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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Toward marriage sustainability: Impacts of delayed marriages in Qatar

Noora Lari<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** Qatar society demonstrates an interesting opportunity to examine the impacts of recent socioeconomic developments on family cohesion and marriage formation. This study describes individual-level factors (e.g., education, occupation) and societal-level factors (e.g., religion, culture, and norms) for marriages' postponement among Qataris, which adversely impacts individuals, families, and entire society. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female participants. The discussions addressed core aspects influencing marriage timing for men and women (e.g., marriage type, spousal selection, marriage costs and expenses, social bias and gender differentials at the household level). Policy instruments were suggested as follows: subsidizing the state-granted marriage fund on the country-level, and redefining gender roles within the family context.

**Subjects:** Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Feminist Theory; Women's Studies

**Keywords:** culture; family policy; gender and family; marriage delay; patriarchy; Qatar women

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The cultural legacy in terms of marriage formation is central to the Arab family. Most discourses on marriage delay determinants focus largely on the potential combinations of macro and micro factors, leading to adopting measures that explain marital prospects. These determinants include the impeded processes of socioeconomic changes occurring in the Gulf Arab region, such as the financial cost of marriage, higher education, and employment status, resources, living arrangements, and childbearing. To tackle marriage delay, a more nuanced policy intervention should be facilitated by the authorities possibly through educational tools and curricula; awareness programs may improve the public's perceptions and entail the renegotiation of gender roles at the family level. In addition, strategic institutional arrangements (e.g., providing state grants and allowances for newly married couples) and family-friendly solutions (e.g., flexible working hours, part-time jobs; remote work, childcare support) aimed at encouraging marriage formation may be adopted.

## 1. Introduction

The definition of marriage delay varies across both societies and social groups within the same population. Arab Gulf states (i.e., Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates [UAE], Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar) have experienced significant socioeconomic changes due to hydrocarbon revenues, oil production, and the economic growth that accompanies the hydrocarbon industry, where standards of living are increasing, the gross domestic product has risen, and populations have grown (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). In turn, unconventional social trends have reshaped family dynamics, marriage formation, and societal behavior—which are adapting to less conservative viewpoints, with high divorce rates and a steady decline in marriages and a corresponding decline in fertility rates in the Arab region.

Emirati men marry, on average, at age 26.6 years and women at age 25.5 years (Al-Hakami & McLaughlin, 2016); however, women very often choose to marry, on average, after their 24th birthday (De Bel-Air et al., 2018). In the state of Qatar—as a rentier country—Qatari women married after 24 years of age, whereas males were generally eight years older than women when they married in 2018; however, that gap has reduced over time (De Bel-Air et al., 2018). The number of Qatari women participating in education and the labor force remained stable at 36% from 2012–2015. The average age at the time of the first marriage witnessed a remarkable increase during 1990–2017, from about 22.1 years old for women in the 1990s to 24 in 2017; the analogous rise for men is from 26 to 26.6 years old (Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority, 2018). Moreover, choosing to stay unmarried has also become quite prevalent: 8.6% of men and 12.9% of women over the age of 30 have never been married (Alharahsheh et al., 2015, p. 7).

Several studies have explored the determinants of marriage timing (Malhotra, 1997), wherein combinations of macro and micro factors have been identified as explaining marriage delay (Higuchi, 2001). Martin (2004) indicated that the factors associated with delay are quite difficult to identify positively in a dynamic model and defines delayed marriage as any pattern in which age-specific marriage at later ages is rising too much to be explained by declining rates and attendant effects of unmeasured heterogeneity. In the Gulf region, some factors have been suggested for the overall delay in marriage timing, including women's education and career, which strongly affect marriage timing (Duflo et al., 2015; Kirdar et al., 2009; Situmorang, 2007), and traditional patterns of arranged marriage (Strier & Zidan, 2013).

This paper uses the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2020 to primarily explore the factors contributing to marriage delay practices among Qataris. It begins with a theoretical discussion about the cultural texture, describes the methodological procedures, and provides a detailed thematic analysis, elucidating the social and cultural factors that determine marriage delay in Qatari society. Finally, the paper presents some key recommendations based on the main findings.

## 2. Context: The role of traditions, patriarchy, and modernization in the Arab Gulf

In patriarchal societies, the cultural legacy in terms of social commitment and family continuity is central to the Arab family. The Gulf Arab region follows a legitimate marriage system as per Islamic law (Harkness, 2020; Holý, 1989), which is strongly associated with its social fabric in terms of familial, economic, religious, and ethnic concerns (Ottson & Berntsen, 2014) and remains in line with the traditions and conservatism values of the region (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2004) that endorse the social and tribal structures controlled by the kinship system (Al-Ghanim, 2012).

In terms of marriage customs, consanguineous and endogamous marriage practices (i.e., marriage between relatives) continue to be upheld in the Arab Gulf region in addition to other preferences for the appropriate age of marriage, as well as for the number and gender of offspring, particularly among Bedouin who still adhere to the customs and traditions (Al-Abdullulkareem, 1998; Al-Ghanim, 2020; Buunk et al., 2010; Cohen & Savaya, 2003; Talbani & Hasanali, 2000). Statistics show that the average rate of marriage between relatives is 40%–50% of all marriages in

the Arab world (Al-Ghanim, 2020). In Qatar, statistical data show that 44.5% of marriages were consanguineous in 2004; this number increased in 2008 to 50% and further increased in 2013 to 59% between first-degree relatives (Al-Ghanim, 2020; Bener & Alali, 2006; Harkness & Khaled, 2014; Holý, 1989; Sandridge et al., 2010).

The Muslim family has been described as a patriarchal unit that reinforces patriarchal gender relations where the woman has a subordinate position (Moghadam, 2004). In these “traditional” settings, the extended family (i.e., married couple lives with their parents and relatives in the same household; Ottsen & Berntsen, 2014) remains the basic social unit. This is in contrast with “modern” settings—where the nuclear family predominates, as individuals generally have more latitude in selecting their marriage partners (Ross, 1997). At the level of marriage formation, this is thought to remain a socially legitimate practice that reinforces stereotypical gender roles, thus enacting strategic accommodations that signal feminine respectability and conformity to male domination (Salem & Yount, 2019, p. 501). Gender socialization involves labels such as masculine and feminine, gender norms and a gender hierarchy (Ahmed, 2008; Lips, 2018; Narain, 2017). Prescriptive gender stereotypes attribute authority, leadership and decisiveness to masculinity and sensitivity, subservience and warmth to femininity (Lips, 2018). In many societies, women are expected to serve as wives and caregivers and to be part-time employed (Joshi & Och, 2014), consequently lacking time, money, networks and support to pursue public or political careers (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Kunovich & Paxton, 2005). Feminism has the goals of removing the gender inequalities, however, scholars of gender resistance theories argue that balancing opportunities for men and women will not necessarily lead to gender equality (Lorber, 1998).

Importantly, the autonomy of men and women regarding their life partners is somewhat constrained (Ottsen & Berntsen, 2014, p. 390), where the parents play a central role in selecting the spouses of their offspring (Apostolou, 2007; Batabyal & Beladi, 2002; Medora, 2003). Tribe, social class, age, employment status, and educational level are primary predictors of partner selection (; Bener & Ali, 2004; Chowdhry, 2007; Kalmijn, 1991; Mody, 2008; Tadmouri et al., 2009; Tosi, 2017). Conversely, men are likely to exercise greater control over the choice of their own spouse than women are at the family level (Allendorf, 2017; Riley, 1994).

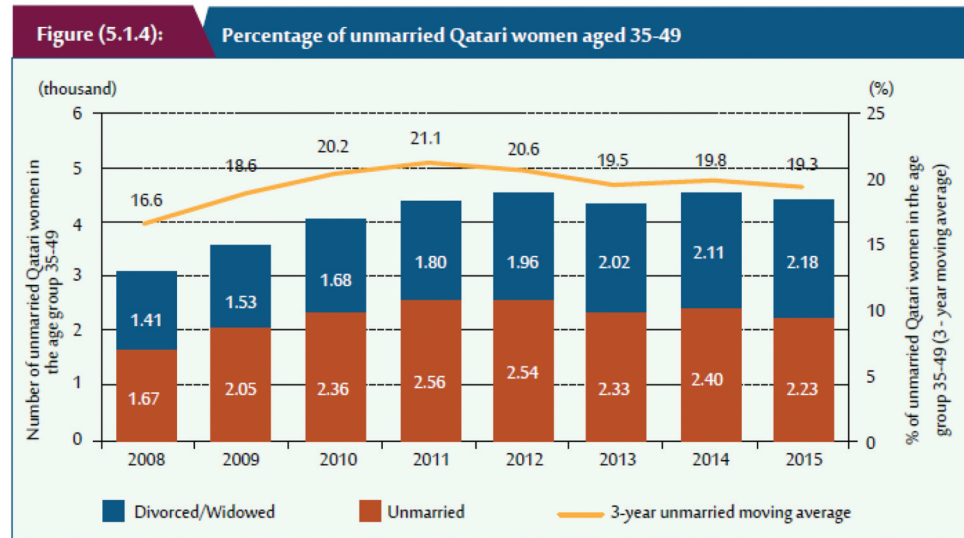
### 3. Determinants of marriage delay

The continuation of the cultural structures that promote traditional marriage patterns (such as the tribe and the extended family) is still prevalent in Gulf Arab societies. However, the impeded processes of socioeconomic changes occurring in the Gulf region, such as the financial cost of marriage, higher education, and employment status, resources, living arrangements, childbearing, and other factors (Iyigun & Lafortune, 2016), have influenced the traditional patterns of marriage formation (i.e., consanguineous, tribal, and arranged marriage and the extended-family model) in the Arab family system to some extent (Akhtar, 2020; Shah & Nathanson, 2002).

The extraordinary proportion of women’s educational attainment and participation in the labor force contributes more to their economic independence and self-sufficiency (Hull, 2002; Jones, 2004; Tey, 2004), and women have become more educated. Women’s education and literacy rates have increased; for example, approximately 50% of women aged 18–23 years attend higher education in Saudi Arabia (Worldbank, 2021). Al-Ansari (2020) argued that women comprise 24% of the Qatari population and 18% of the workforce. To illustrate, in 2016, around 46.6% of women born in 1987–1991 (aged 25–29) had university education. Moreover, the percentage of economically active women aged 15 and over is high (36.9% in 2016; Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority, 2016).

The universal pattern of women marrying earlier than men has been less common in Qatar. The so-called decline in marriage is attributable to its delay rather than its complete rejection

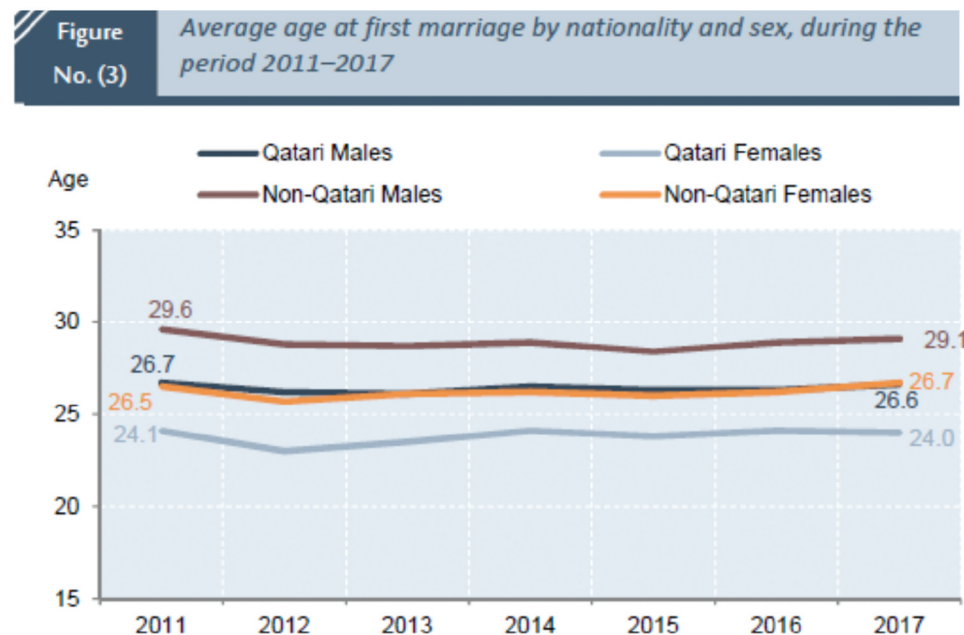
**Figure 1. Percentage of unmarried Qatari women aged 35–49.**



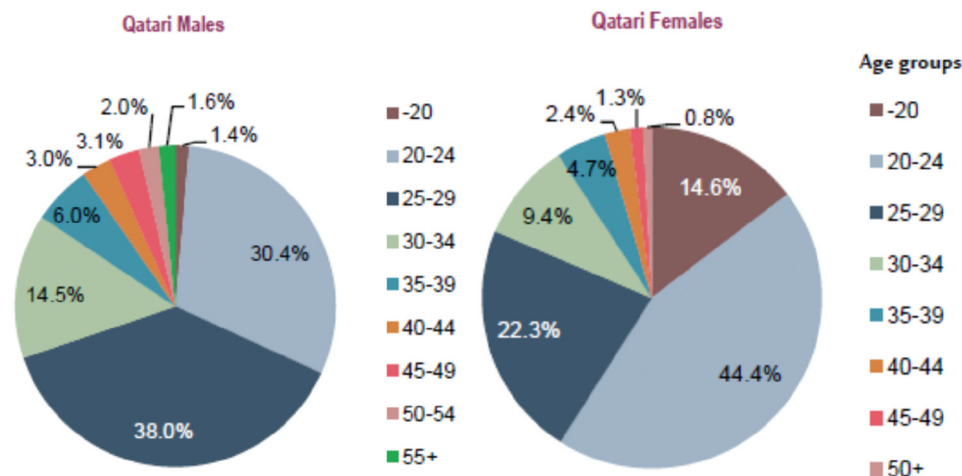
(Loughran & Zissimopoulos, 2004). A comprehensive annual survey conducted by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University in 2012 showed that the preferred marriage age is 21 for females and 25 for males (Social and Economic Survey Research Institute, 2012–2017). More recent statistical data (shown below in Figure 1) show the number of unmarried Qatari women in the 35–49 age group from 2008 to 2015.

Figure 2 shows the average age of Qatari citizens at first marriage and demonstrates a quasi-decrease in the average age at first marriage during 2011–2017, from 26.7 years and 24.1 years in 2011 to 26.6 years and 24 years in 2017 for males and females, respectively (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2018).

**Figure 2. Average age of first marriage by sex 2011–2017.**  
 Source: Marriage and Divorce Report, 2017



**Figure 3. Qatari marriage contracts by age and sex.**  
 Source: Marriage and Divorce Report, 2017



In 2017, the highest rate of marriage occurred in the 20–29 age group, accounting for 68.4% of marriages among Qatari males and 66.7% among Qatari females. Figure 3 below shows marriage contracts by husband’s and wife’s age groups.

Educated women have acquired certain expectations about marriage that are not easily met by Qatari men (Harkness, 2020, p. 150), which might have led them to have a stronger voice in deciding their marriage timing (Holý, 1989, p. 246; Wyndow et al., 2013, p. 34). Similarly, a study found that early marriage inhibits the career development and economic independence of one or both individuals in a marriage (Loughran & Zissimopoulos, 2004). There has been little change in household chore distribution, and the prevalence of traditional gender roles creates favorable conditions for conflict in marriage (Greenstein, 1990). Moreover, the extended-family model started to gradually disappear, favoring nuclear families comprising two parents and their children; therefore, Qatari families’ values showed some variations in their attitudes—as they demonstrate greater openness and flexibility, especially regarding issues of gender and the distribution of authority within the family (Al-Ghanim, 2012, p. 333).

These factors have changed women’s preferences to marry early and prefer a small family size, as it decreases the time available for work. For instance, the average Qatari woman has 2.08 children (Harkness, 2020, p. 156). De Graaf and Vermeulen (1997) revealed that the adverse influence of marriage and children on the supply of women’s labor has declined; correspondingly, it creates work–family conflicts for mothers (Blossfeld, 1995), despite substantial progress in improving work–family balance through the Human Resource Law of 2009.

The financial affordability of marriage (expensive dowries and marriage costs) and difficulties in securing independent households after marriage costs have influenced the age at first marriage for men (De Bel-Air et al., 2018). The custom of the dowry (*mahr*) dates back as far as 3000 BC, from the time of Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations (Anderson, 2007). In the Islamic law, the dowry confirms the validity of the marriage contract (Pandang et al., 2018) and the groom’s family normally contributes to the marriage expenses and provides a dowry, which must be paid at the time of marriage. De Bel-Air et al. (2018) identified the burden of marriage on middle-class families in Qatar because of the amount of dowry paid by grooms in marriage. It is estimated that the average cost of a wedding in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries oscillates between \$30,000 and \$140,000 (Kaaki, 2009), with the lowest in Oman and Bahrain and the highest among Qataris, Emiratis, and to some extent, Saudis.



In traditional societies, dowry can be perceived as recognition, respect and valuing of women's contribution to marriage, in practice it limits women's autonomy as dowry has often been correlated to polygyny, divorce and domestic violence (Anderson, 2007), and also as a means to control the bride (Pandang et al., 2018). It is also considered a direct payment for the bride's virginity (Hughes, 1985), the expected number of children, the alliance between tribes/kinship groups (Dekker & Hoogeveen, 2002) and in compensation for the loss of a daughter (Botticini & Siow, 2003).

While most of the above previous studies concerning the determinants of marriage delay have been conducted using quantitative methods and in international contexts with different social settings in terms of marriage patterns (Duflo et al., 2015; Higuchi, 2001; Hullen, 2000; Jones, 2004; Kirdar et al., 2009; Situmorang, 2007), this paper uses qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with Qatari men and women to examine the determinants of marriage delay. Additionally, the paper offers social policy instruments regarding the drivers of marriage formation, as the dearth in policy research on marriage delay is more pronounced in the Arab Gulf region.

#### 4. Methodology

This paper uses qualitative evidence. Ten semi-structured in-depth interviews with five male and five female participants from various sectors and with different socioeconomic backgrounds were conducted in 2020 and were guided by an interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions and comments. The participants were recruited using purposive sampling; they were contacted by phone and via email to explain the purpose of the study. The choice of the sample was guided by the study objectives, which are to explore participants' perceptions, lived experiences, and attitudes toward delayed marriage (personal experience and lived realities based on their expertise) to bring views of participants' different personal backgrounds and life experiences while addressing practical recommendations. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality, as indicated in the consent form they were provided before the interview start.

The interviews lasted for approximately two hours and were audio recorded and transcribed. All procedures followed the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. A semi-structured protocol was used, which included an introduction to the subject and some questions formulated by the research team beforehand based on previous quantitative research on the consequences of marriage delay, as follows: What is the ideal age to get married? Tell us about your decision-making process for marrying (when, how, and who involved in the decision, what are your expectations and general motivations for marriage, and if your marriage was delayed, what was the reasons?). The protocol that led the discussions was open-ended, broad, flexible, and dynamic, and researchers generated an open dialog, and this method allowed for flexible transitions between topics according to how the interviews developed.

The data from the interviews were transcribed into Arabic and then translated into English. To check validity, some participants received the Arabic written scripts of the interview instrument in which they participated, asking them to reflect on our interpretation. Minor comments were reflected in the final versions. The translated scripts were checked for validity to facilitate the use of the MaxQDA software package for qualitative analysis. Data coding was accomplished in two stages using this software. Thematic analysis was used to allow the research findings to emerge from the raw data. This approach was chosen due to its flexibility and ability to support rich, detailed, and complex descriptions of the data.

The first step in the analysis plan was the initial coding, which involved generating numerous category codes without limiting their number (Charmaz, 2006). We conducted a coding iteration to generate them. At this stage, the researchers listed emerging ideas, drew relationship diagrams, and identified keywords that respondents frequently used, as these are indicators of important themes. The second stage involved focused coding, in which the researcher eliminated, combined,

or subdivided the coding categories identified in the first step. Attention was drawn to wider themes connecting the codes (Charmaz, 2006; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Then, the list of coding categories was reviewed to identify wider thematic attributes, connecting them to combine the attributes into main themes. Subsequently, some countervailing themes emerged from the analysis, and each of these themes is discussed in the following sections. Key quotes from the participants were selected to emphasize the emerging themes.

## 5. Findings

This section discusses the main findings as identified in the following main emerging themes: the opposition to arranged and consanguineous marriages, marriage costs and expenses, and gender equity at the household level.

### 5.1. *Opposition to arranged and consanguineous marriages*

The cultural practices pertaining to marriage have remained largely unchanged in Qatar. Several studies have addressed the traditional marriage models (i.e., endogamous and consanguineous marriages between relatives and, in particular, between cousins) that still persist in Arab Gulf societies owing to the society's emphasis on tribalism (Bedouin and tribal families, Al-hadar) as a means to maintain family wealth, ties, and identity through the tribal structure of extended families (Al-Gazali et al., 1997; Alharahsheh et al., 2015; Bittles & Hamamy, 2010; Bittles et al., 1991; Chan, 1997; Jurdi & Saxena, 2003). Although consanguineous marriages are not necessarily arranged, this serves to explain why the degree of acceptance and openness to other non-traditional models of love marriages is deemed socially unacceptable and remains generally treated as not a preferred option despite signs that society has changed over the years. The traditional family model defines parents as the primary providers and those responsible for strictly maintaining the marriage pattern (Al-Mahmoud, 2019).

The participants were asked about their marriage arrangements (decision-making process) if they were married. They attributed the issue of commitment to familial expectations of arranged and consanguineous marriages, as the men and women are still affected by the decision of their extended family, traditional, and patriarchal norms. Studies have shown that family involvement in upspring marriages plays a major role in marriage timing (Gaughan, 2002). In particular, most of the respondents' involvement in the decision-making process of their marriage was minimal, as their families preferred them to marry someone who came from a similar tribal environment. The results revealed that some participants opposed arranged and consanguineous marriages, preferring marrying to non-relatives. For example, Participant B (female/36 years old) formulated the following:

“I still did not get married because of the traditional tribal marriage type in my family that is following a certain arranged marriage system; I will be judged if I went against my own culture's traditions to choose my future husband.”

Participant H similarly narrated this idea as follows:

“My family does not usually support my decision to marry a person from a different tribe due to cultural norms ... Consanguineous marriage, in many cases, is done only to satisfy the family, which leads many women to perceive this as non-healthy and unstable marriage as the perceived risks of marrying a stranger ...”

As stated by Participant J, she illustrated this through her personal experience:

“I would like to marry, but my family has been pressing me, asking questions: When are you getting married to your cousin? I keep objecting to this proposal and delaying my marriage.”



Likewise, other women participants in the study (C, E) were questioning the idea of their right in spousal selection, indicating that this has influenced their marriage timing and marital satisfaction, as their families used to object to many marriage proposals who were first-degree relatives, leading women to postpone their marriages or stay single longer or not getting married at all. This is consistent with other studies, DHS surveys and other small-scale studies shows that there has been little decline in the preference for consanguineous marriages (Al-Ghanim, 2020).

These social pressures in which unmarried adult men and women live have resulted in an increasing number of people who delay marriage, which is bound to continue in future years due to the great influence of tradition, norms, and family values (Salem & Yount, 2019, p. 503). It was apparent that the family's resentment toward marrying out of the family was heavily influenced by the gender of participants, as their involvement in women's marriage decisions is much more often than men's. A male participant (Participant F, age 47) reported that:

“My family wanted me to marry my relative. But I rejected the traditional way of marriage and decided to marry my wife by my choice.”

Another male participant had alternative views about arranged marriages, and in his view, Participant A (age 29) clarified that:

“Access to social media platforms has changed the system of ‘arranged marriage’ to ‘love relationship marriages,’ where it has allowed the man and the woman, though still officially unmarried, to get to know each other over a long period and thus has affected their decision of when to get married. I consider this a necessity in choosing my life partner.”

### **5.2. The economic burden: marriage costs and expenses**

The high standard of living is associated with the increase in average costs of marriage, which is customary and will remain high, regardless of the economic situation of the marrying couples and their families (Singerman & Ibrahim, 2001), due to the drastic increase in wealth from oil and gas resources in Qatar. It mainly contributes as a factor to delayed marriage for grooms because of social pressure from their families, as they need to be ready for the high cost of wedding ceremonies, the expenses of the wedding hall, the bride's needs, and the costs of living arrangements, which have encouraged some Qatari men to delay marriage or search for a non-Qatari bride who will require a lower dowry (*mahr*)—paid in advance before the wedding to the bride's family—and less expensive marriage. Most male discussants agreed that the high expenses of marriage are linked to an increase in celibacy and in the average age of the first marriage (Alharahsheh et al., 2015). Participant F recalled his experience in marriage:

“I have delayed my marriage until the early 30s because I could not afford the high cost of marriage, which leads many Qatari men to fear the financial burden and responsibility to go into debt and take out bank loans to cover their expenses.”

Participant H further stated during the discussion:

“Despite state support to create housing opportunities, social security, and insurance and to reduce marriage costs, meeting the expenses of a marriage remains the most challenging aspect of Qatari men's lives.”

Other male participants commented that they were obligated to follow these traditions in marriage by their families, which relates to the high standard of living, which resulted in growing consumerist and materialistic culture and poor knowledge of finance and budget management, thereby inducing heavy debts and threatening the stability and cohesion of Qatari families, especially low-income families (GSDP, MTR report [unpublished] 2013: 118, cited in Qatar Second National Development

Strategy (NDS-2) 2018–2022). Yet, this marriage model is not the only norm, as other people choose to marry with limited costs and without the heavy financial burdens that accompany marriage.

### **5.3. Gender equity at the household level**

Qatari society still perceives women differently from men; for a long time, traditional gender roles considered mothers the primary caregiver, even if they are in paid employment, and embraced the role of a “male breadwinner” (El-Haddad, 2003; Rajakumar et al., 2017; Ridge et al., 2017). Al-Attiyah (2015) indicated that Qatari families still maintain the belief that a woman must get married and raise a family regardless of advancements made in education and labor force participation. Several participants discussed how patriarchal dominance and gender dynamics within their families hinder them from getting married at younger ages. Most of them agreed that the persistence of patriarchal values and gender role expectations tends to be well entrenched and often induces a delay in marriage, particularly women. Participant D claimed that:

“Many women postpone their marriage to late twenties because they had ambitions to continue their higher degree and get employed. When I got married, I had to scarify my job since my husband’s role is to provide for the family needs ...”

Participant E described how gender role expectations play a central role in marriage timing as follows:

“Men in our society think that women must be committed to their feminine role ... I got married at an early age but regretted because I did all childcare and household responsibilities which affected my studies ...”

Perspectives are gradually changing, adding dynamism to gender roles as the conservation of patriarchal values is gradually eroding (Holý, 1989, p. 249); due to the increase in women professionals, they are affected by the time they devote to their families and children. Maintaining traditional gender norms—such as the role of women as homemakers—has resulted in more women working while adhering to their household and childcare duties (Rajakumar et al., 2017). Additionally, a substantial number of working mothers have resorted to the hiring of house help, as husbands are not actively contributing to familial obligations and responsibilities. Hence, women have become more dependent on domestic workers, and their views on their roles as mothers and wives and their rights and duties to their own families have changed. Participant F claimed that:

“As more Qatari females join the workforce, housework and childcare are being done by nanny or domestic workers.”

Discussants addressed the relationship between women’s pursuit of higher education and financial independence and its relation to delay marriage. Participant C explained:

“Graduate studies and scholarship opportunities, high income and contributions to entrepreneurship, and easy access to leadership positions and international travel have played a significant role in me delaying marriages.”

Participant J was unmarried in her mid-30s and stated that:

“I am an independent woman and successful with my career. My expectations of getting married is limited. Therefore, I decided to delay my marriage until I find a suitable open-minded partner.”

As more working mothers become involved in the workforce, their aspirations shift from having large families to obtaining more education or more success at work. Participant I indicated that:

“Family sizes have been significantly reduced, and birth rates are decreasing as more women choose to have fewer children.”

Besides financial independence, there are other motives (e.g., self-realization, career advancements, future security, and ambitions) for women to delay marriage. Some women may, therefore, decrease their chances of finding a suitable spouse, as their educational qualifications might be intimidating to men as they wait for husbands that meet their preferences. Eventually, most women end up getting married in their late twenties or early thirties. Ashghar et al. (2015) stated that, while research cites employment as a factor in delaying marriage, their findings show that 48% versus 21% were willing to delay entering the workforce because they prioritize marriage and children. Notably, working women who get married manage to fulfil their domestic roles and work responsibilities, but they face several challenges on both sides.

## **6. Toward a national marital policy**

The formation and maintenance of the family is a central feature of social policy, where the family is the basis of society, and the law shall regulate adequate means to protect the family, support its structure, strengthen its ties, and protect maternity, childhood, and old age. The state recognizes challenges related to marriage that impede family cohesion, including high social, psychological, health, and economic costs due to late marriage and non-marriage of young people, alongside the rising financial cost of marriage, despite the various forms of support provided by the state to encourage young people to get married (Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority, 2018). To ensure a high level of social stability within the family context and sustainability, the Qatar government has initiated several social instruments (e.g., Social Protection Strategy, Population Policy [2017–2020]) to support family-building allowances and benefits among nationals (Maktabi, 2016, p. 20).

Given what is currently known about the effects of context on marriage timing, the extent to which establishing social policy will affect marriage patterns is a central debate due to methodological and analytical considerations in directly measuring policy impacts on marriage timing. Therefore, establishing the predictors of the consistent increase in rates of marriage delay in Qatar can be substantially attributed to the interplay of several factors—including traditional marriage (which remains the main type of marriage practiced in society), the cost of marriage and male–female roles, and the expansion of women’s education and access to paid employment.

Although the results of our qualitative analysis indicate there are still perceptions of marriage delay, given socioeconomic factors. However, these factors do not clearly explain the full story, as the various policy instruments cannot be isolated or determined as successful and evaluating their efficiency may also impact other interrelated factors. Nevertheless, with the drive to inform policy, we recommend some solutions that might influence age at first marriage through (1) subsidizing the state-granted Marriage Fund at the country level and (2) redefining gender roles within the family context at the individual level.

### **6.1. Subsidizing the state-granted marriage fund**

The Qatari authorities provides marriage loans and housing loans for nationals planning to marry. Authorities have also issued legislation to endorse the Marriage Fund policy and increase the number of low-cost wedding halls in major cities (Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority). The Marriage Fund policy states that Qataris must attend premarital counseling and an educational program on the obligations of marriage and the importance of forming a family to receive a marriage grant (Permeant Population Committee, 2018). The marriage grant is paid in one installment to Qatari national grooms and brides getting married for the first time as a means to encourage family formation and reduce delayed marriage rates.

Similar marriage funds program is explicitly labeled as funds for endorsing marriage in a few Gulf countries (e.g., Oman, Kuwait, and UAE). In 2011, during a social uprising in Oman, many young individuals suggested that a marriage fund should be created to cover the cost of marriage and its

associated expenses. “The Shura Council 2012 proposition” (De Bel-Air et al., 2018) was designed to support the creation of an endowment; however, the Omani government postponed the initiative. Hence, youngsters have selected alternative sources of financing, such as loans from Islamic banks, popular finance options, and collective weddings. In contrast, the government of Kuwait provides a marriage allowance to aid the start-up of a marriage (Shah & Nathanson, 2002) for Kuwaiti nationals. The UAE Marriage Fund have been hailed in the early 1990s to boost income, decrease the burden of marriage on young couples, and encourage them to marry under certain conditions (a UAE citizen to marry UAE women for eligibility), with a small monthly repayment of the grant. The government has also launched campaigns aimed at persuading citizens to reduce the costs of dowers, expenses, and ceremonies. However, the measurement of the success of such a scheme in reducing marriage delay (or increased marriage rates) remains unmeasured (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

There is mixed evidence about the influence of state-granted Marriage Fund solutions on marriage delay. The traditions of marriage practices have impacted the participants of this study, particularly men, due to the rising cost of wedding and other expenses (e.g., housing, dowry, and wedding ceremonies). State intervention is needed to reduce the financial burden of marriage and “dowry” (Salem & Yount, 2019) and is an effective tool in reducing typical wedding expenses.

### **6.2. Redefining gender roles within the family context**

In patriarchal societies, gender relations and norms at the family level have been gradually changing due to women’s increased access to education, labor force participation, and income. However, women still actively contribute to familial obligations and responsibilities, causing an unequal household division of labor embedded within core societal structures guided by gender disparities. The collective experience of the participants indicates there is a societal bias in the way genders are perceived, with women being perceived differently from men. The qualitative results indicate that some women may delay marriage if they feel it would inhibit their career development or restrict their mobility, and they may remain single because they cannot find a partner as a suitable candidate due to gender role expectations. This is because the demands of work, the increasing needs of the family, and insufficient support make work–family balance inadequate (Ben-Omran et al., 2020, p. 1051; James-Hawkins et al., 2017).

In Qatar, the national policies assert that they enhance the traditional Qatari family core while empowering women to participate in all spheres of society and supporting working women by revising the human resources law and maternity leave policy to help women balance family and professional responsibilities (Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2011–2016). Nevertheless, labor laws in Qatar vary between the public and private sectors. For instance, according to the Human Resources Law of 2016, which applies to the public sector, women can have 60 days of paid maternity leave, while the Labor Law of 2004 states that women can only apply for 50 days of paid maternity leave in the private sector. In the public sector, women are permitted two nursing hours for two years, compared to one nursing hour in the private sector.

In light of this, a more nuanced policy intervention should be facilitated by the state or policy intervention of gender-equitable policy proposals to tackle the continuation of gender disparity along four “systematic forces”—the sociocultural, organizational, legislative, and human resources areas (Al-Lamky, 2007, pp. 63–64)—and to equalize the male–female roles within the family context (i.e., household and childcare responsibilities). This could be facilitated through educational tools and curricula, and awareness programs may improve the public’s perceptions and entail the renegotiation of gender roles and reshape public attitudes toward gender roles (Hill & Hill, 1990; Lindsey, 2015) in the family context.

It is unclear how effective these policies are on the level or timing of first marriage, yet strategic institutional arrangements (e.g., providing housing allowances for newly married couples) and family-friendly solutions (e.g., flexible working hours, part-time jobs, remote work, childcare support) have been established by many countries aimed at improving work–family compatibility

(Datta Gupta et al., 2008; Letablier et al., 2009; Rindfuss et al., 2007; Rønsen, 2004), which may contribute to younger ages at first marriage.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis model revealed that the cultural texture makes marriages' postponement observations related to individual-level factors (e.g., education, occupation) and societal-level factors (e.g., religion, culture, and norms, and household division of labor), which adversely impacts individuals, families, in Gulf region, particularly Qatar society in comparison to the existing literature on marriage and kinship. Hence, the core traditional aspect (i.e., marriage type, expenses, and spousal selection) has affected marriage timing for men and women, with social bias and gender differentials.

In addition, women's increased education and access to the labor market was also linked to marriage delay, which also may delay childbearing. Although this study is among the very few that have addressed the issue of marriage delay, there are methodological and practical shortcomings that account for the qualitative research design, as the sample is not representative of the society to allow casual associations in the factors influencing marriage patterns. To contribute to this research gap, scholars may consider utilizing empirical and experimental measurements for a better understanding of the main factors increasing the rates of marriage delay and promote marriage among young people within the Arab Gulf region.

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