

Understanding Changing Patterns of Marriage and Transitions into Parenthood among Qatari Youth

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Given recent social and economic developments in Qatari society, it is relevant to examine their impact on marriage patterns and family cohesion. Recent statistical findings have highlighted the increased marital age, the decreased number of children in households, and the surging divorce rate in Qatar. This policy brief presents the key findings on family formation from the Qatari Youth Survey (QYS) conducted through a telephone survey by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University. This brief aims to understand the perceptions of marriage and family formation and transitions into parenthood of young people in Qatar (ages 18–29). The findings indicate an increase in marital age and a decline in the number of children per household. Therefore, this brief provides policymakers with some insight into youths' perceptions toward marriage patterns, marital relationships and transitions into parenthood.

Qatar has experienced significant socio-economic changes as a result of hydrocarbon revenues, economic growth, and increased standards of living. The number of women in higher education institutions and the workplace has in turn increased, and this has had an impact on family formations due to a rise in the average age of marriage and a decline in the number of children per Qatari family. This policy brief presents the key findings on family formation and their attitudes toward marital life from the Qatari Youth Survey (QYS) conducted through a telephone survey by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University. A total of 1,989 Qatari youth (ages 18–29) were interviewed for the survey.

Marriage Patterns

With different patterns and forms of marriage, traditional arranged marriages have remained the norm in Qatari society, along with other preferences for consanguineous marriages, extended

families, an appropriate age for marriage, choosing a life partner, and the number of children. As such, the union of two individuals is often affected by traditions and societal changes.

Marriage Timing: in terms of first marriage timing, Qatari women generally prefer to marry later in life. State statistics have revealed that from 1986 to 2010, the average age of first marriage for Qatari women increased by 3.7 years, from 19.2 to 23.9 years⁵. Early marriage inhibits the career development and financial independence of both partners. This increased financial independence has allowed both Qatari men and women to delay the timing of marriage. Increases in the cost of weddings, dowries, and quality of life have also had an impact on the age of marriage in Qatar⁶.

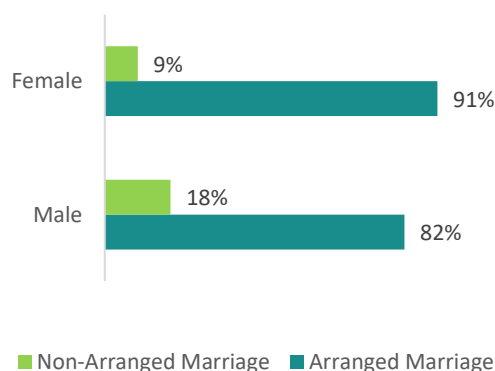
The respondents were asked to indicate their ages at their first marriage. The average age for entering into a marriage contract for both male and female respondents was 22 years. However, the model age of marriage contract signing for women was younger than that for men (20 and 25 years old, respectively).

Arrange Marriages: an arranged marriage describes a custom in which family and/or social relations heavily influence the choice of an individual's marriage partner. Parents play a major role in choosing a life partner for their sons and daughters. In addition, tribe, social class, age, employment status, and education level are the primary predictive factors of partner selection.

In a traditional marriage, a marriage proposal is made to a girl who is introduced by the young man's family, and it is agreed to arrange a date for a visit and acquaintance. If approved, the rest of the marriage procedures are carried out according to applicable customs. Bener and Al-Ali (2006) reported an increase in the number of arranged marriages in Qatari society⁷. By contrast, the nuclear family system allows for more autonomy in the selection of marriage partners¹.

In this context, the respondents were asked how they chose their life partners. The majority of the respondents—82% of men and 91% of women—had arranged marriages through their families or relatives (see Figure 1), while only 12% of respondents did not have arranged marriages.

Figure 1: Marriage patterns among Qatari youths



Although the younger youth group (18–24 years) in Qatar had a greater number of arranged marriages than the older youth group (24–30 years), 42% of the younger age group were more likely to talk to their spouse (42%) before signing the marriage contract compared to the older youth group (39%). Among the women, 93% of the younger respondents (18–24) had arranged marriages, which was marginally higher than 85% among the older respondents (24–30). The Ministry of Social Development and Family has launched programs such as 'The First Year of Marriage' to support and foster progressive family cohesion and communication before marriage². The aim of such initiatives is to decrease relatively high divorce rates in the country.

Marital Relationships

Several factors contribute to the success of the marital relationship, including responsibility, communication skills with the partner, participation in decision-making, mutual respect, and the ability to solve marital problems. Perceived gender roles still predominate. Women are perceived as the primary caregivers of their families and as responsible for domestic chores in households—such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare—whereas men are considered the breadwinners of their families⁴.

Gender Roles: expectations regarding gender roles have changed little among youth today. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the notion that it is the man's responsibility to provide for the living expenses of the family. Around 91% of respondents agreed that a man is financially responsible for his female relatives, although more male respondents (95%) than female respondents (87%) agreed with this statement. On the other hand, more women (71%) agreed that working women should contribute to family

expenses, compared to 58% of male respondents.

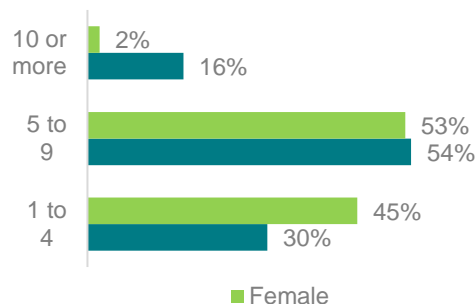
Family Formation and Transitions into Parenthood

The social changes in society gave rise to a new societal model based on individuality and the nuclear family, as the modern family preferred to have only two children. Having children was also associated with high care costs in terms of education and living requirements, amusement park visits, private lessons, and trips. Consequently, the increase in the average age of marriage has led to a decline in the average number of children that each Qatari family chooses to have. Between 2010 and 2020, the average number of children born to Qatari women decreased from 3.6 to 2.4⁸.

Average Number of Children: overall, 71% of respondents had fewer than three children. Of the younger respondents (18–24), 12% had three or more children, in comparison to 32% of the older respondents (24–30). In terms of gender, 34% of the female respondents had three or more children, compared to only 20% of the males.

Ideal Number of Children: when asked about their ideal number of children, 53% of respondents wanted 5 - 9 children. In general, women wanted fewer children than men, as 45% of women expressed a desire for fewer than five children versus only 30% of men. Similarly, 16% of male respondents wanted 10 or more children, whereas only 2% of female respondents agreed with this statement (see Figure 2). This indicates that family dynamics are influenced by the downturn in average family size reflected in contemporary families' preferences to have fewer children.

Figure 2: Perceived ideal number of children among Qatari youths



Childcare: the respondents were asked about their satisfaction with their spouse's involvement in different activities related to parenting, including bathing, dressing children, putting children to bed, playing, reading, and participating in dinnertime. Overall, 95% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their spouse's involvement in raising their children.

In the 2021 Shura Council Session, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani stated that parents should prioritize and play a direct role in the upbringing of their children without assigning responsibility to others.⁹ However, the transformation of family formations toward a nuclear setup has made this more difficult to achieve.

Changing family formations within Qatari society reflects the socio-economic development of the state. An increased number of women in the workforce correlates with an increase in the average age of marriage and a decline in the average number of children within each household. Additionally, traditional arranged marriages have increased among the younger generation. In general, male respondents wanted to have more children than female respondents did.

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Policy Recommendations

1. Increase awareness of the services provided by the marriage, children, and family formation programs of the Ministry of Social Development and Family.
2. Increase awareness programs for couples about getting married.
3. Strengthen family and marital relationships with regard to choosing a life partner, marriage success, facing marital problems, financial management, and ways to balance work and family responsibilities.
4. Provide more resources and support for families seeking to raise children, including information about child development and parenting strategies.
5. Support working mothers through improved maternity leave policies to achieve enhanced work–family flexibility.