

Qatari Women: Engagement And Empowerment Through Majlis Al-Hareem

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Abstract

Female engagement and participation in the Middle East and in the Arab Gulf in particular—especially among ordinary women interacting within their societies—have been largely overlooked in social science literature until quite recently (e.g., Sonbol 2012; Krause 2008). Too often, the Western and global mindset emphasizes social and cultural exclusion and segregation of women, particularly in the Arab Gulf, to argue that women are left out, oppressed, and silenced. Yet our recent qualitative and quantitative research in the state of Qatar depicts Qatari women as equal to or even surpassing men on a variety of important indicators of political, economic, educational, and social engagement (QNRF UREP 12-016-5-007). One of the most significant findings point toward a particular aspect of Qatari women's engagement with their societies: the use of majlis al-hareem (female gatherings) as a way of caring for the family, interacting with the community, and engaging with the government, on levels comparable to their male counterparts. Using the case study of Qatar, our research aims to understand the drivers and obstacles of women's agency in the Arab Gulf by focusing on the use of majlis al-hareem as a locus of engagement with greater society (QNRF UREP 15-035-5-013).

We hypothesize that the majlis al-hareem is a natural setting of social life for women in the Arab Gulf, in which the act of participation has direct implications for willingness and ability to engage in greater society. Beyond the confines of the familial home, few spaces in the Arab Gulf afford women the privacy and freedom to assemble and engage in conversation. The majlis is a designated, purpose-built gendered meeting space or salon, unique to the Arab world. Yet there is no existing social science literature on female participation in these types of gatherings, as Western literature traditionally depicts the majlis as a male-only place of power. Our research employs both qualitative and quantitative methodology to gather crucial empirical evidence, combining ethnographic fieldwork and interview-based research in approximately 20 different majlis al-hareem throughout Qatar (spanning family, social, neighborhood, religious, and intellectual gatherings) and a professional survey of Qatari women (of 1,049 respondents) conducted through Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute using random sampling and trained interviewers. Our data gives new insights into female engagement and empowerment in the Arab Gulf, filling a social science research gap and continuing the burgeoning academic conversation on the power and place of women in Middle Eastern society.

References:

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- Sonbol, Amira El-Azhary, ed. 2012. *Gulf Women*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.