

# Self-consciousness and Self-expression of Qatari Female Students

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*This study sets out to outline the self-consciousness and self-expression of Qatari female students. The paper is based on a research carried out at the female section of the University of Qatar where Qatari girls were observed from September 2005 to May 2006. The recruited participants (14) were also interviewed at the later stage of the study. The results showed that, according to the axis of expression of the outward–inward female identity and the axis of autonomy–dependency, Qatari female students can be classified into three types: “beauteous Qataris,” “active Qataris” and “religious Qataris.” The paper critically discusses the main differences of the types. The main findings suggest that Qatari female students display a lot of superficial changes based on the imitation, which indicate deeper processes and the need to obtain more autonomy; education stimulates questioning of the moral norms imposed by society and family; Qatari female students start adopting a new interpretation of religious scriptures and dogmas from the woman-friendly perspective.*

The issue of women living in Islamic societies has not only always been a controversial and much disputed subject, but in the light of the recent boom of globalization has also become fundamental in building a better intercultural understanding. In the last decades, the literature that offers contradictory findings about the status of Muslim women has emerged; however, objective information is still a rarity. Ghada Kharmi (1996) says: “The sensitivity of this issue is such as to prevent most people from engaging in rational debate for fear that they will either be branded as Muslim fanatics or as enemies of Islam. The whole matter is so charged with emotion and paranoia that to attempt a cool evaluation of exactly what are the rights of women under Islam is no easy matter.”

Frequent feminist conferences and organizations for defense of women’s rights emphasize that the first step in the improvement of women’s lives in Islamic society is a detailed and complex study of their present status, especially in the countries where little research has been done. It has to be pointed out with fairness that even though researchers have shown an increased interest in the topic, most studies have been

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carried out in the Arab countries where “Islamic feminism” emerged;<sup>1</sup> whereas certain MENA<sup>2</sup> countries, for instance, those of the GCC<sup>3</sup> region, have been paid far too little attention. Qatar clearly illustrates this point as the situation of Qatari women can only be defined by poor governmental statistical data and a few academic articles, which in the advent of the country’s rapid change have already lost their accuracy; yet no complex research concentrating exactly on the present situation of Qatari women has been carried out. The purpose of this paper is, at least partly, to fill in the gap of feminist writings and to contribute to setting and analysing data on young Qatari women in the modern Qatar.

### Methodology of the research

In his study “InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing” Kvale (1996) argues: “If you want to study people’s behavior and their interaction with the environment, the observations of field studies will usually give more valid knowledge than merely asking subjects about their behavior.” This approach perfectly corresponded with the method applied in the present research. For the purpose of obtaining optimal results, Qatari girls were observed in the chosen field study plot—Qatar University—for nine months. The recruited participants were also interviewed at the later stage of the study. In order to understand the particularities of the present research, the plot and the method had to be taken on closer investigation.

#### *Plot of the Field Study*

The University of Qatar served as the main plot of the field study from September 2005 to May 2006 and was chosen for its significant and active role in the social life of Qatar. Even though many changes have occurred in the country since the establishment of the University of Qatar in 1973 and it now experiences competition from the branches of acknowledged American Universities,<sup>4</sup> it managed to hold the major role in Qatar’s higher education system. In the 2004/ 2005 academic year, the University of Qatar had 9760 students,<sup>5</sup> which stands for 96.8% of the total student body residing in Qatar.<sup>6</sup> 6641 or 68% of the University of Qatar students were females, whereas 78.3 % of them were Qatari.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco.

<sup>2</sup> Middle East and North Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Gulf Cooperation Council—Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates.

<sup>4</sup> Such as Georgetown, Carnegie Melon, Weil Cornell.

<sup>5</sup> If not stated otherwise, statistical data come from the Statistics Department of the Planning Council of Qatar.

<sup>6</sup> In 2004/ 2005, 620 female and 692 male Qatari youngsters were studying abroad, most of them in Great Britain.

<sup>7</sup> The remaining 21.7% mainly consisted of students from other Arabic countries, such as Oman, Bahrain, Iraq, Palestine.

Despite the fact that the number of students studying in the University of Qatar and the proportion of male and female students have changed insignificantly since the 1996/ 1997 academic year, it is interesting to investigate changes in the formation of female students according to the fields of studies.

	1996/ 1997	2004/ 2005
Engineering	–	192
Sharia	392	881
Humanities	914	2546
Science	606	1129
Administration and Economy	416	608
Education	1982	635

Table 1. Structure of female students according to the fields of study in University of Qatar in 1996/ 1997 and 2004/ 2005 academic years

Discussing the tendency of female students forming a majority of student body Munira Fakhro (1996) says: “This trend will most likely have an effect on conservative Gulf states.” Obviously, these changes are happening sooner than it was possible to anticipate. In spite of the fact that till the establishment of the University of Qatar in 1973, possibilities for a woman to obtain even a secondary education were very doubtful, now Qatar is famous for an objective to become a leading educational center in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> What complicates the picture is the fact that no official data on the structure of Qatari citizens according to sex and age is available, therefore the exact percentage of Qatari females obtaining higher education is not clear.<sup>9</sup> However, the fact that women comprise two thirds of the total student body is eloquent per se. It should also be pointed out that the conditions of women in the Gulf states, which include the right to education, depend on the overall development and urbanization of a state (Fakhro 1996). According to the Planning Council of State of Qatar, in 2005 Qatari urban population reached 100%, whereas the GDP doubled from year 2003, reaching 42.1 US\$ billions in 2005.

The most common reason for denying higher education for a female appears to be early marriage and motherhood as it is commonly believed that marital life and studies are incompatible. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that even religious Qatari families often encourage their daughters to enter the university prior to marriage,

<sup>8</sup> This objective is widely supported and sponsored by the wife of Amir—Sheikha Mouza Bint Naser Al-Misnad.

<sup>9</sup> The Statistics Department of the Planning Council of Qatar estimated the total population of 744,000 in 2004, but didn't present any data on the proportion of Qatari citizenship holders. Unofficial data from various sources suggest that Qataris should form about a quarter of the total population. Qataris themselves commonly state that there are 130,000–150,000 Qatari citizenship holders. In 2004/ 2005 female tertiary enrolment of total female population formed 66.6%, and the ratio of female to male in tertiary education was 209.

basing it on every Muslim's right for education and enlightenment (Azzam 1996; El-Nimr 1996), as well as on the belief that education aids in woman's capacity to be a good mother.<sup>10</sup> Lama Abu-Odeh (1996) perfectly illustrates the attitude of typical contemporary Muslims: "Through education she raises happier and healthier children, and she is refined in order to be socially presentable with her husband."

Not least in significance is the fact that rules of gender segregation are applied in the University of Qatar, therefore it is strictly divided into male and female sections. As a result, female students are allowed to take off their *abayas* and in some places even to uncover their hair, yet male professors and university personnel are present here. Additionally, it is practically the only place where female students are not supervised by their family members.<sup>11</sup> When a female student enters university, she starts her autonomous life—here she makes her own decisions whether to wear *abaya* or not, here her behaviour stays less controlled, here the norms dictated by society and family are much lighter, because perfect circumstances for it are created—segregation is applied, but exceptions to it are allowed. In the face of these factors, female students' self-expression becomes much more open, and therefore the University of Qatar is a convenient place for the field study of the research.

#### *Participants and procedure*

In view of the sequestered Qatari students' community, one of the key tasks for a successful research was to enter the circle of Qatari students and to obtain their confidence. It should be pointed out in fairness that commonly every Westerner attracts a lot of attention in the university; however, most of the female students observe a newcomer from a distance. Everyday contacts and participation in the university activities are essential in creating an atmosphere of trustful relationships and in becoming an insider.

On achieving this goal, the stage of respondent recruitment and interviewing began. Some of the respondents were chosen from the interviewer's own social circle, whereas other female students were found in various university events. It should be noted that some of the respondents learned about the research from their friends and declared their wish to participate in it. To obtain information on the full spectrum of beliefs of university female students, diverse respondents were chosen according to the primary presumptions formed during previous observations. Additional criteria for inclusion in

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<sup>10</sup> In 2004, 41% of all the marriages registered in Qatar were held with the girls aged 20–24.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to understand that even if a female is allowed to meet her friends in a café or cinema, her behaviour is still indirectly restricted by her family, because Qatari families are so big and the population so small that the risk to be watched by one of your relatives remains really high. Lama Abu-Odeh (1996) indicates "the institution of gossip and reputation" as one of the main measures that culture uses "to guard itself against possible violations."

this study were that participants be between the ages 18–25, hold a Qatari citizenship and be Muslims. The sample consisted of fourteen female students.

### *Instruments of the research*

In an attempt to make each interviewee feel as comfortable as possible, they were enabled to choose a suitable time and place of the interview; absolutely all respondents expressed their wish to meet in the university area prior or after their lectures. Prior to commencing the study, confidentiality and data anonymity were assured and respondents were given account of the study purposes. Commonly, respondents were eager to get personal information about the interviewer such as religious beliefs, favorite music, hobbies. It is interesting that the majority of respondents behaved themselves in a very informal and friendly manner and sought to maintain communication after the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the basis of a questionnaire compiled especially for this study. In order to get a full spectrum of a girl's beliefs, the main topics were as follows: Education and Employment, Travel Experience, Family, Appearance, Society, Violence against Women. Each of these topics consisted of the main questions followed by a number of supporting questions and examples (some of which spontaneously derived from the discussion), which assisted in achieving more accurate and detailed answers. Interviews were commonly started by a discussion of daily matters and then gradually directed to more "sensitive" topics and personal experiences. Even though all respondents expressed will to be interviewed in English, some of the terms were explained in their native Arabic to those who were not fluent in English.

It goes without saying that confidentiality and data anonymity is a tender subject in Qatar, therefore a vast majority of respondents see audio recording of the interview as a threat to be identified if audio material would be leaked. The idea to audio record the interviews was given up after a few unsuccessful attempts,<sup>12</sup> and the obtained data were written down right after the interview.<sup>13</sup>

### **Classification of Qatari female students**

Classification of Qatari female students was inspired by the sexual typology of Arab women by Lama Abu-Odeh (1996). She bases her typology on modern Arab novels, interviews, observations of men and women in the daily life, accentuating the sexual expression of Arab women in public by observing "different relationships that different

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<sup>12</sup> Even though respondents agreed to be recorded, answers to the questions were so laconic and sketchy that interviews were practically worthless.

<sup>13</sup> Sometimes brief notes were written down during the interview, too.

women have come to have with the most popular Arab female dance, the belly-dance.” Abu-Odeh classifies Arab women into the sexy virgin, the virgin of love, the coquette, the GAP girl, the autonomous virgin, the slut, and the tease.

In the study of Qatari female students it was decided to base the classification on: (1) the axis of the expression of outward-inward female identity (the expression of gender); (2) the axis of autonomy-dependency (the need for autonomy or symbiotic relation). The main focus was set on the woman’s self-conceptualization and how it is expressed in her daily life; also on such *ego* capabilities as expressing ideas, ability to take care of herself, desire for autonomy, and their relation with *individual superego* (beliefs) and *collective superego* (rules of society). According to it, Qatari female students were divided into “beauteous Qataris,” “active Qataris” and “religious Qataris.” In the sexual expression, “beauteous Qataris” share similarities with Abu-Odeh’s “sexy virgin,” while “active Qataris” can be related to “autonomous virgins.” No type corresponding to “religious Qataris” is present in the sexual typology of Lama Abu-Odeh.

### *Beauteous Qatari*

“Beauteous Qatari” is the most popular type of Qatari female students entitled so because of their exaggerative attention to the looks.

This female may choose almost every field of study, however, the most popular are “fashionable” studies such as business management and English language. She believes that higher education is essential for every woman. “Firstly, studying in university helps a woman to better understand herself, makes her more mature. Secondly, it’s also necessary for bringing up children and for being able to work,” says Azizah.<sup>14</sup> A “beauteous Qatari” argues that professions are either “womanly” or “manly” and agrees that a woman shouldn’t choose the latter ones. “Well, a woman might be able to pilot a plane, but what’s the reason for that? It simply makes her life more difficult if she enters a “manly” field, these are hard professions. Besides, men are able to make decisions better than women and it’s extremely important in the jobs where you need to have quick orientation,” tells Farah. “Qatari women are simply not ready to work in professional fields where most of the positions belong to men. For example, a Qatari woman would never manage to work in the army, she is too weak for that. The groups of men would embarrass her,” agrees Laila. Paradoxically, even though a “beauteous Qatari” emphasizes the significance of education, she doesn’t take additional interests in her study field, doesn’t like reading, doesn’t participate in the out-of-class events and doesn’t have any hobbies. Asked what her favorite occupations in the free time are Azizah says: “Free time? I don’t know. To tell you the truth, I don’t

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<sup>14</sup> All the names of the respondents mentioned in the text are changed.

have any talent... Or hobby... I don't like reading. Well, maybe except the magazines about stars. I love to chat with my friends on the Internet. The rest of the time I watch music televisions, but only those playing English music! I also like shopping!" "When vacations come I travel with my mother and sisters to Dubai for shopping. But there is nothing to do in Qatar," Ghaniyah shares the same view.

Such female believes that knowledge she obtained in the university will likely be used for bringing up her children, and has no big career ambitions. "I don't know if I work in the future. Maybe... But I am absolutely sure that it's responsibility of a man to take financial care of the family, so I don't feel that I really have to go to work," states Azizah.

A "beauteous Qatari" often travels to other Middle Eastern countries, especially to those of the Gulf region. Commonly she has also visited a few Western countries which she is totally fascinated with. "I love London! I love everything about it—people, surroundings, weather!" tells Azizah. "I've enjoyed my holidays in Germany so much. It's true that some people see us as terrorists there, simply because we are Muslims... However, I adore freedom of Germans!" says Jameelah. A "beauteous Qatari" admires Western women and considers them free and strong. "I still remember one view: quite an old Austrian woman was sitting in a small outdoor café smoking, drinking coffee and reading a magazine. I watched her and dreamed that one day I could be just like her!" tells Laila. "I think that Western women are very free, for example, they don't have any problem to walk up to a guy who they like and ask him out for a date." says Jameelah. This type of female wishes to study abroad, yet it's very difficult to accomplish it as her father or brother has to escort her; however, a "beauteous Qatari" is commonly allowed to go on short trips with her mother or sisters.

Typically, this female is not married and openly enjoys it, because even though her life is now restricted by society rules and parents' provision, she is still guaranteed at least partial freedom. A "beauteous Qatari" believes that the perfect age for a female to get married is around her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. "I want to enjoy my life while I can. When I marry I won't be able to meet my friends or go to a movie whenever I wish. When I think of marriage I see myself sitting at home with a big belly, you know, from pregnancy... I'll think of that when I am 27 or 28," says Azizah.

A "beauteous Qatari" doesn't want to have a lot of children—"not more than three" as she usually puts it. "I don't love children. I think it's simply the husband's wish to have a son and to give his boy the name of his father. If it was in my hands I wouldn't have children at all, but I know that when I marry it'll be my main responsibility. But I definitely won't have more than three children! And I won't make any compromises here!" expresses her view Jameelah. Commenting on her marital expectations Laila says: "The first man who proposed to me was gorgeous! As soon as I saw him I said to my mother: "Mom, I want him!" But do you know what his conditions were? He

wanted me to give up my studies, he objected that I would work, drive, go outside home or have a maid. Of course, I turned him down! I'm not a sex and childbirth machine!"

A "beauteous Qatari" hopes that her future husband will be understanding, educated, tolerant and will actively participate in the family life and in the upbringing of children. "I wish that my future husband would be a graduate of a European or American university. I think it would help him to better understand me. Besides, men who spend some time in foreign countries are more tolerant," tells Ghaniyah. A "beauteous Qatari" is conscious of the fact that her husband will be chosen by her parents and more often than not they won't pay too much attention to her opinion; however, she believes in love and in its importance in the family. "The most important thing is that the man would be understanding and that love would connect us," claims Azizah, who also believes that sometimes "love can start" even in a few meetings before the wedding.

A female of this type is very curious and at the same time very cautious when it comes to men. She is interested in establishing contact with them, but only if it's kept on a very superficial level; she wants to get attention and appreciation, however, she is very careful about relationship that could be dangerous to her reputation. "This spring I accidentally send a SMS to the wrong number and that's how I got to know one American guy working in Doha. I was communicating with him on the phone for a couple of weeks. We planned to meet, but when we already decided the day and time when we had to see each other I started thinking that it's too dangerous. What if some Qataris will see me and spread gossips all around the town? No one would understand such meeting in Qatar," tells Farah. "If I see that some guy is starring at me in the shopping mall or in the street I turn my eyes away at once. In this society you can't leave any reason for rumors to spread. If I lived in the West, I would act quite differently, maybe I would even have a boyfriend. Of course, I understand that according to our religion you can't have any intimate relations till your wedding day and I absolutely agree with that, but love is not forbidden by Islam. Unfortunately, Qataris don't understand that," says Ghaniyah. Such female dreams not only about the opportunity to choose a husband by herself, but also about the possibility to marry a westernized man or even a Westerner. "Our parents should understand that a Qatari girl would be happier with an American, European or even Lebanese because they are more liberal than Qatari men," says Jameelah.

A "beauteous Qatari" strictly criticizes polygamy and claims that she wouldn't accept living in such a family. "It's allowed for a Muslim to have more than one wife, but it's also emphasized that husband has to treat each of his wives in the same way. If he buys a present for one wife, he has to buy the same for the second, if he spends one night with one wife, he has to spend the other with the other one, at last he must love them in the same way and I'm sure that no man is capable to do that," says Farah. "I understand that a man needs a second wife if the first can't have children or when in



some cases the first wife is not understanding, but usually it's a stupid wish of men because it allows them to show their power and wealth," explains Ghaniyah.

One of the most important things in the life of a "beauteous Qatari" is her appearance. She doesn't like or often even detests *abaya* (traditional black dress of the Gulf region). In order to make it more fashionable and create an original style, she uses various stylings and decorations such as the newest trend in the fashion of *abaya*—the so called "butterfly" style.<sup>15</sup> *Abayas* are commonly decorated with colourful motives of traditional Arabic ornamentation, though some extremely "modern" interpretations can be noticed, too.<sup>16</sup> "I hate *abaya*! I think it's so outworn. I love colours, and wearing this black thing I feel like someone has just died. I hope I will be able to dress the way I want one day!" says Jameelah, and after suddenly jumping up from a chair and removing her *abaya* continues: "Look, underneath it I dress like a normal fashionable Western girl." Hela wears an elastic sky-blue shirt, tight jeans and golden high-heals. "Besides, I would never wear *abaya* if I lived abroad. Even now when I travel outside Gulf with my parents I dress like a Western girl. I just follow the main rule of dressing—I fully cover my body and hair. But if I ever have a chance to go to a Western country alone I'll dress open clothes and I won't hide my hair!", tells the female. Commonly, females of this type aren't so rebellious and support the opinion that a Muslim woman has to cover her body and wear a veil, but not a single "beauteous Qatari" likes to wear *abaya*; underneath the traditional dress she usually wears clothes from luxurious Western clothing brands. Such female particularly likes pants and sees it as the symbol of a Western woman. Asked a question about the future of *abaya* she doesn't hesitate a minute to answer that "the shorter, the better."

A "beauteous Qatari" doesn't wear *niqab* (face veil) arguing that a Muslim woman shouldn't cover her hands and face. Heavy make-up, high heels, colourful bags and fanciful hairdos are typical attributes of a "beauteous Qatari." The university is one of the main places for her to show off. Commonly, she takes off her *abaya* and *hijab* (head covering) here and spends most of the time between lectures in a bathroom fixing her make-up, hairdo or simply admiring her image in the mirror, as well as in the café area where girls have a perfect chance to observe each other. Importantly, this space is one of the main places to "pick a bride" as a female can "recommend" a group mate that she finds presentable to her brother and so a brother has a perfect chance to learn about the girl everything that is considered important—her appearance, reputation, if she is religious enough, how she acts being angry, etc. No wonder that in such surrounding a "beauteous Qatari" feels perfectly. Here she can exhibit her beauty, new clothes and show off to her best implicitly attracting male and perhaps even to the possible husband. In this instance, male consideration becomes more theoretical, allowing a "beauteous

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<sup>15</sup> Tight cuffs and flared out sleeves form a shape of a butterfly.

<sup>16</sup> The most original *abaya* I witnessed was decorated with white skulls, whereas there is a new trend of using applications of Chinese Dragons and big silver safety-pins.

Qatari” to enjoy and deepen her narcissistic characteristics—she knows that men are attracted to her, however, they can’t harm her in no respect.

A “beauteous Qatari” is embarrassed by direct communication with men. Such female feels perfectly in the segregated university surroundings and seems to be deeply hesitant when asked about the possibility of making the University of Qatar coeducational. “It would be a bit strange. When I communicate with my male professors I can easily explain our relation as absolutely professional. But with a boy group mate I couldn’t define that,” says Jameelah. Whereas talking about work space, a “beauteous Qatari” emphasizes that it’s “totally different from university, because men respect women there.” “Nowadays men and women should work together. It’s absolutely normal, because professional ties are the only ones connecting colleagues. Times have changed and so the attitude of men changes. When we work together with men we’ll teach them to respect us even more,” tells Ghaniyah. Nonetheless, a “beauteous Qatari” argues that women should avoid any unspecified relations with men. “Of course, if some man asks me a question in the university I will answer him, but if someone comes to me and starts talking in a street or in a mall I will go away at once,” explains Azizah. When she wants to go out of home she typically needs to get the permission from a family member, however, it doesn’t necessarily have to be her father or brother, it can commonly be her mother, too. Usually it is not difficult for a “beauteous Qatari” to go out of home, and she is often noticed in shopping malls, cafes or cinema. She is allowed to leave with her girlfriends or sisters, parents don’t demand her to be accompanied by *mahram* (an unmarriageable kin).

A “beauteous Qatari” claims that women have enough rights in Qatar. She doesn’t know any organizations for women here, she is also not interested in politics and she can’t prognosticate if she votes in 2007 election. In fact, it’s the first time she hears about the elections in 2007. A “beauteous Qatari” believes she could vote for a woman candidate if the latter “represents her interests;” however, she believes that men are much better in governing the country.

Such female claims that she never felt discriminated as a woman, but can name a few cases when a Qatari female was not allowed to study, work or was forced into marriage. “It happens because we have some people with a very complicated thinking. But I think a girl should talk with them and explain everything,” says Laila. Whereas Farah is more pessimistic: “Actually there is not much she can do. I suggest her to simply adjust to such fate.”

A “beauteous Qatari” opines that *mahram* cannot make any decisions concerning the female’s life without consulting with her. However, she extenuates that if a woman does something “really bad,” for example, engages in premarital sexual relations, *mahram* can punish her using physical actions. She considers it explainable, but unjustifiable. “If a girl goes so far with her actions, it means that parents brought her up in a wrong way. And in this case you have not to beat your daughter, but to blame

yourself,” explains Farah. Asked what actions parents should take if they are “betrayed” by their daughter, the female falls silent for a moment and then responds in a serious and profound voice: “They should find her a psychotherapist.”

### *Active Qatari*

Even though the “active Qatari” type is less numerous than the “beauteous Qatari,” there is no doubt that it’s the most liberal and influential.

An “active Qatari” usually chooses a “serious” study field; technological and natural sciences are amongst the popular ones. Yet it is possible to find this type of female in every specialty, inasmuch as those who are forbidden by parents to enter a certain study field (because it is considered “manly” professions) enter linguistic studies or another “appropriate” field. “I graduated from school with perfect grades, so I had an opportunity to study biology in some Western country,<sup>17</sup> but my parents didn’t allow this. They said that I myself wouldn’t be able to cope with everything, that there wouldn’t be anyone to take care about me. Besides, I am not used to this way of living. I felt very disappointed at first, but after considering everything I realized that my parents are absolutely right—this lifestyle is not for me... Every day when I come back from university there is hot dinner served for me. And, for example, I have no idea how I should travel alone. I entered business management in the University of Qatar and I am really happy with my studies here,” says Nabilah. Interestingly, such female commonly claims that all study fields are appropriate for a woman, but some of them are “more appropriate” than others. She bases her opinion on the argument that “woman will simply make her life more difficult if she chooses a profession where most of her colleagues are men.” At the same time she agrees that total gender segregation in work space is not possible, because, how Rana puts it: “Cooperation between men and women is essential, because they add to the competences of one another and that’s how you get the best results.” It’s important to mention that this type of female emphasizes the importance of education; the most important thing, she argues, is not to hold a university diploma, but to take interest in obtaining knowledge, to participate in conferences and seminars, to read books and to follow the world news.

An “active Qatari” always becomes the best student in her class. Not only she perfectly attends lectures and carefully studies all the material, but she also commonly becomes the president of student clubs, as well as the organizer of various conferences and events. “I love to participate in various university activities. I am the president of the student club. I also actively participate in organizing university events,” says Rana. “I am assisting my aunts who are opening a new center for women in Doha. Here they will be able to get more information about Islam, their rights, possibilities to gain

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<sup>17</sup> The exact places, dates and titles are not mentioned on the basis of anonymity.

higher education and also to communicate with each other and share their experiences,” tells Aminah.

An “active Qatari” likes reading books. She enjoys not only books written by Arab writers and the ones related to her study field, but also writings by famous Western authors. Nabilah, for example, admires Virginia Woolf and Rana says her favourite book is John Gray’s “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.”

An “active Qatari” usually has experience of profession-oriented activity in foreign countries. When she travels, she is commonly escorted by *mahram*. “This year I participated in an international conference abroad. In the beginning I was so worried, because I thought I won’t be able to go there as my father and brothers are very busy, so I doubted if anyone will accompany me, but my father agreed without hesitating! It was wonderful! I met so many interesting girls from all over the world, besides, I read a paper! Everyone who got to know me was surprised that an Arab girl can be so open-minded!” Rana shares her experience. “I was studying in one Western country for two years. I lived with my brothers; they, one after the other, used to take care of me and fix such things as payment for the apartment or shopping. But once I stayed all by myself for one week. My family agreed to make an exception, because they already knew my surroundings and I already knew the language, so I felt much safer than in the beginning,” says Kamilah. Nawal, who received an invitation to spend two weeks in a Muslim center in one European country, tells: “When I heard that I and my friend were chosen from all our classmates, I almost fainted from happiness! I didn’t tell anything to my dad for two weeks, because I was afraid he won’t let me go alone to such a far country. And really, when he first heard it, he said “no” right away. I spent all week convincing my mother to convince my father, and then my mother spent another week convincing my father. One morning I came to the kitchen for breakfast, my dad was sitting near the table, and as soon as he saw me he said “Oh, well, you can go...” I even started jumping how happy I was! I am so grateful to him that he gave me this chance. Well, I really almost died from fear when I had to leave the country... It’s good that my friend also convinced her parents to let her travel, but still we had so many difficulties and troubles. For example, when we reached our hotel where we were supposed to stay, the taxi driver took our things out of the car and left us standing there alone! We had to take our luggage to the third floor by ourselves! And then it turned out that the hotel had only three stars and that even hot water wasn’t working well enough there. I called my brother in Doha and he found a normal place for us to stay. We really had a lot of difficulties just as my father had told it would happen, but I still appreciate this experience so much, because I think it really made me stronger.” Unfortunately, most Qatari parents still see their daughter’s wish to study abroad very skeptically, not even considering an opportunity to let her travel without *mahram*.

This type of female has an ambivalent attitude towards Western women: on the one hand, such Qatari admires the possibilities and strength of Western women; on the

other hand, she has compassion on the latter because of the extremely difficult living conditions. “Firstly, a woman in the West is very strong. Otherwise she wouldn’t survive there! The absolute equality between men and women has its price. A woman gains more rights, but she loses so much. And her life becomes much more difficult,” argues Aminah. “We have more similarities than differences with the Western women. We are all women in the end. However, for us it is much easier to live than it is for them. We are protected and cherished by our men, while they have to live all by their selves. If our families live according to true Islamic rules, women live like princesses,” Nabilah expresses her view. No wonder that, according to Qataris, “under such living conditions Western women lose their femininity.” “I think most of Western women are unfeminine. For example, English women wear mannish T-shirts, pants, they have these short haircuts and like to make it into ponytails. Maybe Scandinavians and Germans are a bit more feminine,” tells Kamilah.

An “active Qatari” thinks that the ideal age for a woman to get married comes when she graduates from university, because as Rana puts it: “Then a woman is a real grown-up, besides, before starting to work she can make a pause and have children.” This type of female is interested in marriage, seeing it as an inseparable part of the woman’s life. Commonly, she engages while studying in the last years of university and gets married right after graduation. She accepts the fact that her parents will choose her future husband on their own. The only thing this female worries about is that her husband would be tolerant, educated and wouldn’t mind her career objectives. “I am planning to get engaged this spring. Right now my future husband is studying in the West, and as soon as he comes back we will get engaged and then in the autumn we’ll get married. He looks really cool! To tell you the truth, I found some very useful information in the Internet. I found the discussion forum in the website of his university and there I got to know his opinion about family, children, religion. After reading all that I can say without any doubt that I want my husband to think as tolerantly as he does!” tells Rana.

This type of female supports the view that Qatari women should get married with Qatari men, because “it will help them to better understand each other.” It should be pointed out that she is aware of the fact that unless her husband is a Qatari, he has to be from the surrounding Gulf countries, and she has never put too much effort in considering whether the marriage between a Qatari woman and a foreigner is possible. An “active Qatari” has her certain preferences towards marriage. For example, she wouldn’t like to get married with her cousin, arguing that their children could have mental and physical disorders. Nonetheless she is conscious about the possible limits of her desires and doesn’t “waste” her time on dreams about love. Her attitude towards marriage is clearly practical—when the right time comes, her parents will find her the

husband, “Insha Allah,”<sup>18</sup> she will fall in love with him and they will happily live ever after. “I don’t think about marriage too much. I want to get married and have children when I finish my studies, but for now there is nothing I can do about it. When the right time comes I will get married,” calmly explains Nabilah.

An “active Qatari” claims that the main duty of a woman in the family is to bring up her children in a right way. She doesn’t have to clean house or make food, because it can be easily done by a maid. “The main goal of every woman is to take care of her children and their future, but I think I can manage working at the same time. I want to work. I think it’s useful for everybody—for me, for my husband, for my country,” says Aminah. “I hope my husband will not only understand me, but support me as well. Wife and husband have to take part in all family deals together. If I wipe the floor, he has to wipe it too! Well, of course, we will have a maid,” she adds. An “active Qatari” argues that a woman should have a driver, because it is very “practical.” Commonly she knows how to drive a car, but doesn’t have a driving license, because she simply considers it as an aggravation of a woman. “I know how to drive and I love to go for a drive in the dunes outside the town, but I wouldn’t like to drive in the town at all. Everybody is driving like mad here. Besides, a driver can really make woman’s life easier, because she can relax in the car and he can also fix some things like taking children from school or bringing documents,” tells Kamilah.

This type of female wouldn’t accept husband’s will to have more than one wife and in this case would choose divorce. According to her, the only situation when option of polygamous family could be considered is if the first wife is infertile. “In the days of the revelation of Quran there was an uncontrolled polygamy in the Arab world and men used to have nine, ten wives, so if one day it was forbidden for these men to have more than one wife no one would have followed Islam. So Quran limited the number of wives to four and emphasized that all the wives have to be treated in exactly the same way,” explains Nabilah and after a little pause resumes: “Besides, in the old times Arabs used to be at war a lot. Many men never returned home from the battles and so their wives, who were absolutely materially dependent on men, used to stay in a terrible situation. It was a noble duty of a good Muslim to marry such a woman and to give her the same life as his first wife’s. However, it’s not important nowadays. I can justify a polygamous family only if the first wife is unable to have children.” Whereas Aminah, whose father has two wives, playfully expresses an original attitude: “My mother is the second wife for my father. The first one is much older than my mom. I get along with her very well—she is like an aunty for me. But I would never agree that my husband had more than one wife! Though it’s logical that a man needs four wives: the first is his real wife, the second is mother, the third is a friend, and the fourth one is his lover. But I am sure that I can be all of them for a man!”

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<sup>18</sup> Often used Arabic term meaning “If it is God’s will.”

An “active Qatari” covers her hair and wears *abaya* even at the university. She believes that it guarantees a serious attitude towards her, besides, she regards exposure of the body and exaggerated care for the looks as shameful and dishonourable. “Westerners think that we cover our hair and wear our traditional clothes because we are forced to do so, but it’s so far from truth. We like to wear *abaya*! It properly covers the body and it also saves the Qatari individuality and identity. I feel really ashamed for girls that want to get rid of these traditions as soon as possible,” claims Kamilah. “Those dressed up Qatari girls that take over everything, they can from the West do a big mistake. They make our name worse not only in the eyes of Qataris, but also of the whole world,” tells Aminah. However, as a rule, an “active Qatari” disapproves of covering her face with *niqab*. “I don’t like *niqab*, it’s not Islamic. Of course, if some girls find it necessary, let them cover. But I would never hide my face, this is my personality, this is who I am. Our religion says that a woman shouldn’t hide her face and hands,” says Aminah. “I don’t use make-up and other things that could attract useless attention, so I know that I don’t do anything bad in showing my face,” expresses her opinion Nabilah. Underneath *abaya* an “active Qatari” wears conservative Western clothes; usually it’s jeans, a simple long-sleeved shirt and sneakers. However, when such female travels abroad she takes off her *abaya* and covers her hair with a colorful veil. “I don’t wear *abaya* when I travel to foreign countries, because *abaya* loses its meaning there. It is made to protect a girl from attention, and in the foreign countries *abaya* attracts it, because for foreigners this clothing seems very strange,” explains Rana. An “active Qatari” hopes that the tradition to wear *abaya* will prevail for a great while in Qatar, however, she doubts that it will be used after 50 years. “I think we should be proud of such a cloth as *abaya*—it’s our heritage. Just I am afraid that with all that is going on nowadays in Qatar, with all this Western influence already after 10 years *abaya* will be forgotten,” says Kamilah.

An “active Qatari” avoids contacts with the university male staff and communicates with them only as much as her studies require. When she meets male students at various conferences and events, she behaves in a very conservative way leaving no chance for any discussion other than university activities. “Sometimes I have to organize events together with boys. Of course, I would prefer working with girls, but I understand that nowadays I can’t escape contact with boys and there isn’t anything wrong until a girl knows how to behave herself. I always communicate with them only as much as my professional activities demand,” says Nawal.

An “active Qatari” deems that if woman is outside study or work surroundings and is not escorted by *mahram*, she even shouldn’t greet men. Eye contact is a great taboo. This type of female argues that “firstly, it can cause a lot of troubles in Qatar, secondly, a good girl should understand that she shouldn’t do this.” Commonly such female needs to get the permission of *mahram* if she wants to go out of her home, however, if she wants to leave with a “noble” intention, for example, for the sake of studies, he

doesn't have a right to object. "Women are lazy here. They simply don't know their rights. I had problems with my brothers, too. Sometimes they don't want me to go to some events, but I know that it's my right and I always use it," says Kamilah and adds: "A woman has to have a reason if she wants to go out of home. I don't understand women who go shopping to Dubai every weekend. If your husband gives you such an opportunity you have to be happy about it, but you can't start using it."

An "active Qatari" argues that visiting a male doctor is absolutely acceptable, because here the gender plays a minor role conceding it to the patient–doctor relation. She can also have a male driver or housekeeper and stay with them by herself, however it is necessary to have in mind that personnel staff never consists of Qataris or other "potential spouses" from neighboring countries. Indians, Pakistanis, and emigrants from other South Asian countries are considered "not dangerous," because there is no way a Qatari could marry them. Anyhow an "active Qatari" emphasizes that nonetheless "they are still men in the first place." "My driver is an Indian and I often have to go somewhere alone with him. I know that some Qataris would even take off their *hijab* or fix their make-up in this situation, but it's *haram*.<sup>19</sup> A driver, even though he is an Indian, is firstly a man, and looking at a girl obsessed with her looks they all think the same," says Aminah.

An "active Qatari" can indicate at least a few women's organizations or centers existing in Qatar. She doesn't think, however, that new laws defending women's rights are needed in Qatar, yet she argues that it is necessary to introduce possibilities and rights that are presented to women by Quran. "Our religion gives a lot of rights to women, even more than to men in some cases. It's true that not all women are liberal in our society, but religion has nothing to do with it, it's simply a wrong way of thinking," claims Rana. "People become more and more complicated. Earlier people in Qatar used to have only Quran, so it was very clear for them how they should behave. Now, when we have this Western culture coming in, everything is much more complicated. People are confused," tells Aminah.

This type of female argues that men and women are equal, but not the same, therefore their rights can differ in some spheres. "The biggest difference between men and women is woman's ability to give birth to children. Every woman should be proud of it and at the same time should take it responsibly. Of course, just after giving birth to a child woman can't go to work. While her husband always has to guarantee full financial maintenance for the family, so it's very natural that sometimes their rights differ," says Nawal.

An "active Qatari" intends to vote in Qatari governmental elections in 2007. She also claims that if a woman is really smart she can participate in governing the country;

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<sup>19</sup> An often used Arabic term which indicates a strict prohibition; for example, it is *haram* for a Muslim to eat pork or drink alcohol.



moreover, an “active Qatari” could even give her vote for a woman candidate if she was “good enough” as Aminah puts it. “I don’t care if it’s a man or a woman when I choose whom I will vote for. The main thing is that he or she would be able to represent the interests of Qataris,” explains her view Nabilah.

This female says that she doesn’t feel discriminated in Qatar, though it had happened in the Western countries. “When I was studying in the West, every morning I used to buy a cake in a small bakery close to my home. One day I was waiting for my turn and behind me there was a German woman with a small girl who looked at me and asked her mother “What is this stupid Turkish doing here?” I bent down and explained to her that I’m not Turkish and that it’s very rude to call people “stupid,” especially when you don’t know them. The mother of the girl apologized, but still it was very hurtful,” tells Kamilah. “We travelled to one Western country with my father. He was wearing *thaub* (traditional white male garment). Suddenly one foreigner came to us and sarcastically said: ‘You’re without camels?’” shares her experience Kamilah.

An “active Qatari” acknowledges that cases when *mahram* forbids a woman to obtain education or forces her to marry a certain man still exist in Qatar, however, she argues that it’s the problem of women because they simply don’t know their rights declared in Islam. *Mahram* can use neither physical nor psychological force against daughter under any circumstances; it’s unjustifiable on any condition. “My sister wanted to marry one man and my brother was against it, so I took the part of my sister and told him that it’s clearly stated in *hadith* (traditions relating to the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad) that if a man and a woman like each other, they have a right to get married and no one can forbid that. In the end they got married and now my brother is happy for them, because they really get along very well,” tells Aminah and adds: “If someone tries to limit woman’s rights she simply has to show Quran, because everything is in Quran.”

### *Religious Qatari*

A “religious Qatari” is a distinctive type of Qatari females likely to be the outcome of gender segregation. It is a considerably smaller group than “beauteous Qatari,” but in the matter of quantity it can be compared to the type of “active Qatari.” The “religious Qatari” was named so on the basis of her strong religious beliefs which regulate and control all the spheres of her live.<sup>20</sup>

As a rule, a “religious Qatari” chooses *Sharia* (Islamic law) studies. Unlike most of university students, she speaks English quite poorly. She suggests that a woman has to obtain higher education inasmuch as this knowledge can assist in the upbringing of

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<sup>20</sup> For a traditional interpretation of the woman’s status in Quran and Islamic law, see “Women in Islamic Law” by Raga El-Nimr.

children; furthermore, studies enable to achieve a profound comprehension of Islam. “It’s very important for a woman to graduate from university. Here we have the best chance to get a deeper understanding of our religion and to become good Muslims,” says Masouda. A “religious Qatari” claims that only exceptional study fields are appropriate for a woman. The best she can choose is religious studies. She might also consider linguistics or other humanities, however, she should leave such fields as natural or exact sciences for men. “I don’t understand girls who want to study, for example, medicine or engineering. I don’t understand parents who let them do it, either. After all, they are girls! They simply don’t have the right skills to do it! They would never be capable to make decisions in such a right way and short time as men do,” says Yaminah. This type of female doesn’t plan working after she finishes her studies; she just doesn’t see any reason for that. “I would like to dedicate my life for taking care of children and for the other, higher work—studying Quran. Men are meant to work and financially take care of the family, while women have to make sure that her children would become good Muslims,” tells Sabirah. A “religious Qatari” doesn’t participate in any conferences or other out-of-class activities as she considers it to be an absolute waste of time. She spends most of her spare time reading and exploring Quran and religious literature. “I love reading! I am interested in all the religious readings. It’s surprising that from every book I get so much new information about Islam!” claims Yaminah. “I go to the Muslim center when I have free time. They often have lectures about Islam,” says Bahiya.

A “religious Qatari” doesn’t have much experience in travelling. Once in a while she visits Arab countries and is fascinated by an opportunity to take a trip to Mecca or Medina; however, she doesn’t consider travelling to be a useful activity. It is interesting that most of these females have visited some Western countries, but they show no admiration and no wish to go back. “Most Qataris are crazy about travelling, they can go to Dubai every weekend, but I personally think it’s a waste of time. I can go and visit some country, but to go there one more time seems nonsense to me. The only place where I really gain strength is Medina,” tells Rawhad. This type of female always travels escorted by *mahram* and supports the view that “it is *haram* for a woman to travel without a man.” A “religious Qatari” views Western women sympathetically and always emphasizes that they even don’t understand how disadvantaged they are. “Western women are used by men every day. No one cares for them, no one protects them. And they even don’t understand it and are happy with their ‘freedom’!” says Yaminah. “Women living in Europe and America are very unhappy. Just look how many women in the West are depressed! We don’t have such problems in Qatar,” claims Masouda.

A “religious Qatari” argues that the ideal age for a female to get married is between the ages of 19–20. She agrees that the girl’s parents should choose her the husband. “Parents know what is best for me and have more experience than I do, so I think they’ll

choose a good and religious man,” says Masouda. Paradoxically, explaining why she isn’t capable to choose a husband by herself, the female says: “I don’t have enough experience for that. But if I ever get divorced then I could choose a husband by myself, because I would already know what they are like.” This type of female acknowledges that she would like to see her husband before the wedding; however, she doesn’t consider a closer acquaintance to be essential. “I would like to have a chance to see my husband before the wedding, but it’s not necessary to communicate with him. I trust my parents and their decision, besides, we’ll have all our life to get to know each other,” explains Sabirah. A “religious Qatari” regards religiousness as the most important trait of a man, whereas comprehension is considered to be more relevant for a woman than for a man. “The most important thing is that a man would be a good Muslim. He will have to make all the important decisions in the family, so it’s necessary that he followed the principles of Islam. Of course, I can express my opinion and advise, but he is a man and even if I find his decision not a hundred percent right, I will still depend on his opinion and I will do everything to understand him,” shares her opinion Rawdah.

She agrees that a man should participate in family life, however, his first concern should be oriented towards work. Although at her present home a “religious Qatari” has a maid and acknowledges that according to the rules of Islam woman doesn’t have to keep house and to cook, in her future home she would like to do everything by herself. “I don’t like maids. I don’t trust them. In the beginning you hire them just to help in the housework and after half a year they already take care of your children and you don’t even notice anything!” explains Yaminah.

A “religious Qatari” wouldn’t want her future husband to have other wives, and if he didn’t have a serious reason for that she would even consider a possibility of divorce; however, there are some conditions in which she justifies a polygamous family. “If the wife can’t have children or some accident happens and she stays handicapped, the man could marry one more woman, because otherwise he would simply leave his first wife or start cheating on her with another woman, so I think it’s better that everything is official,” claims Sabirah. “There are men for whom one woman is just not enough, but I doubt if I could be with such. I would think about it only because of children, but I am not sure if I could live like this,” says Yaminah.

This type of female wouldn’t mind if she was bounded by the ties of blood with her husband. “It’s perfect if you can get married with someone from your family. I think such couple is much closer between themselves,” expresses her view Masouda. It is interesting to note that Qatari male and female cousins interact a lot and often even live in the same rooms when they are children, but as soon as they reach early adolescence, they are separated and cannot even see each other. If encounter happens by surprise, the female is expected to ignore her cousin. A “religious Qatari” deems that if a woman doesn’t have a chance to get married with her family member, then it should necessarily be a man from Qatar or at least from neighboring countries.

This type of female is particularly fond of wearing *abaya* and is convinced that it is a perfect clothing for a woman. “I can wear whatever I want near members of my family, but I have to wear a loose dress which covers all the body and doesn’t reveal my body forms when I’m in the public. It’s exactly what *abaya* does!” explains Sabirah. “When you buy a flower in a shop it’s always rolled-up in paper that it wouldn’t be affected by wind and that it would keep its beauty till you bring it home. The same concerns a woman—her beauty has to be revealed only at home near her family members, because she slowly loses it if she is watched by others,” claims Yaminah. A “religious Qatari” criticizes “beauteous Qataris” and the new fashion of *abayas*. She never decorates her *abaya* with colourful designs and always chooses a loose silhouette for it. “I’m shocked to see these girls with heavy make-ups and colorful *abayas*. They don’t get the essence of Islam. A girl has to be modest! *Abaya* is black in order to save a girl from attention, while they put all those colourful designs on it and make it so tight that you can see all their body!” says Masouda.

A “religious Qatari” usually wears *niqab* even when she is at the university, because “no one except *mahram* should see the face.” “Men are used to stare at woman’s eyes in Qatar, so it is the best to fully cover the face,” says Rawdah. A female of this type commonly wears exclusively black footwear which doesn’t leave any uncovered skin, and doesn’t use any make-up. She usually prefers sewing her own garments to buying ones and completely dismisses pants from her wardrobe. “Muslim women shouldn’t wear pants, it’s a manly clothing. According to Islam, women can’t pray wearing pants, so it means they shouldn’t wear them at all,” explains Yaminah. Even though this female is disappointed with the changing style of Qatari female clothes, she strongly believes that *abaya* will exist for a great while. “Good Qatari Muslims will never give up *abaya*,” says Rawdah and adds: “For example, my seven-year-old sister. She doesn’t have to wear *abaya* and *hijab* at this age, but she can’t wait till that age when she can finally wear it! Besides she already understands that she has to hide herself from men she doesn’t know. When a male photographer came to make a picture of our family, she ran away and hid. When I asked her why she did that she said ‘Well, he’s a man...’ What a smart girl!”

A “religious Qatari” thinks that gender segregation at the university is a necessity. Moreover, women can study and work only where no men are present. According to her, communication with a man who is not *mahram* is forbidden and is seen as a violation of Islamic rules. A “woman can work as a teacher or as a nurse in a women’s hospital, but it’s not good if she works together with men. In our religion, women can’t communicate with any man who is not from her family,” says Masouda. “Everything begins from girls and boys studying at the same universities. Then meetings for a coffee and walks in the evenings follow. Until everything ends with a pregnancy outside marriage,” tells Sabirah. “We still have some moral principles left in Qatar and we have to cherish and protect them. Just look what is happening in the West: children are

growing up with lonely mothers, sexual relations outside marriage are seen as an absolutely normal phenomenon, venereal diseases spread on a terrible scale. And after all this someone tells us that we are living wrongly? Islam forbids any unnecessary contact between men and women that there would be no temptation and that we would avoid such social degradation. Sexual relations outside marriage deserve the same punishment as a theft or a murder," expresses her opinion Rawdah. "We don't need male company in the parties as we don't need alcohol or drugs. Muslims' family circle is so wide and relations in it so warm that we can easily stay without it," claims Yaminah.

Females of this type argue that a woman should leave her home only for a serious reason. "A woman should spend most of her time at home, because husband takes care of all the important things and she just doesn't have any reason for going outside," says Rawdah. A "religious Qatari" feels uncomfortable if she stays alone with a male driver or has to visit a male doctor. "Islam allows doing that, because it is seen as unavoidable relations between a man and a woman and their gender has nothing to do with it, but I myself try to avoid it and not to stay close to other men in any case," says Sabirah.

Females of this type are openly surprised when asked if women need more rights in Qatar. "Rights? We have enough rights, besides, we are protected and cherished," tells Masouda. A "religious Qatari" argues that men and women are completely different, so their rights cannot be equal in any case. This female sees the woman as the weaker gender and infantilizes her. "Man has to take care of his wife because she is much weaker than him," explains Yaminah.

A "religious Qatari" doesn't even consider an opportunity to get a driving license, because "it's not appropriate for a woman to drive."

She doesn't know if she votes in 2007 Qatari elections, however, she is confident that she wouldn't give her vote for a female candidate. A "woman could never govern a country. It's men's job to make important decisions," says Sabirah. "Without a man, a woman can't make big decisions even at home, so how would she govern a country?" wonders Rawdah.

A "religious Qatari" acknowledges that sometimes parents don't permit their daughter to study at the university or force her to marry a certain man, but in her opinion "she should trust their decision, because they know better than she does what their daughter needs." She claims that parents or husband should consult a woman before making decisions that concern her life; however, they have a full right to decide by them selves. A "religious Qatari" agrees that closest relatives could be justified if they use physical force against a woman in the case when she does something "really bad" and defames family honour. "I never thought about it. Well, I guess yes... There are really some girls who cannot be handled otherwise," after giving thought to it for a minute answers Masouda. Before saying goodbye she hands a pamphlet about women's rights in Islam and says: "You have to come to the meetings in the Muslim

center. There are also meetings for women converted to Islam. They will answer all your questions and explain how happy you can be if you choose to follow the Islamic way.”

### Discussion

There are standard explanations that “Western feminism” applies to the situation of Muslim women (Karmi 1996). It goes without saying that both their thinking and their daily life routines contradict the idea of what is called “a free woman” in the West (Azzam 1996). Nonetheless, it seems to be the case that emancipation of Muslim women lays the foundations of the unique “Islamic feminism” (Afshar 1996; Azzam 1996; Fakhro 1996).

As a rule, one of the first things that attract attention of a Western newcomer in Qatar is native women dressed in black, or as they usually put it, “all covered up.” Naturally, when assessed from the Occidental point of view and compared to the freedom of a Western woman (which, paradoxically, is more often than not prejudiced from what a woman wears or doesn’t wear), it is concluded that Qatari women suffer from a fierce subjugation to men. Moreover, the idea that such clothing could be an independent and self-sufficient decision of a woman is completely rejected. In reality, while most Westerners consider Muslim women’s clothing and especially the veil as an undeniable oppression of women, it is often seen as a freedom expression and a liberating mean by Muslim women. Haleh Afshar (1996) writes: “[...] many Muslim women have chosen the veil as the symbol of Islamisation and have accepted it as the public face of their revivalist position. For them the veil is a liberating and not an oppressive force. They maintain that the veil enables them to become the observers and not the observed; that it liberates them from the dictates of the fashion industry and the demands on the beauty myth. In the context of the patriarchal structures that shape women’s lives, the veil is a means of bypassing sexual harassment and ‘gaining respect’.” The comment about the veil should be taken into further consideration. Every woman who doesn’t cover her hair and who resided in Qatar for a longer period will most probably agree that a woman without a veil is often sexually harassed here, whereas women wearing a veil become more “honourable,” “better,” “following the right way.” It should be pointed out in fairness that in Qatar the same role is attributed not only to the veil, but also to *abaya*. Nevertheless, it should also be assessed as a national costume whose role often becomes symbolic: if you are Qatari you have to wear *abaya*, however, it can be decorated with various appliquéés, even the ones which depict skulls or Chinese dragons, and you can even take it off and tuck it deep into the bag as soon as you board the plane heading outside the Gulf. On the other hand, the *abaya* and the veil cannot be dismissed as the symbols of “Islamic feminism,” either. Qatari females who are fighting for the rights of women consider *hijab* and *abaya* not

only as the primal signs of Islamic individuality, but also as a means to fight against sexual discrimination, what can be illustrated by the beliefs of the “active Qatari.” Whereas the “beauteous Qatari’s” objective to recant *abaya*, as well as her habit to wear extremely high-heeled shoes or heavy make-up suggest a distinctive protest against the rules that constrict her life. Moreover, disappointment with the native order leads her to idealization of the West and admiration of the Western woman which is regarded as the embodiment of perfection and is imitated in all possible ways that are only tolerated by Qatari society. In fact, while both the “active Qatari” and the “religious Qatari” deny their sexuality, the “beauteous Qatari” admits and exposes it; however, she is absolutely unconscious of the sexual implication of this process. Thus, appearance unconsciously becomes a niche for a revolt. This being the case, a Qatari female wearing patent-leather stilettos, which are considered to be an exclusive attribute of strip-clubs in the West, should be seen completely differently than a Westerner with the same footwear. Qatari women who are seeking self-expression have to maneuver between the strict norms of society and family and their own wishes. They abundantly plead for more freedom, but at the same time realize that they lack experience of autonomous life. Hence, they accept standard practices of society (*collective superego*), but their personal identity doesn’t fit into the old standards and surpasses attempts of men to hold women in their authority. The need of autonomy (education, expansion to the “male” professions, public self-expression) is clearly growing. Consequently, the woman wants to be more Western (more autonomous), and being unable to achieve it, tries to resemble a Western woman at least with the help of symbols of “freedom” such as shoes, bags, make-up.

It should be pointed out that depending on the type, a Qatari female can admire, respect Western women or revolt at them. They can imagine them completely differently—from a free Austrian sitting in a café with a cigarette in her hand to a disadvantaged woman who is used, diminished and, paradoxically, oppressed. Yet, regardless of classification, Qatari women are never captivated by the model of Western-style feminism. Haleh Afshar (1996) argues: “[...] many highly educated and articulate Muslim women regard Western feminism as a poor example and have no wish to follow it. Not only do they dismiss Western feminism for being one of the many instruments of colonialism, but also they despise the kinds of freedom offered to women in the West.” The “active Qatari” argues that Western women gained many rights, but lost respect and many privileges such as financial support or guardianship of a man. The “religious Qatari” thinks that the only “achievement” of Western movements for women’s rights in reality is turning a woman into a sex object. While, the “beauteous Qatari,” who admires the image of the emancipated Western woman, doesn’t try to conceal that it would be perfect, if she could be “just like” a Western woman stressing appearance details such as clothing, but at the same time be in financial subjection to her husband. It can be assessed as the need for symbiosis—a

woman cannot take care of herself, she needs a man who would patronize her. The centenary-old Freud's theory which proposes that father is an absolute authority to a woman in a patriarchal society and his role is subsequently taken over by husband can be successfully applied in Qatar. This being the case, the symbiotic relation becomes a necessity and inevitability. She considers a man "responsible for her," because he is "brainier," "more sophisticated," "better" in making decisions, has more experience. After all, life without a man is hardly imagined. Nevertheless, a Qatari woman fears a moment when her husband coming into existence takes over the authority from her father. The "religious Qatari" doubts if her future husband can be as good a Muslim as her father is; the "active Qatari" wonders if he is tolerant and understanding enough; whereas, the "beauteous Qatari" is scared that her husband will imprison her at home and that repeated pregnancies will disort her body.

The upbringing of a Qatari woman is purposeful; her surroundings are isolated and segregated in order to advisedly avoid the formation of autonomy. Family, hand in hand with society, infantilize the woman. Therefore, a full predictability of a woman's life from her birth to her marriage is invoked. There are few possibilities of choice in this life. Yet, endurance is girded and good fortune is expected therein.

### Conclusion

This study was set out to determine the self-consciousness and self-expression of Qatari female students. The findings that emerged from a thorough field study and interviews with participants revealed Qatari female students' feminine self-identification. According to the axis of autonomy-dependency and the axis of the expression of outward-inward female identity, Qatari female students were classified into three groups: "beauteous Qataris," "active Qataris" and "religious Qataris." The paper is based on a unique primary source of information and offers a discussion of the main findings.

The research has shown that on the basis of the encounter between Islamic and Western cultures, significant processes concerning the women's status are under way in Qatar.

Firstly, the fact that women obtain higher education is of great significance. Education definitely stimulates doubts, therefore even a "religious Qatari" studying *Sharia* starts wondering "why?" and even though most often the answers are still found in the religious scriptures, it is the first and one of the key steps in the improvement of women's situation in Islamic societies. Moreover, the fact that university moulds an innovative career woman—the "active Qatari," who sees education not only as a compulsory characteristic of a good mother, but also as a start of her career and a possibility to gain more autonomy, has to be taken into deep consideration, too.



Secondly, under the strong effect of globalization, a lot of “superficial” changes, based on imitation, are being displayed by Qatari female students. They signal, however, about the deeper processes and the encounter of Islamic and Occidental values; for instance, “beauteous Qatari,” asked what should be done if a girl engages in premarital sexual relations and thus injures the honour of the family, answers that it would be the best if she consulted a psychotherapist.

It is likely that the most important change that plays the key role in stimulating all the other alterations in lives of Qatari women is a new interpretation of religious scriptures and dogmas from the women-friendly perspective.<sup>21</sup> The fact that women take Quran in their hands and engage in trying to understand and explain it in a way that wouldn't contradict their beliefs<sup>22</sup> is the most accurate indicator of changes.

It goes without saying that true liberation is still a long way off for Qatari women, however, fundamental changes first of all start inside the community itself, and indeed it is the case in the contemporary Qatar.

The present paper was limited in size, which caused a dismissal of Qatari female students' comparison with the rest of society and analysis of Qatari men's attitudes towards and relation with women. Therefore, further research on this topic needs to be undertaken in order to fill the gap in the feminist writings.

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<sup>21</sup> For an in-depth explanation of interpreting Quran from the women-friendly perspective, see *Qur'an and Woman. Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* by Anna Wadud (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>22</sup> It can be illustrated by Qatari girls' view on polygamy. As is well known, Islam allows polygamy, however, girls refute it basing their opinion on the change of historical and social circumstances.

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