

Gender Diversity in Higher Education in Qatar: Challenges and Pathways for Progress

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Abstract: *Qatar National Vision 2030 underscores the pivotal role of women in national development and promotes initiatives to enhance gender diversity. Given Qatar's distinctive religious, social, and cultural context, pursuing gender parity invites broader discourse. While gender diversity is recognised nationally for its significance and benefits, its implementation across all sectors remains uncertain. This exploratory study investigates gender diversity within Qatar's higher education workforce. A review of existing literature and a qualitative, interpretivist approach involving semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants inform the research. Findings indicate widespread support for gender diversity; however, equitable representation remains elusive. Thematic analysis highlights legal frameworks and institutional policies alongside cultural and societal influences. Despite anti-discrimination laws, persistent barriers include cultural norms, implicit biases, and limited institutional and societal support. The study advocates for increased awareness and collective action, offering a foundation for future research to develop impactful strategies toward gender equity in Qatar's higher education sector.*

Keywords: gender diversity, Qatar national vision 2030, higher education, cultural norms

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In recent decades, Qatar has become a leading economic force in the Middle East and a global hub for business and tourism (Government of Qatar, 2021). The Qatar National Vision 2030 was introduced to sustain and enhance this progress. It aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and is built upon four strategic pillars: human, social, economic, and environmental development (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008).

Acknowledging that societal and economic progress requires deliberate investment in human capital, the National Vision integrates strategic measures to enhance Qatari workforce capabilities (General Secretariat For Development Planning, 2008), aligning with global recognition of human capital development as a key driver of economic growth (Jones, 2016).

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Education lies at the heart of human capital development. Aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030, which prioritises cultivating a knowledge-based society, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) is committed to delivering accessible, world-class education. The MOEHE enhances workforce competence, institutional growth, and quality of academic programs. At the time of this research, thirty-one accredited public and private higher education institutions were listed on the Ministry's official website (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2021).

Qatar's National Vision is committed to empowering women as equal contributors to society, promoting gender equity in education, careers, and employment while upholding cultural values, reinforcing gender diversity as vital to social, economic, and human development goals (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008). As Qatar advances toward a knowledge-based society, this study examines progress and remaining gaps in women's roles and educational development.

Al-Thani et al. (2020) contend that gender bias hampers women's career progression in Qatar, with persistent stereotypes and work-life balance challenges, especially in male-dominated sectors, further limiting advancement opportunities (Al-Malki & Fathi, 2016; Kamali & Mohamed, 2019).

Investigating the challenges and opportunities for enhancing gender diversity in Qatar's higher education sector requires a multidisciplinary approach, integrating sociology, gender studies, and organisational behaviour. It will also incorporate psychology, economics, and public policy insights to develop comprehensive solutions for promoting gender equality.

Research Aim and Objectives

This research examines gender diversity in Qatari higher education institutions, exploring challenges, strategies, and opportunities for advancing gender diversity within these academic environments. Additionally, this study aims to assess the current level of gender diversity in Qatar's higher education institutions, focusing on faculty, staff, and student populations. It explores faculty and staff perceptions of gender diversity, examines existing policies and practices, identifies barriers hindering progress, and evaluates best practices from other countries for potential implementation. Based on the findings, recommendations will be proposed to enhance gender diversity.

Research Questions

Does the higher education sector in Qatar face challenges related to gender diversity?

RQ – 1A: If so, what measures can be taken to enhance the current state of gender diversity?

RQ – 1B: If not, what measures and strategies have been implemented to address this issue?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Women are entering the workforce in greater numbers, yet in Higher Education Institutions (HEI), they remain underrepresented in senior positions and certain fields, often facing unfavourable employment conditions. This issue persists even in regions with higher gender diversity in the workforce (Hovdhaugen & Gunnes, 2019; Sułkowski *et al.*, 2019; Silander *et al.*, 2022). Despite this, careers in higher education are still viewed as more suitable for women than fields like engineering. Recruitment is primarily influenced by state legal provisions and institutional policies promoting gender equality in hiring (Kemp *et al.*, 2017).

Gender relations in Qatar have evolved through legal and policy reforms addressing women's education, mobility, workforce participation, voting, and leadership roles. However, disparities persist between legal provisions and societal acceptance, impacting gender diversity and parity. The World Economic Forum (2022) ranks Qatar 137th out of 146 countries, with a gender parity score of 0.617 on a 0-1 scale.

In Qatar, gender stereotyping is prevalent, with individuals assigned roles based on perceived categories. Women, in particular, face limitations imposed by cultural and societal expectations, restricting their roles and opportunities (Felder & Vuollo, 2011; Al-Ansari, 2022). A World Bank report (2020) highlights that women in Qatar often face discrimination and bias, with stereotypes questioning their skills in certain fields. Despite societal pressures, Qatar emphasises women's crucial role in nation-building. Researchers found that Qatari women continue to advance in embracing their roles and freedoms in the workforce (Kemp *et al.*, 2015; Golkowska, 2017; Liloia, 2019).

This research examines how socio-cultural factors, such as biases, religion, national identity, gender roles, and stereotypes, shape gender diversity in Qatar's higher education institutions, drawing on regional and global studies.

Diversity

Diversity encompasses a broad range of dimensions that reflect the multifaceted nature of individuals and groups within a society or organisation. Demographic diversity includes variations in age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation (Cox, 1994), while cognitive diversity highlights differences in how people perceive, process, and resolve problems, encompassing disparities in skills, experiences, and perspectives (Page, 2008). Functional diversity refers to distinctions in expertise, competencies, and capabilities relevant to specific tasks or roles (Van Knippenberg, De Dreu and Homan, 2004). In contrast, socioeconomic diversity captures differences in income levels, education, occupation, and social standing (O'Reilly and Williams, 1998). Geographic diversity involves differences in place of residence, such as country, region, or urban versus rural settings (Cox, 1994). Linguistic diversity concerns the variety of languages and dialects spoken (Gudykunst, 2004), and personality diversity reflects differences in psychological traits (Barrick and Mount, 1991). Political, religious, and gender diversity encompass differing political affiliations (Phillips, Liljenquist and Neale, 2009), spiritual beliefs (Emmons, 2000), and gender identities and expressions (Bauer *et al.*, 2015). This study concentrates specifically on gender diversity,

offering foundational definitions before advancing into focused research and discussing this singular aspect of societal diversity.

Gender Diversity – Definitions

In this study, gender diversity refers to the equitable representation of individuals of different genders within a specific context, institution, or organisation (Teodósio et al., 2022). It encompasses the challenges encountered and the initiatives and strategies employed to attain a fair distribution of men and women within a given setting (Hieker & Rushby, 2019). The pursuit of gender parity, or a balanced gender ratio, has attracted sustained attention across global, national, societal, and organisational levels, owing to its recognised influence on institutional performance and its relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals (World Bank Group, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2022).

Gender Diversity Indicators, Challenges, Initiatives and Opportunities

Assessing gender diversity relies on specific indicators that serve as benchmarks to evaluate progress, identify improvement areas, and measure the effectiveness of interventions. These indicators form the foundation of research and reporting on gender diversity, enabling cross-contextual comparisons. Global reports extend beyond simple measures of representation to include indices related to economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, offering a comprehensive view of progress toward equity. Rooted in the principle of gender equality, advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and treatment regardless of gender, these assessments highlight ongoing disparities (World Bank Group, 2019; UN Women, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2022). In Qatar, for example, women have made significant gains in education and access to employment, yet continue to face challenges in achieving equal labour force participation and leadership representation (World Bank, 2020). While summary rankings exist, detailed analyses across these indicators provide a more nuanced understanding of gender diversity.

Equitable gender representation across all areas of life has consistently demonstrated positive outcomes. Hunt et al. (2015) found that companies with higher gender diversity were 15% more likely to exceed industry-standard financial performance, attributing this to an expanded talent pool and broader consumer reach, enhancing organisational effectiveness. Research further indicates that advancing gender diversity invites diverse perspectives and shared experiences, fostering greater understanding, acceptance, and social cohesion. At the national level, promoting gender diversity improves outcomes across sectors and supports stronger governance and sustainable societal development (Bahry & Marr, 2005; UN Women, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2022).

Achieving gender diversity is inherently linked to overcoming challenges that span national, institutional, organisational, and societal levels, each interrelated and mutually influential. At the national level, legal, policy, and regulatory frameworks can either foster inclusivity or exacerbate disparities. For instance, the World Economic Forum (2022) evaluates gender diversity in political empowerment by tracking milestones such as the enfranchisement of women and their representation in leadership, highlighting a state's commitment to equity through such measures. However, without institutional and organisational dedication, state-level efforts risk being ineffective (Botella et al., 2019). In Qatar, while laws prohibit gender-

based discrimination in hiring, women still face greater difficulties achieving work-life balance due to societal expectations around caregiving. Positive interventions, such as flexible work arrangements and enhanced parental leave, endorsed by MADLSA (2020), have shown promise in addressing these challenges. Nonetheless, persistent societal stereotypes and unconscious biases (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) continue to hinder meaningful progress toward gender equity.

Workplace Gender Diversity in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

Qatar, as a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), shares with its fellow member states a common political and cultural identity grounded in Arab and Islamic traditions, shaped by geographic proximity, shared goals, and similar Islam-based governance structures (General Secretariat, 1981). Consequently, gender diversity concerns are echoed across GCC countries, though progress varies among them. Gender diversity encompasses tangible, structural aspects shaped by national and local legal and policy frameworks, and intangible elements rooted in deep-seated social and cultural norms and beliefs.

From a legal and policy framework perspective, GCC countries have taken significant steps to address gender diversity. Alhawsawi and Jawhar (2023) highlight the commitments made by nations such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar in their Vision 2030 documents, focusing on increasing opportunities for women to pursue higher education and workforce integration. However, while education offers a gateway for workforce inclusion, achieving gender diversity in the workplace remains more complex, particularly in the Gulf region. Issues such as societal restrictions on mixed-gender interactions and limitations on female mobility pose significant challenges, requiring a more structural approach. For example, Ellis et al. (2015) note that in Saudi Arabia, companies must create separate working spaces and support areas for female employees. Though intended to facilitate women's participation, these provisions may increase costs and reinforce negative biases against female employment.

Moreover, societal norms and cultural expectations continue to play a crucial role in shaping female workforce participation. Engin and McKeown (2017) argue that family decisions in the Gulf significantly influence women's career choices, often limiting their educational and professional opportunities. Despite the absence of legal barriers, cultural preferences often favour occupations with limited male interaction or mobility (Charrad, 2009; Al-Malki, 2018; Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). While professional settings generally allow mixed-gender interactions, cultural and family commitments still discourage women from working late hours, raising issues of work-life balance. In Qatar, gender diversity initiatives are being promoted through government and private sector policies, with the Qatar National Vision 2030 emphasising women's workforce participation (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008). Policies like parental leave and flexible work arrangements support working mothers (MADLSA, 2020). However, career advancement remains constrained by the limited networking opportunities for women, as social spaces like Majlis, central to male networking, are not open to mixed-gender interactions (Ellis et al., 2015; Babakhouya, 2019).

Gender Diversity in Qatar

The state of gender diversity in Qatari society, like other Gulf nations, is both unique and evolving due to the changing political, economic, and social landscape. Family plays a central

role in Qatari society, with women seen as vital in preserving traditional cultural and familial values. Historically, women were nurtured within these parameters and coupled with complex legal, social, and religious norms, were underrepresented and excluded from broader nation-building roles. However, as Qatar has modernised over recent decades, societal views on women have shifted. Although women's roles in preserving familial traditions remain integral, perspectives on their capabilities and potential have evolved. A pivotal moment came in 1999 when Sheikh Hamad Al-Thani ratified a new constitution granting women the right to vote, stand for office, and exercise other citizenship rights. Under the leadership of HH Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Missned, significant investments in female education and employment were made, with Qatar achieving the highest global literacy rate and gender parity in higher education (Golkowska, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2022).

Education is a key avenue for promoting women's participation in the labour market, leading one to expect Qatar to perform similarly in economic participation and opportunity, especially given the nation's legislation supporting women's entrepreneurial initiatives. However, Qatar ranks 133rd out of 146 countries, with a score of 0.499 on a 0-1 scale, falling below the global average in various indicators of gender diversity in economic participation, including wage equality for similar work. Despite these low rankings, Qatar is not an outlier, as other countries in the Middle East show similar results (World Economic Forum, 2022). Factors such as societal perceptions of suitable job sectors for women, family considerations, religious beliefs, and legal restrictions, particularly in the Gulf region, contribute to these disparities (Bahry & Marr, 2005; Stasz et al., 2007; Felder & Vuollo, 2011). Female mobility is regulated in Qatar, restricting single women's travel. However, the age limit for permission has recently been lowered to 25 years for single women, and married women generally do not require such permissions unless contested by their husbands (Golkowska, 2017). Despite these constraints, increasing numbers of Qatari women are navigating these gendered spaces and leveraging emerging opportunities to shape their futures (Golkowska, 2017; Liloia, 2019).

The Higher Education Sector in Qatar

Formal education in Qatar became officially recognised with the Education Law of 1954 and continues to receive significant governmental focus. Education is acknowledged in the Qatar National Vision 2030 as a key factor in developing a qualified workforce and establishing a knowledge-based society. Between 2016 and 2022, the government allocated approximately 10% of its budget to education, supporting a well-regulated and world-class educational system. As a result of this investment, student enrolment increased from 2016 to 2018, although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all sectors in 2020. Despite these disruptions, enrolment figures remained comparable to those in 2016. In 2020, approximately 33,000 students were enrolled in higher education, with 33% being foreign nationals and 67% Qatari citizens. Of the total student population, females represented 70% (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2019, 2020; Qatar Development Bank, 2021; Oxford Business Group, 2022b).

While the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) regulates the higher education sector through various policies and initiatives, public and private institutions contribute. By the start of the 2021/22 academic year, Qatar hosted thirty-two higher education institutions, including public and private schools, military institutions, and Qatar Foundation-affiliated schools. These institutions employ a diverse workforce, with expatriates comprising

the majority. For instance, in the 2019/2020 academic year, private institutions employed 934 academic staff, including 303 expatriate females, 617 expatriate males, and 14 Qatari staff (6 females and 8 males), while non-academic staff demographics were similar, though with more Qatari participation (Planning and Statistics Authority, 2019, 2020; Qatar Development Bank, 2021; Oxford Business Group, 2022b).

Gender Diversity in the Higher Education Sector

Workers in the higher education sector can be categorised based on their roles, including academic staff, whose primary responsibilities involve teaching or research; professional student support staff, who assist with social, health, or academic needs; administrative and managerial staff, who oversee institutional operations; and operations and maintenance staff, who manage ancillary and security services (UNESCO-UIS, OECD, & Eurostat, 2018). The recruitment, retention, and management of a highly skilled workforce are crucial for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to fulfil their mission of cultivating a skilled workforce for the future, as in other sectors (Altbach, 2015; OECD, 2020). Academic careers in HEI typically require advanced postgraduate qualifications and research accomplishments, meaning that women's underrepresentation in postgraduate and research fields contributes to their lower presence in academic roles (Carrington & Pratt, 2003).

Upon entering the sector, the focus shifts to retention and promotion policies, particularly as women are more likely to experience career interruptions due to family obligations. Retention discussions often centre on family-friendly policies, such as maternity leave, childcare support, and flexible working arrangements to address mobility challenges. Career progression within academia is notably gendered, with women predominantly occupying entry-level positions and being underrepresented in senior roles. Advancement typically requires further academic work, including research, postgraduate studies, conference participation, and publications. Graduate and postgraduate research priorities often favour male-dominated fields, unintentionally exacerbating women's underrepresentation in certain academic disciplines (Winchester & Browning, 2015; Llorens et al., 2021).

Llorens et al. (2021) highlight that time spent on childcare and the associated resources place women at a competitive disadvantage, particularly in academic careers where productivity is key for securing grant funding. For academic mothers, attending conferences and workshops introduces challenges related to childcare and mobility, requiring additional funding and family-friendly options. Moreover, as post-graduate research funding typically comes from institutions, organisations, or state sources, the lack of female representation at decision-making levels can lead to conditions that disproportionately disadvantage women, perpetuating low gender diversity.

Institutional human resource policy frameworks often include strategies for promotions and, in some cases, establish quotas for roles to be filled by women to promote gender diversity (Bencivenga et al., 2021). While many roles are open to both genders, research by Carrington and Pratt (2003) reveals that women tend to apply for promotions less frequently. This trend can be attributed to various factors, including women's perceptions of senior roles' increased commitment and responsibilities and work-life balance challenges. Windsor and Crawford (2021) discuss the negative impact of mentorship dynamics in academia, highlighting that women's underrepresentation in academic mentorship, especially in women-to-women

mentorship programs, limits their mentoring opportunities by men who are often on decision-making bodies. This lack of mentorship can hinder their chances of career advancement. Even in environments with policies aiming to close the gender gap in higher education institutions (HEI), the influence of socio-cultural factors persists, with recruitment biases favouring candidates with fewer family commitments and reinforcing the stereotype that leadership is masculine (Bencivenga et al., 2021; Llorens et al., 2021). In Australia, substantial efforts since the mid-1980s have addressed the underrepresentation of women in academic positions, with women making up 44% of academic staff by 2014, compared to just 20% in the mid-1980s. However, despite progress, women remain overrepresented in certain disciplines and student support roles and still face underrepresentation in research positions (Winchester & Browning, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Considering the study's nature and scope, a qualitative thematic research design has been adopted to understand and interpret the meanings surrounding gender diversity in Qatar's higher education sector, rather than merely measuring objective facts.

Data Collection

This study incorporated a primary data collection approach. The data was collected via semi-structured interviews from a sample selected within Qatar higher education by multi-variation purposive sampling, with the plan of thematic analysis since this design facilitates an in-depth insight into respondents' insights, perceptions, and experiences to enable clarification, explore answers from different points of view, and draw the right inferences to achieve research validity.

Interviews

This research adopted an investigative approach supported by open-ended, scripted semi-structured interviews (Appendix A). Six interviews were conducted, ranging from 45 to 60 minutes, with over 70% of the questions consistently addressed across all sessions. Interviews commenced with collecting demographic information before transitioning to more focused inquiries, a strategy employed to minimise potential bias. To ensure accuracy and reliability in the analysis, all interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Participants

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with respondents free to withdraw at any point. Participants were selected from within Qatar's higher education sector using defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to represent the relevant characteristics comprehensively. A heterogeneous purposive sampling strategy was employed, drawing from various non-probability techniques including quota, snowball, self-selection, convenience, theoretical, and purposive sampling. This deliberate approach aimed to capture participants with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints, enriching the data's depth and breadth (Saunders et al., 2012).

Following the maximum variation sampling technique, this study identified distinct characteristics that define the population under investigation, as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

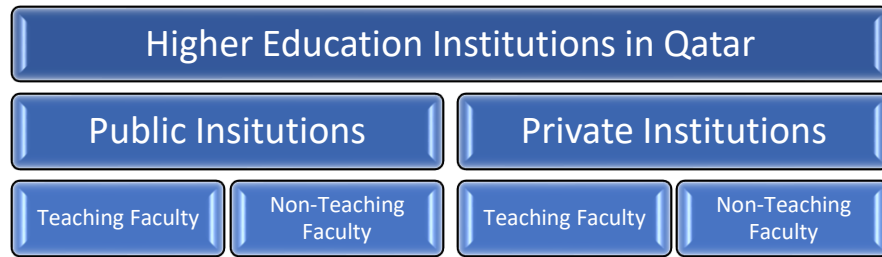


Figure 1: Illustration of Distinct Features Characterising the Population

The tables below present the demographic characteristics of the research sample:

Table 1: Gender and Family Status of Respondents

Age Range	Single	Married without children	Married with children	Total
Male	1	1	1	3
Female	-	1	2	3
Total	1	2	3	6

Table 2: Age and Highest Academic Qualification of Respondents

Age Range	Master's Degree	Doctorate (PhD)	Total
25 – 30 years	1	-	1
31 – 40 years	3	1	4
41 – 50 years	-	1	1
51 – 60 years	-	-	-
Total	4	2	6

Table 1: Respondents' Professional Categories

Staff Category	Public Institutions	Private Institutions	Total
Academic Staff	1	1	2
Non-Academic Staff	2	2	4
Total	3	3	6

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In selecting non-academic participants, the study prioritised individuals from Human Resources who had held managerial roles for at least three years, ensuring access to informed and in-depth perspectives. One non-academic respondent, though not currently in HR, had previously served in an academic faculty role and provided valuable insight from both professional experiences. Academic participants also held senior positions and had been tenured for at least three years, allowing the researcher to draw on their substantial experience and contextual understanding.

RESULTS

State of Gender Diversity in the Faculty of HEI

Gender representation among faculty varies by staff category. In public institutions, participants noted a total staff population of around 3,000, with women comprising approximately 60% of non-academic staff and 35% of academic staff. In contrast, a respondent from a private institution with a faculty of about 60 individuals reported that women account for roughly 17% of academic staff and 70% of non-academic personnel.

Respondents' Perceptions on the State of Gender Diversity in HEI

Respondents strongly believed that improved gender representation among academic faculty would be advantageous. They emphasised that gender diversity enriches institutions by bringing a wider range of views, ideas, perspectives, experiences, and skills, ultimately contributing to the collective good. One participant noted that fostering gender diversity within educational institutions paves the way for a more inclusive future. An HR professional highlighted that the current state of gender diversity in Qatari higher education institutions is partly influenced by external factors, particularly Qatar's dependence on expatriate labour to fulfil local workforce demands. Another respondent observed that the limited number of women qualified or available to occupy teaching and managerial positions poses a challenge. Despite these barriers, all participants acknowledged the high level of dedication demonstrated by women in the workplace, with consistently strong performance ratings reported across the board.

Existing Work Policies and Practices Promoting Gender Diversity

Participants consistently emphasised that recruitment, career development, and promotion processes are governed by anti-discrimination policies related to race, gender, and origin, with a strong emphasis on merit-based assessments. Competence, rather than identity, is the determining factor in accessing professional opportunities. Additionally, respondents confirmed that gender-based disparities in remuneration do not exist; rather, salary and allowance allocations are influenced by variables such as marital status, job grade, and years of experience.

Across both public and private sectors, there is a shared acknowledgement of adherence to state-mandated maternity leave policies. One respondent from a public institution noted additional provisions for childcare, including leave for attending to sick children. While the overall physical work environment was described as comfortable and conducive, one respondent suggested including a social space to facilitate informal gendered interactions, considering employees' significant time at work. Two public sector respondents recalled previous gender-segregated workplace arrangements, reflecting earlier cultural norms, and another noted a

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continued cultural preference for maintaining boundaries in mixed-gender settings. This has led to sensitisation programs for new recruits on institutional policies.

A private sector respondent highlighted that occasional remote work options support a better work-life balance. When discussing gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms, one respondent from each sector believed such policies existed, though they were unfamiliar with their specific provisions. Importantly, all respondents affirmed the high level of professional commitment demonstrated by women in the workforce, as reflected in their consistently strong performance evaluations.

Challenges Undermining the Achievement of Gender Diversity

A respondent from Human Resources noted that while formal access to opportunities may not be explicitly hindered by gender-based discrimination, deep-rooted cultural influences and implicit biases continue to impact women's professional experiences adversely. The respondent recounted situations in which qualified female candidates were overlooked by academic hiring committees, not due to a lack of competence, but rather because of their gender or perceived family responsibilities.

Female participants in the study highlighted the ongoing challenge of achieving a sustainable work-life balance, which can lead some women to withdraw from the workforce or decline career-enhancing opportunities. These difficulties are shaped not only by working conditions but also by prevailing cultural expectations. Another HR respondent observed that entrenched stereotypes about female leadership sometimes lead male employees to resist accepting women in authoritative roles, occasionally resulting in formal requests for leadership changes despite the woman's evident qualifications. Additionally, female respondents voiced concern over the limited presence of relatable role models within academia, emphasising the need for greater visibility of women who succeed professionally while maintaining their social, cultural, and gender identities.

Respondent Recommendations for Achieving Gender Diversity in HEI

Respondents emphasised the need for stronger advocacy for gender diversity initiatives, urging active involvement from both men and women despite the competing institutional priorities. They highlighted the value of showcasing successful role models within the sector to inspire current professionals and educate the younger generation about the breadth of opportunities available. An academic respondent noted that career progression in academia is fundamentally driven by competence and personal ambition, irrespective of gender. From a human resources perspective, one respondent stressed the importance of raising awareness about existing institutional policies that support women, particularly those balancing professional responsibilities with family life.

Female participants called for developing more policies that genuinely reflect the realities of family needs and align with Qatari cultural values. One HR respondent referred to the successful implementation of flexible work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting such practices could be reinstated to support new mothers' post-maternity leave. This, they argued, would promote better work-life balance and sustain women's career growth beyond childbearing years. Additionally, academic and HR respondents advocated introducing

gender-sensitivity training and recognising female leadership competence as strategies to mitigate resistance and advance gender diversity in the sector.

DISCUSSION

Gender Diversity in the Higher Education Sector in Qatar

From the perspective of student enrolment, Qatar's higher education sector demonstrates a notable gender imbalance in favour of women, with female students significantly outnumbering their male counterparts. This trend reflects the outcomes of national initiatives and investments to promote women's participation in education and, by extension, their role in nation-building.

However, gender diversity among higher education staff presents a more nuanced picture. Interviews and global data sources indicate that while women dominate non-academic roles, accounting for at least 60% in most institutions according to 2021 UNESCO Institute for Statistics data (2023), they remain underrepresented in academic positions. Estimates from respondents, as well as data from the Planning and Statistics Authority (2019), Oxford Business Group (2022a), and World Economic Forum (2022), suggest that women constitute no more than 37% of academic staff.

This pattern is not unique to Qatar. Studies outside the Gulf region observed similar gender distributions, attributing them to structural factors including educational trends, work environments that lack family-friendliness, and broader societal influences (Carrington & Pratt (2003); Hovdhaugen & Gunnes (2019); Wiecezorek-Szymka (2020); and Llorens et al., 2021).

Although respondents consider these trends less than ideal in the Qatari context, they are viewed as signs of progress. The increasing participation of women in higher education aligns with arguments by Golkowska (2017) and Liloia (2019), who note that women in Qatar progressively embrace greater freedoms and opportunities. Additionally, research suggests that women are more prominent in higher education than traditionally male-dominated sectors (Felder & Vuollo, 2011; Golkowska, 2017; Liloia, 2019).

Despite higher female graduation rates from Qatari HEIs, this has not yet translated into proportional academic staffing. This discrepancy is partly explained and points out that female enrolment in science and industry-related fields remains comparatively low, limiting the pool of potential female academics in these disciplines (Hovdhaugen & Gunnes, 2019; Bencivenga et al., 2021).

Moreover, interviewees reinforced observations across both Middle Eastern and Western contexts regarding women's academic career challenges. These include difficulties achieving work-life balance, the demanding nature of academic work, and institutional policies that may unintentionally perpetuate gender bias (Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Winchester & Browning, 2015; Buttorff et al., 2018; Botella et al., 2019; Dickson, 2019; Bencivenga et al., Leone, 2021).

Gender Diversity Policy Environment

The Labour Law of the State of Qatar, established under Law No. 14 of 2004, contains several provisions to promote gender diversity in the workplace. Specifically, Articles 93, 94, and 98 address women's access to employment, the recognition of equal status within the workplace, and the assurance of equal pay for work of equal value. Articles 96 and 97 also provide

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protections for working mothers, outlining maternity leave entitlements and a designated period for nursing, thereby ensuring income stability and employment security (Ministry of Labour, 2004).

Participants in this research demonstrated a sound understanding of these legal frameworks, suggesting a general awareness of and adherence to the State's gender-related labour policies. This reflects a legal and institutional environment that acknowledges and supports women's roles in the workforce.

Respondents also reported that institutional practices are aligned with national legislation, with many organizations developing internal policies to uphold State requirements. For example, bylaws in one public institution were found to explicitly prohibit gender-based discrimination in hiring and promotions, while also accommodating maternity and nursing needs. Despite these efforts, concerns remain regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of such measures. Questions persist about potential implementation gaps that may hinder progress toward genuine gender equity, as well as whether current provisions fully meet the needs of working women.

Insights from female respondents support findings by Carrington and Pratt (2003), Llorens et al. (2021), and Silander et al. (2022), suggesting that legal provisions alone are insufficient. Achieving meaningful gender diversity demands deeper, more coordinated national, institutional, and individual commitments. While Qatar has made essential policy strides, further action appears necessary to realise the full potential of these efforts.

Gender Diversity in the Qatari Context

The Qatari social and cultural landscape is best described as dynamic, characterised by a careful negotiation between modernity and preserving cultural and national identity. At the national level, the role of women is increasingly recognised as vital to the country's development goals, a perspective that is also echoed in public sentiment, as reflected in the data gathered (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008).

However, translating this national vision into widespread, tangible change appears to lag behind in the socio-cultural sphere. From an Islamic perspective, women are accorded equal value to men, which may explain why participants in this study did not perceive religion as a primary barrier to gender diversity. Nonetheless, deeply rooted biases and societal stereotypes about gender roles in nation-building persist, both in this study and prior research. A prevailing narrative suggests that women prioritising careers are perceived as less committed to family life, an institution considered central to Qatari identity. Moreover, leadership continues to be stereotyped as a masculine domain, often resulting in limited support for women who aspire to such roles (Charrad, 2009; Golkowska, 2017; Liloia, 2019).

While Qatari traditions often support gender-segregated settings, there is growing evidence, particularly within educational workplaces, that mixed-gender professional environments are becoming more accepted. Respondents did not perceive these interactions as detrimental to gender diversity. On the contrary, their views reinforce the idea that modernity is gradually reshaping gender relations in Qatar constructively (Golkowska, 2017; Liloia, 2019).

Barriers and the Way Forward for Qatari Higher Education Institutions

A key issue unique to the Qatari context, as highlighted by a respondent during data collection, is the significant reliance on expatriate staff in higher education institutions (HEI) due to limitations in the local talent pool. This reliance has a notable impact on gender diversity efforts within the sector. Buttorff et al. (2018) have examined this dynamic in their research, calling for more nuanced measurement and analysis to inform effective solutions.

One strategy frequently cited by respondents and supported by existing literature is the implementation of career guidance and early exposure initiatives aimed at attracting a portion of the substantial number of female graduates into academic careers (Reddy et al., 2017; Llorens et al., 2021). These efforts are intended to reshape gender representation in the workforce by influencing career choices from the educational stage.

Respondents also stressed the importance of visible role models and supportive professional networks to attract and retain women in academia. Mentorship programmes and flexible work arrangements were identified as vital components in fostering a more inclusive environment. These measures support work-life balance and help challenge internalised limitations many women may have about their professional roles (Lari et al., 2023). Without such structures, particularly those supported by male and female leaders, women's career advancement remains hindered, and many are excluded from opportunities altogether (Reddy et al., 2017b; Windsor & Crawford, 2021).

Findings from this research indicate broad adherence to national laws and institutional policies. This suggests that further commitment at the policy and leadership levels could positively influence gender diversity outcomes. Karam and Afiouni (2014) highlight HR practitioners' pivotal role in institutionalising gender equity by conducting gender audits, leading sensitisation campaigns, and embedding equity into governance, recruitment, and professional development structures.

While cultural stereotypes and biases continue to impede progress, they are not insurmountable. These deeply rooted challenges, though socio-cultural in nature, can be progressively addressed through comprehensive and inclusive initiatives. Programmes that engage both men and women at all levels, from planning to implementation, have been shown to shift perceptions about women's roles and competencies (Bahry & Marr, 2005; Reddy et al., 2017a). As Llorens et al. (2021) affirm, societal and cultural transformation is often gradual, but sustained awareness efforts are essential for realising meaningful gender parity.

In conclusion, gender diversity within Qatar's higher education sector is shaped not only by the broader challenges inherent to the academic landscape but also by the unique socio-cultural dynamics of the Gulf region. These intersecting factors create a complex environment for equitable representation. Qatar's reliance on a predominantly expatriate workforce further complicates the situation, introducing additional diversity and integration challenges. Effectively addressing these issues requires a comprehensive structural approach that engages legal and institutional policy frameworks. At the same time, it is essential to navigate cultural perceptions with sensitivity, ensuring that efforts to promote gender diversity respect and uphold the core values of national

CONCLUSION

This study initially sought to explore a central question: *Does the higher education sector in Qatar face a gender diversity problem?* Based on the findings and their interpretation, it is evident that the sector encounters challenges related to gender diversity. However, these challenges extend beyond the frequently cited issue of the underrepresentation of women in terms of numbers. The complexity of the problem is more nuanced and multi-dimensional, shaped by the distinct experiences and structures within the different categories of staff employed across the sector. Each group encounters unique realities and obstacles, suggesting that gender diversity cannot be addressed through a uniform or simplistic lens.

While the State of Qatar has made commendable efforts toward promoting gender diversity, gender parity in the higher education sector remains an unfulfilled goal. In contexts where gender equity has been more successfully realised, a common thread is the prioritisation of gender diversity, supported by a sustained and multi-level commitment.

In Qatar's case, this study concludes that meaningful progress can be achieved through a comprehensive, inclusive approach. This would require addressing institutional policies, social and cultural dynamics, and the broader educational environment. Importantly, it must involve active participation and commitment from individuals of all genders. Such a holistic strategy could significantly enhance efforts toward achieving gender equity within the higher education workforce in Qatar.

Limitations

Although this study focuses on gender diversity within Qatar's higher education sector, it does not encompass data from all institutions due to logistical constraints. Consequently, the research does not seek to make statistical generalisations about the entire population within the sector. Given its scope and methodology, this study should be considered exploratory. It may serve as a pilot for future investigations or as a foundational guide for researchers aiming to conduct more comprehensive and detailed studies. In examining workplace gender diversity, it is essential to consider Qatar's dynamic socio-economic landscape. The country's workforce is heavily influenced by a significant presence of male migrant labour, which must be factored into any meaningful analysis of gender representation.

Recommendations for Further Research

This qualitative study did not explore statistical relationships between the various variables and actors in the higher education sector. However, acquiring such data would provide valuable insights into the most effective strategies to address the issue, ensuring that implemented plans yield measurable results.

Additionally, the research did not focus solely on the Qatari national context. Given the diverse range of stakeholders in the higher education sector, a broader examination that includes both nationals and expatriates would offer significant benefits. Understanding how public policy influences these dynamics could further shape the discourse on gender diversity in the sector.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Are you male or female?
2. Choose your appropriate age bracket.

25 – 30		31-40		41-50		51-60		60+	
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3. Are you married or single?
4. How many children do you have?
5. What is your highest level of education?
6. How many years have you worked in this institution?
7. What is your current job title?
8. How many years have you worked in your current capacity?

Section B: Organisational Diversity

9. How many employees does the institution have? (Give your best estimation)
10. What percentage of the employees are women? (Give your best estimation)
11. Do you know of any policies the institution has to enhance gender diversity?
12. Briefly describe the policies you are aware of.
13. Do you know if a pay gap exists between men and women with the same role and work description?
14. Does your company run staff training or skills development programmes? If yes, are they accessible to all?
15. Does the institution have gender-segregated workspaces for its staff?
16. In your experience, has the institution ever organised training programs or workshops on gender diversity, gender-sensitive issues or such? How often does this happen?
17. What do men and women raise the typical types of grievances in the workforce?
18. Does the institution have a gender-sensitive mechanism to handle employee grievances?
19. Does the institution have a parental leave policy in place? Kindly speak about what you know of it.

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20. After childbearing, do mothers return to work and stay working? What do you believe is the reason for this trend?
21. How does the institution ensure diversity in its recruitment and promotion processes?

Section C: Perceptions

22. What is your opinion on gender diversity?
23. Should the number of women appointed to managerial and teaching roles in the institution be increased? And why?
24. Do you believe there is an inadequate number of women capable of filling the managerial and teaching roles in the institution?
25. Do you believe increasing women's participation in the higher education workforce is necessary? Kindly state the reason for your answer
26. Do you believe that after childbearing, women should continue working and pursue career advancement?
27. In your opinion, what are some challenges women face in the institution's workforce?
28. How would you rate the performance and commitment levels of the women in the institution's workforce?
29. What, in your opinion, can be done to enhance the state of gender diversity in your institution?