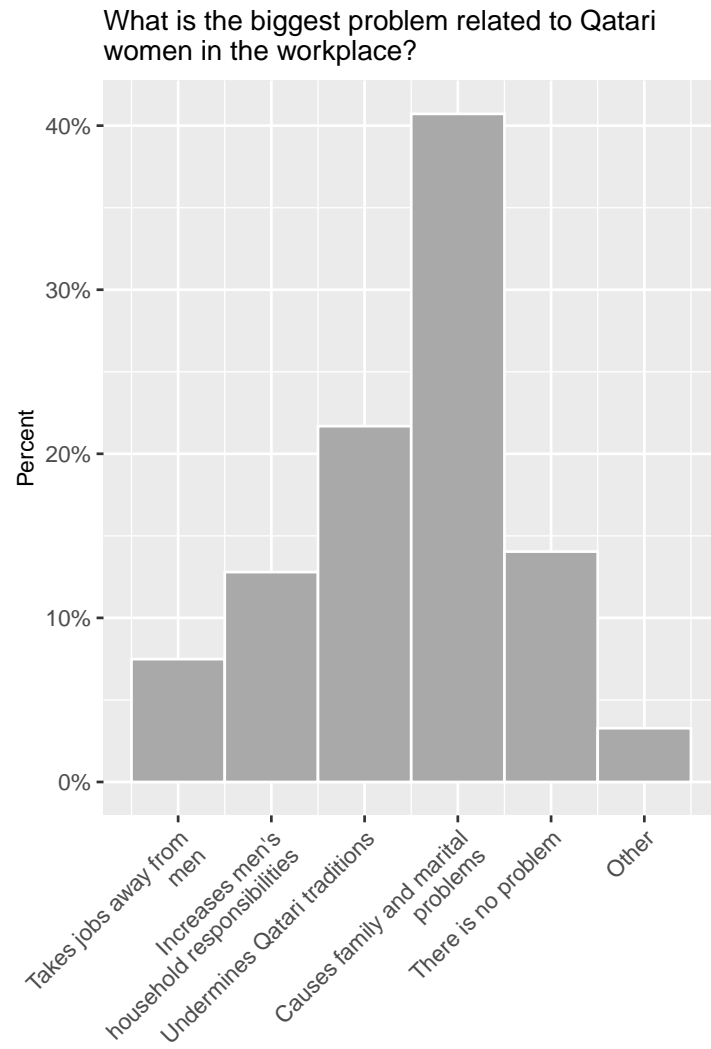


Figure 5: *The biggest problem related to Qatari women working outside of the home*

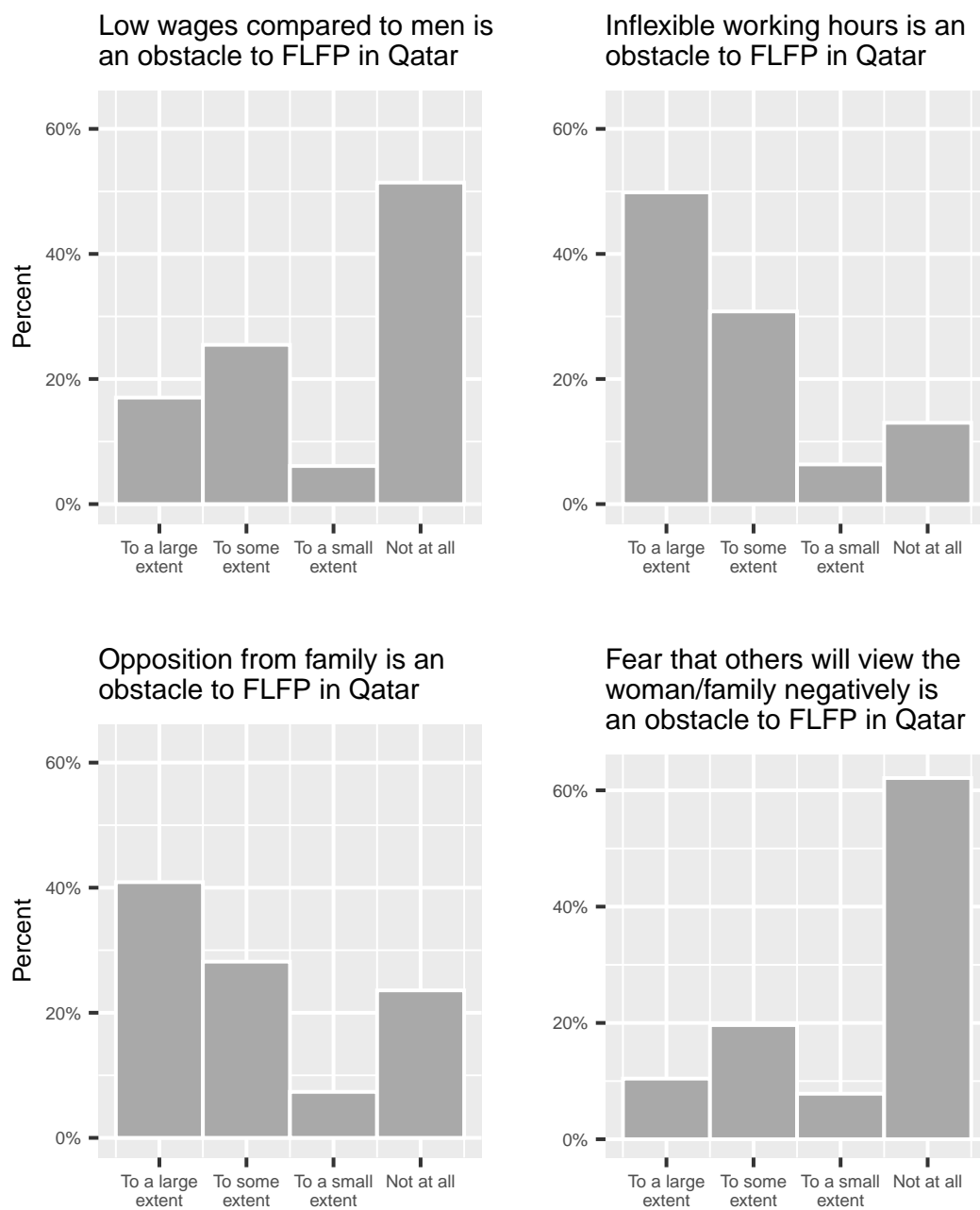


Figure 6: *Obstacles to Qatari women working outside of the home*

by others as a result of FLFP. Respondents were further asked to what extent they believed that their friends share their views regarding female labor force participation, as well as the extent to which Qatari society at large shared their views (see Figure 7). The results presented suggest that Qataris do not typically believe that their attitudes may be out of step with others’ whose opinions matter. A very slim percentage of individuals think that family, friends, or society “somewhat” oppose their views, and virtually no respondent believes that they face strong opposition for their attitudes.

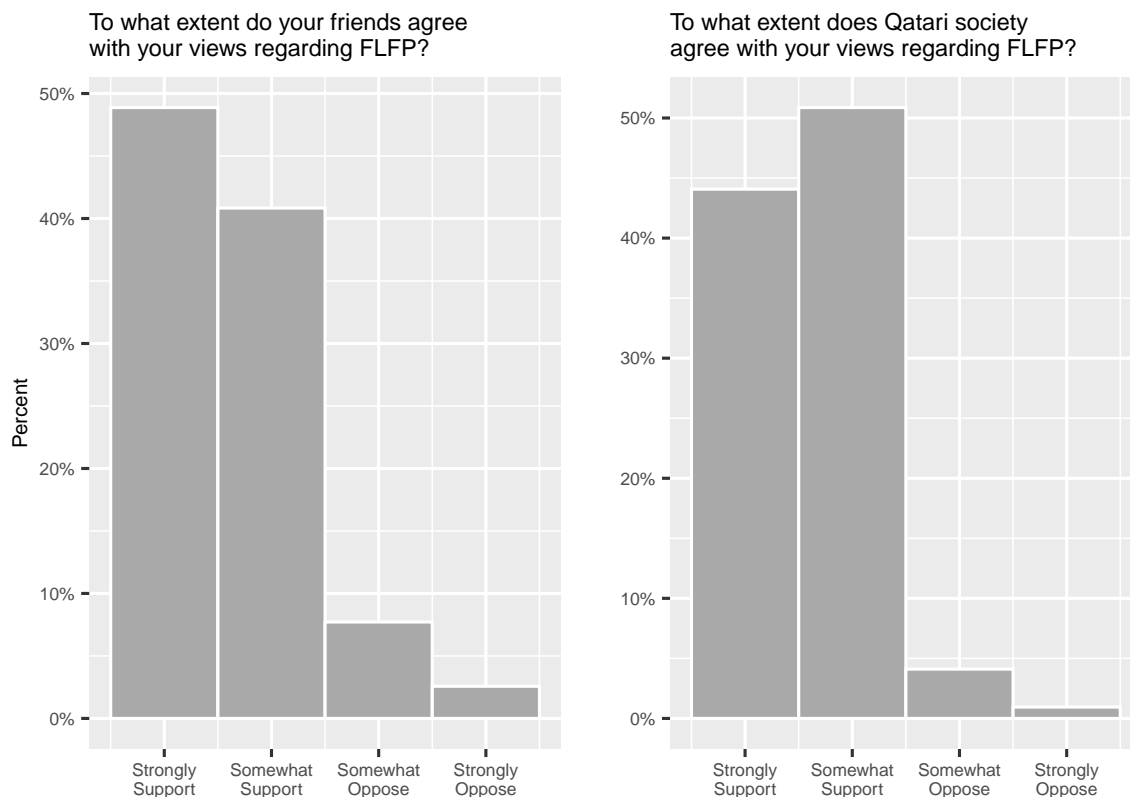


Figure 7: *Perceived attitudes of friends and Qatari society regarding women working outside of the home*

4 Focus Group Evidence

The quantitative evidence that we have presented offers important insights into the population-level attitudes toward female labor force participation and its effects. To explore the micro-level processes of social attitude construction and contestation, we conducted focus group sessions for male and female Qatari citizens using a virtual platform in December 2020.²⁸ Participants were recruited by phone

²⁸See Stanley (2016) for a discussion of the utility of focus group research in political science, particularly for understanding public discourse surrounding complex social processes.

and email and divided into groups by gender to encourage open discussion. The focus groups were led by two experienced facilitators (including one of the authors of this article) and a semi-structured protocol was used which included an introduction to the subject of female labor force participation and a list of discussion topics formulated beforehand by the research team. Focus group discussions — which continued for approximately one hour — were recorded and transcribed; transcriptions were subsequently validated by select participants.²⁹

The focus group participants generally expressed high levels of support for female labor force participation, both on the part of the government and Qatari society. That said, a number of countervailing themes emerge from the conversations. These themes include a persistence of patriarchal values; attitudinal differences across generations; opposition to gender mixing in the workplace; and concern about strained marital relations associated with female labor force participation. Each of these themes is discussed in the sections to follow. We seek to contextualize the focus group evidence with additional information from the qualitative literature on this subject.

4.1 Persistence of Patriarchal Values

Existing research has suggested that patriarchal values persist within Qatari households and that men tend to hold more conservative views than women regarding gender roles and responsibilities (Abdalla 1996). The feelings expressed by focus group participants also reflect the persistence of these attitudes. For example, one female focus group participant said, “we were brought up in a conservative family setting where women could not transgress societal boundaries, traditions, and household chores.” These traditional attitudes regarding gender are consistent with conservative family values; people who hold these attitudes tend to be unequivocally opposed to women working outside the home or having men participate in domestic labor (Momani 2016; Rodriguez and Scurry 2019).³⁰

The view that men serve in a “breadwinner” role is further associated with conservative family structures, reinforcing traditions and gender role expectations. In such a setting, women may be less inclined to participate in the labor market (Eagly and Wood 2012; Rodriguez and Scurry 2019; Ucal and Gunay 2019). Along these lines, a 45-year-old male participant commented, “my brothers and I are financially responsible for our only sister; she is not obligated to participate in the labor market because we provide well for her and the family.” Another male participant offered a complementary view stating that, “women’s participation in the job market is secondary, but her role at home is essential.”³¹

Qatari men develop their attitudes in a broader societal context that can reinforce certain types of patriarchal attitudes. For example, Theodoropoulou and Ahmed (2018) find that within the Qatari society, norms surrounding masculine and feminine gender roles reflect a combination of Islamic beliefs, local traditions, and cultural pressures. According to one female focus group participant, social customs and traditions can influence men’s attitudes — “when he meets with his friends, he is affected

²⁹Thematic analysis was conducted using MaxQDA. Full results are available upon request.

³⁰This traditional family setup influences a stereotypical picture of female domestic work (Al-Ghanim 2012; Al-Attayah and Nasser 2014; Liloia 2020).

³¹Theodoropoulou and Ahmed (2018) find that despite the fact that women in Qatar have become increasingly independent financially, the socially idealized Qatari woman continues to be one who prioritizes her family over her career and is obedient to her husband. These perspectives are echoed by research by scholars who have found that many Qatari respondents do not believe that the distribution of gender roles have changed considerably despite rising levels of educational attainment within the country (Al-Ghanim 2019). This includes the within-household distribution of labor which can also burden female children who are seen as responsible for their younger brothers and sisters (Al-Ghanim 2019).

by conversations related to male power, and begins to exercise his authority over female relatives.” Researchers report that these dynamics extend beyond fathers and husbands seeking to control women but also extending to brothers, including younger brothers (Al-Ghanim 2019). The multi-faceted (and often, reinforcing) nature of pressures encouraging patriarchal values suggests the many challenges associated with changing gendered attitudes in society. This perspective is consistent with scholars who have suggested that the obstacles to gender justice in Qatar include, “deep-rooted kinship structure and cultural elements that limit women’s participation in the public sphere” (Al-Ghanim 2019).

4.2 Differences across Generations

The variation in attitudes toward female labor force participation across generations reflects at least two identifiable trends. On the one hand, conservative societies like Qatar have observed important changes in attitudes over time, with the younger generation typically showing more flexibility in adjusting a traditional gendered division of labor within households (e.g., Witte 2011; Korotayev et al. 2015; Mehmood et al. 2015; Young 2016). On the other hand, the everyday costs of female labor force participation are often borne by recently married couples and young families, where the tradeoffs associated with time away from home for work generate higher costs than for families at later stages of life. We find focus group evidence that reflects both of these ideas.

Multiple focus group respondents articulated the idea that the current generation is open-minded and accepts women’s work but that differences in opinion towards FLFP persist, attributable to variation in family upbringing. One male respondent noted that, “male dominance was common thirty years ago when power was completely in the hands of men, but today, women can decide to work outside [the home] instead of [doing] caring and domestic work.” The focus group discussions also pointed to ways in which the older generations were less accepting of women’s work compared to those of the younger generation.³² According to one 45-year-old female participant, “my husband was strict and refused to let me participate in the labor market [25 years ago].” One 30-year-old man commented, “the rise in parents’ educational levels has influenced their attitudes toward working women...because they believe that women could make a valuable contribution to the labor market beside their duties of caring for the family and raising children.” These comments indicate ways in which the younger generation has adopted less traditional views regarding a gendered division of labor (Diwan and Vartanova 2017; Mehmood et al. 2015).

Al-Ghanim (2009) argues that a basic transformation in Qatar relates to decreasing family size and a transformation from extended to nuclear families. Several participants felt that this transition has led to changes in the family structure and circumstances. According to one 34-year-old man, “previous generations of extended families lived together...their financial needs were covered by the breadwinners of the household, and there was no need for the wife to work and help her husband.” A 48-year-old woman explained that “extended family contexts were the norm...women’s primary roles were based in households, and they were prevented from exercising their rights in education and work.” Changing gender role patterns have become common for middle class families, with implications for female labor force participation (Kooli and Al Muftah, 2020). As a young female participant noted, “men may

³²It is worth pointing out that the perception among some of our focus group respondents are only partly consistent with the empirical results that we have presented. While younger women are consistently more supportive of FLFP than older women, this empirical trend does not apply in the same way for men.

spend money with little regard for the family's expenses or desires...his spouse should get a job to be financially independent and spend money on home expenses in order to avoid affecting the family budget."

While a number of focus group participants said that they believed the younger generation was more open minded regarding women's role in the workplace, this sentiment was not universal, suggesting a more nuanced set of dynamics at play than simply a narrative of a steady march toward increased attitudes toward gender equality. According to one male respondent:

"The current generation rejects the presence of women in the labor market more than the previous generations, due to the woman being busy with her work and not achieving the right balance with her commitments and family responsibilities at home, as the working hours are long and leads to a lack of time control and failing to attend to house chores and caring for the children properly."

A female respondent also suggested the ways in which older individuals acquired greater levels of intellectual maturity and broader forms of understanding including with regard to the acceptance of trends that they would not have accepted by their younger selves. This respondent said that, "the previous generation did not realize the importance of women's role in building the society, but with age, experience, and interacting with working women in all fields, the previous generation becomes more aware of women's role in society and accepts their presence." The openness of an older generation of Qataris, especially Qatari men, is reflected in our empirical results.

4.3 Gender Segregation in the Workplace

Gender segregation is common in Qatari society, a fact that suggests the mixing of men and women in the workplace could pose a challenge to acceptance of FLFP. Indeed, the statistical results that we have presented suggest mixed-gender workplaces are a larger impediment to FLFP than work sector or salary. Our focus group discussions also indicate strong opinions related to the issue of mixed-gender workplaces. In conservative families where wives and daughters are expected to limit their interactions with the opposite sex, women's educational and career choices are constrained by a family preference for gender segregation (Diwan and Vartanova 2017). Multiple male and female respondents suggested that "mixing in the workplace" could be blocked by family members who opposed such activities, in some cases expressing concern about the impact on a woman's "reputation." According to a 35-year old female respondent:

"My family will not allow me to work in a mixed-gender workplaces regardless of high-payment offers. They hold negative stereotypes associated with a woman working in similar conditions that are seen as not socially acceptable for women. Although they are confident that I will respect social boundaries in my interactions with male colleagues."

According to one male respondent, "a man, whether a husband, father or brother, does not prefer the woman to work in a mixed place, as he was raised on this approach and is culturally inherited, and even when asking the woman herself, she does not prefer working in a mixed environment and prefers to work in entities in which male and female workers are separated in order to obtain her privacy."

Another woman noted, “I work in a mixed-gender workplace where I co-work with male colleagues. However, I expect that if my brother were present at my workplace, several issues would arise if I interacted with a male colleague.” A 44-year-old male participant shared the following: “I support my female relatives who work in the governmental sector but I do not agree with the working conditions in the private sector, such as banks, as I am concerned about the reputations of women who co-work with men.”

As suggested in the focus groups, mixed-gender workplaces remain unpopular with many Qataris especially as related to the impact working in this environment might have on a woman’s reputation. This result largely mirrors the findings of Al-Ghanim (2019), who reports that although there is almost no opposition to a woman’s right to work outside of the home, there continues to be a generalized rejection of women interfacing directly with men in the workplace, especially among male respondents including young, college educated men.³³ Male allies for this position are relatively few but do exist in our focus group sample. For example, according to one young, married man, “personally, I trust my wife and do not mind her interacting with male colleagues at her workplace, as she was offered a suitable high-paying job that matches her qualifications in engineering, educational level, and aspirations.”

4.4 Work-family Conflicts

One of the main challenges facing Qatari families relates to work-family balance associated with women working outside of the home. In many cases, conflict emerges regarding the household distribution of labor, disagreement over how to manage the upbringing of children, and balancing work and family responsibilities.

For example, one female participant remarked, “husbands usually support the[ir] working wives, albeit with certain conditions — that they work but, at the same time, handle all household matters and childcare duties.” Another female respondent stated that, “the reliance of many mothers on maids and nannies to raise their children is because of their preoccupation in fulfilling work responsibilities...family problems arise because of the shortcomings in raising children and her role as an educator and mother at home.” Working women in Qatar report higher levels of role overload and caregiver strain than working men and an associated psychological toll associated with long hours of labor in and outside of the household.³⁴

Although male participants from across generations indicated that they allow their wives to participate in the labor market, many expressed concerns about sharing household responsibilities within families. According to one married man, “wives tend to neglect their family duties toward children because they are preoccupied with long working hours, which leads to a lack of time management.” Another male participant noted that “the lack of adequate distribution of household responsibilities among dual-earner spouses” has emerged as the main issue in marriages. A male respondent added to this idea, arguing that the current generation of Qataris has witnessed mothers, sisters, and wives in the workforce, building the image of a working mother occupied by work tasks and distracted from the house chores, raising children, and taking care of husbands.³⁵ The costs associated with managing

³³ Among younger women, however, there is much greater support for a workplace of this type (Al-Ghanim 2019).

³⁴ “Work-Family Balance: Challenges, Experience, and Implications for Families,” Doha International Family Institute, Qatar Foundation, 2018.

³⁵ According to Rodriguez and Scurry (2019), men lose utility when they act against their traditional role as the provider for the family.

work-family balance are particularly acute for young couples. More than 65 percent of divorces occur within the first five years of marriage and challenges associated with work-life balance are thought to be a leading factor associated with these separations (Caeiro 2018).³⁶

Practical issues predominate as an important consideration for Qatari women seeking to balance work-family responsibilities. For example, implementing flexible work arrangements is believed to have an important positive impact, helping women achieve work-family balance.³⁷ One working mother illustrated the impact of such measures as follows:

“My workplace provides flexible working hours and an on-site childcare center. I have the opportunity to coordinate my work and to meet my child’s needs. I have not faced any work-family conflicts and have achieved the required balance with my supportive husband, who shares household responsibilities.”

Participants mentioned the importance of family-friendly workplace policies, such as six months of maternity leave, breastfeeding hours and spaces, and on-site childcare facilities as helping to reduce work-family conflicts. On the other hand, a lack of access to these progressive policies can create stress for women. A 50-year-old working woman expressed her frustration in the following way, “I have been working in the governmental sector since around 1996, and there was a proposal to provide an on-site childcare facility for children...but it was not implemented, and the problems facing working mothers were not solved.” A working mother with a newborn stated, “my maternity leave was for a period of two months, which was not sufficient; I needed a longer leave period to care for my child...inflexible workplace policies [made] it imperative to recruit a nanny to help raise my child.”

5 Toward a Model of Social Change in Conservative Societies

We have argued that the cultural constraints to female labor force participation in Qatar revolve around dynamics *within* rather than *external to* the family. Although Qataris support FLFP in principle and for their own relatives, the actual experience of living in a household with a working woman creates the potential for within-family conflict given the very high bar imposed on women regarding household and caretaking responsibilities in Qatar’s conservative society. In this section, we develop a conceptual framework that reconciles our emphasis on within-family dynamics with influential existing explanations. Our understanding of how societies overcome cultural constraints has applicability to social change in conservative societies in the Arab Gulf and elsewhere.

In particular, we argue that conservative societies have the opportunity to move through a successive opening of domains to female participation and incorporation. In the case of Gulf societies, this relates to women seeking educational opportunities (including higher education and training in traditionally male-dominated fields) and employment outside of the home (including mixed-gender employment spaces).

³⁶Caeiro (2018) argues that growing divorce rates are related to a wide variety of factors, including disagreements over expectations related to gender roles and the existence of domestic violence within the marriage. One female focus group respondent pointed out that working women were subject to more domestic violence compared to non-working women in Qatar.

³⁷Lari (2020) examines the extent to which work-family conflict affects Qatari working adults’ job satisfaction and the ways in which family-friendly human resource policies can increase job satisfaction.

Related dynamics could apply to women driving cars, running for political office, or traveling overseas without a male family member for school or leisure.

Two types of cultural constraints are relevant in this setting — those related to meeting societal expectations and the practical concerns that emerge related to traditional gender roles within households. Our two stages — societal norms convergence and household-level implementation — speak to core concerns in conservative societies. Conservative societies strongly value moral conformity, a fact that stresses the importance of social conventions and the acceptability of communal practice. Early moves into new public domains trigger concern about levels of societal acceptance and acceptability. Indeed, first movers into the new domain may suffer reputational harms given their pioneering actions. But as common knowledge develops about the generalized acceptability of female participation in that public sphere increases, objections to women’s participation turn to more practical concerns related to traditional gender role within households.³⁸

In addition, conservative societies rest strongly on the sanctity of family structures and roles, suggesting ways that change can lead to household conflict. Any disruption to prevailing domestic practices requires a period of adjustment and negotiation of the household division of labor. Our argument is that this general pattern is repeated across new domains as women gain access to a larger number of public spaces within conservative societies. By being attentive to these two factors, scholars are able to more fully account for cultural constraints to female participation in the public domains of conservative societies.

How does this model play out in practice? The case of women’s higher educational attainment in Gulf societies provides an important example of how social change takes place. Access to the educational domain — while initially opposed for reasons related to both societal norms as well as household concerns — has now become widely accepted in these societies. First movers into the domain of higher education faced serious concerns about how their human capital investments would be viewed by society more broadly.³⁹ Would such women be able to get married without penalty or discrimination, for instance? Would families that permitted their daughters to attend university suffer reputational losses? Once women began to attend university, new questions began to arise. These included logistical ones about how women would interact with male students or faculty members, as well as who would take over responsibilities within the household for young women who were previously assisting with chores and childcare. Over the longer term, however, social acceptability of women’s higher educational attainment increased and household accommodation followed. Women in the Arab Gulf states now have among the highest levels of tertiary educational attainment in the world.

The framework that we have presented helps to reconcile why it is that concern over second-order beliefs about support for FLFP are so salient in Saudi society — where women working outside of the home is relatively rare — but not in Qatari society. Saudi Arabia lags behind Qatar in terms of female labor force participation. As a result, we argue that Saudi society faces the dual-challenge of engendering public support not only for women working in principle, but also understanding how to manage new gender roles within households and families. If our framework is correct, we should see discourse in Saudi Arabia regarding the household-level challenges of women working outside of the

³⁸This is not to say that the process that we have described eliminates the persistence of highly conservative preferences regarding women’s roles for some pockets of society. We argue, however, that most people are seeking to coordinate around the new acceptable behaviors and working to make those changes appropriate for their families.

³⁹See Hamdan (2005) for details about the challenges to advancing women’s education in Saudi Arabia.

home increase as women’s labor force participation becomes more common. In addition, we should observe growing concern over second-order beliefs in Qatari society related to the newest frontier in women’s employment — the mixed-gender workplace.⁴⁰

Our perspective is also more consistent with qualitative scholarly accounts related to how cultural norms regarding women’s educational and economic integration change. Researchers have long argued that realization of women’s economic potential in Arab Gulf states could not be achieved overnight (e.g., Quamar 2013; Shalaby 2014; Rutledge and Al-Shamsi 2016), and would require the combined effects of state-based employment programs and evolution of societal expectations. For example, Crabtree (2007) argues that in the United Arab Emirates, despite tremendous transformations to gender roles over recent decades, family expectations attached to gender roles have persisted.⁴¹ Thompson (2015) has suggested that it would be short-sighted to underestimate the influence of conservative forces on issues related to gender egalitarianism and that women who seek access to new public domains face challenges at the national, societal, and family levels.

6 Conclusions

Economic autonomy is the foundation for gender egalitarianism in societies around the world. When women can generate personal financial resources based on paid work, this single factor has the capacity to transform outcomes as diverse as social attitudes toward gender equality, the household division of labor, and even the perpetuation of interpersonal violence against women. Yet female labor force participation rates in the Middle East have remained low over the last four decades even though women’s education has dramatically increased and fertility rates have declined (Majbouri 2020).

As societies of the Arab Gulf face a national imperative to transition to more knowledge-based economies in light of declining fossil fuel reliance, women — an educated but largely economically untapped demographic — are playing a critical role in the drive toward change. Although we cannot entirely take into account the vast set of economic incentives for working, Qatar provides as close as possible to an ideal setting for understanding more about the cultural constraints to female labor force participation. In Qatar, women have emerged as targets of state employment nationalization policies; at the same time, however, they continue to be crucial bearers of societal values in the religious and cultural domains (Vora 2018, 32).

The results of our analysis suggest speak directly to the challenges associated with increasing FLFP in conservative societies. We find that Qataris are supportive of women working outside of the home when asked in the most abstract terms. Levels of support for FLFP decline, however, when respondents are asked to think about their own female family members working; and then decline even further when they are presented a prospective workplace that is described as mixed-gender (rather than single-sex). We also find that support for female labor force participation varies based on demographic characteristics — in particular, age and gender — and family structure. The fact that exogenously

⁴⁰For example, Al-Ghanim (2017) has shown that only about half of her male interview respondents supported the idea of women working in a mixed-gender environment. Women, particularly those with higher levels of education, were considerably more open to the idea of a mixed-gender work environment.

⁴¹Qatar has invested tremendous resources in helping households manage new entrance into the labor market as an increasing number of Qatari women face challenges associated with the balancing work and family life with growing professional and domestic commitments. For example, the Doha International Family Institute undertakes research and publishes policy papers with the goal of encouraging family stability in the face of changing times.

determined family structure — as captured by the percent of male children within families — influences support for FLFP, suggests the importance of how ideas and norms become established within family units.

Our findings also have implications for how to think about the role of second-order beliefs in influencing labor force participation in Gulf states (e.g., Bursztyn et al. 2020), and other conservative societies. We propose a theoretical framework for understanding norm change and contend that conservative societies confront two core issues when it comes to social change. The first is associated with convergence around the social acceptability of new norms. The second issue is related to how these changes are integrated within the domain of the household. In particular, informational treatments about second-order beliefs cannot address underlying tensions regarding the trade-offs associated with women working that emerge within families. This pattern of norm convergence (in principle) followed by household implementation of norm change (in practice) is repeated across different domains, including women’s integration in higher education, employment spaces, politics, and other areas.⁴²

There are a number of policy implications of these findings. The sweeping economic transformation embodied in Qatar National Vision 2030 represents a critical juncture, as the way Qatari nationals are integrated in the labor market will influence future patterns in employment.⁴³ Family-friendly work measures like flexible hours and part-time status represent important considerations for women, especially working mothers and those with family responsibilities like children with special needs (Lari 2019, 175). While work in the public sector — with its considerable benefits and flexibility — already represents a partial solution to the challenge associated with FLFP (James-Hawkins et al 2017), government responsiveness in this sector could increase support for FLFP more generally.

Our results also speak to the idea that there are no shortcuts when it comes to the pursuit of women’s economic empowerment in conservative societies. Scholars have long argued that the persistence of patriarchal attitudes across the social, economic, and psychological domains in Arab societies means that policies to promote economic development must be considered in light of prevailing gender dynamics (e.g., Joseph 1996). Our results emphasize the idea that lasting norm change requires attention to both household and societal considerations.⁴⁴

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⁴²Our perspective is also consistent with Eickelman and Piscatori (1996, 88) contention that, “families constitute ideological clusters that carry meanings and values ascribed to them *by both family members and those external to the family*” (emphasis added).

⁴³For example, Fernandez et al. (2004) argue that increase in the number of men who have been brought up in a family in which the mother worked has been a significant factor in the increase in FLFP in the US over time. If this finding can be extrapolated to the Gulf states, what happens in the next decade with the social and economic transformations associated with National Vision projects can have important long-term implications.

⁴⁴Critical perspectives on the issue of microfinance initiatives in Bangladesh and elsewhere suggest some of the ways that societal actors can undermine promising gender egalitarian policies.

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