

By the Youth for the Youth

The university student initiative 'The Future is Female' at Georgetown Qatar

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For as long as I can remember, I aspired to create positive change among my community and set on a journey to do more by putting in the effort. Despite cultural reservations towards co-educational schools, I was persistent to join Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q), as I knew it was the right place to pursue my interests and goals. After my personal struggle to enter Georgetown, I made it my goal to support the aspiring girls who need the extra assistance and guidance to excel in the fields of their choice; particularly the fields that are considered unsuitable for women just because they have been male-dominated. Besides my high school teachers who were supportive and reassuring that GU-Q was the right place for me, I am lucky to have a great supportive mother who was there for me during my hardest times. She always told me to keep my eyes on the prize and to not worry about any obstacles; as she believed that God would ease it for me when the time was right, Insha'Allah.

In spite of continuous efforts by the Qatari state and the Qatar National 2030 Vision (QNV) that highlight empowerment of women in the workforce and the public sphere, there remains a cultural and institutional gap that has to be filled in order for the betterment of opportunities and choices of Qatari women. The QNV highlights the aim of "increased opportunities and vocational support for Qatari women" (Qatar National Vision [QNV], 2008,:18-9). Based on the statistical report of 2018, there is a higher economic participation of men than women where men equate 68.2% and women 36.7% in 2017 ("Woman and Man in the State of Qatar: a Statistical Portrait 2018", 2018:54, 62). While it is worth mentioning that the gender gap in economic participation has reduced over the years, the inequality in wage rates remains high ("Woman and Man in the State of Qatar", 2018: 59). Regarding empowerment projects in Qatar, Nada Fouad (2018) explores the relation of women employment and Qatar empowerment goals. She argues that the culture affects women's experiences and how the top-down state approach can be ineffective as women have to take more control over the narrative with a fostering society for the success of women (Fouad, 2018:5-7). This could be achieved by empowering institutions and communities instead of placing hindrances that limit the efforts taken by women. As women worldwide are faced with the issue of not having power relative to men as the system is patriarchal. When the system caters to men, and there are less women in power, it limits the effort of women to do more and be out there supported. Furthermore, there is more pressure and scrutiny on women which is demotivating. Of course, there are different experiences of women depending on many factors such as their social status in society. Therefore, a welcoming and supportive environment is required for the flourishing of women and society. This can be achieved through adopting flexible curriculums in public institutions and welcoming positive safe discussions on matters such as the wellbeing of women instead of censorship due to the general perceived threat of intruding ideas. The solution is to create fruitful discussions in safe spaces such as universities and schools to foster discussions tailored to our culture.

I remember my convocation week at Georgetown, which is where the magic all started. One of my first efforts was to apply for an internship with 'Women of Qatar', a great project led by Al-Jawhara Al-Thani, Georgetown graduate in the class of 2016 and received her masters from Leiden University 2020 in global and colonial history. During the interview both Al-Jawhara and I admired each other's hope for the future of women and that both were passionate about ensuring the betterment of women's inclusivity in Qatar. She advised me to focus on my first year before taking on more responsibilities, we stayed in contact and discussed collaborations later on. During my first week, some upperclassmen were assigned as the Orientation Advisors which is where I first met the founder of 'The Future is Female' initiative (FIF) in 2017, a year before I joined GU-Q. The initiative was started after research showing a gap between the numbers of female graduates and women's economic participation rates. Thus the student-led initiative was established to empower school students into exploring the different fields.

The FIF initiative aims to empower girls in the region and increase their participation in the public sphere. It is a platform where men and women can address gender issues and allows the youth to engage in the current political and social conversations. Furthermore, the aim is to educate students and give them opportunities to explore parameters outside of their classrooms. It encourages them to take an initiative in their communities such as creating their own projects that reflect on empowering their peers and being leaders. We host different events, such as workshops and annual conferences to empower young girls and we have had several girls pursue projects such as creating their own conference for the youth and school debates on the topic of gender equality. Our events are hosted by professional and experienced women in their respective fields, as one of our main goals is to bridge the gap between young girls and women who are currently in the fields they aspire to be in. Through our workshops, we aim to embed students with a variety of skills such as writing, filmmaking, critical thinking, and analytical skills to help them explore diverse fields and gain experience that they can use during their study at the university. The different themes of our workshops include creative skills. FIF aims to create a safe space for the youth to gain exposure to different ideas and opportunities as they learn to be compassionate and increase their awareness on different issues and injustices while learning to support one another. We collaborate with different initiatives and clubs, whether in Georgetown Qatar or in the wider community to bring students together through different events. FIF members are present in different local events to reach out to wider audiences - I have been in a number of activities such as Qatar Leadership Conference, Qatar Youth Power Conference, Debate Tournament: Each for Equal as well as visiting several local schools.

After one year of being in the FIF team, I was promoted to Head of Outreach where I took on more responsibilities and became in charge of the outreach team. Working with a great like-minded ambitious team inspired me to do more, thus we started the Ambassador Program, which gives students more responsibility and connects us with their school and university communities to have wider impacts. The following year, I was given the opportunity to step up and be the President of FIF, which is still my current position as a senior at Georgetown. Besides believing in the aims of the initiative, I particularly like the FIF's team aspirations to improve and be relevant to international or local interests with our yearly new members and President keeping it flexible and a continuous project. I was able to take lead and include my vision further making it my own, where I believed we needed to focus on catering towards the culture and place we are in and did that by creating more Arabic content and events. I believe that public schools should involve different programs that prepare students for their future careers and get them involved to think about their interests, hence we are constantly trying to diversify our target audience and be inclusive towards the community. The FIF student team works together and gains inspiration from local events and class discussions which keeps us motivated to implement more events that cater to the wider community.

In this initiative, students work together to continuously implement lessons we learn in classes and tailor our efforts towards relevant topics. The theme of the year tends to be broad and inclusive but we also highlight certain aspects of female empowerment during our annual conference, then the workshops and events are more focused leading up to the conference in March - which is the month of International Women Day. During the Covid-19 quarantine period, we shifted to online platforms to connect with the community. We had to be more creative in using online resources and our social media platform; for example, the artist biographies we created by reaching out to local female artists. We had monthly themes that were addressed through social media, the first was mental health; as it is not only an important topic that is rarely talked about publicly, but was particularly increasing at the time as a result of the global lockdown. We also hosted our first Arabic workshop with an influential life coach; Jawaher AlMana. She addressed our theme of 'Self-growth and Development' while reflecting on keeping a steady outlook on life and focusing on perception and thoughts to create a positive future. In addition, we co-hosted a collaborative event with Georgetown Women's Alliance Qatar on the "Rise of Domestic Violence Amidst Covid-19." As a result of increasing online workshops we were able to get our event reposted on several platforms which led to an astounding local and international audience via zoom - capturing males and females across Arab countries and different ages. I was able to apply the intersectionality of my background as a Bedouin and the diversity in Georgetown's teachings through research and the FIF initiative, which is also currently being reflected in my honors thesis. As my project focuses on Qatari women's lived experiences, I was able to meet women to interview for my research.

The journey for the future begins at a young age. Where I believe that young's minds are affected by what they get exposed to; hence it is important to have positive surroundings and examples. Therefore, educational institutes play a critical role in shaping and exposing students to grow and set either horizons or limitations. In John Krumboltz (1976) social learning theory, he describes that learning is through

observation (cognitive) and through direct experiences (behavior). The idea behind specific careers choices are thought to be a result of several factors: genetic endowment which is aspects of a person that are inherited or innate which can limit the person's career pool and environmental conditions which are circumstances that impact preferences and skills development. Hence, the exposure one gets and their surrounding environment definitely influences the individual's path decisions and with limited resources one needs a supportive environment to see.

As much as we would like to see great change and hope our aims are met, we also face limitations. The process of putting our ideas into action can be harder than we imagine since we collaborate with institutions and figures. My time in FIF has taught me that putting ideas into reality takes so much time and effort, due to the process of contacting, getting approvals and so on, but it is worth it. What is especially difficult are the hierarchical processes in public schools and higher education institutions that really restrain us. As students, we do not have the time or energy to go through long chains of commands that are complicated. However, the whole purpose of FIF is to focus on empowering girls for the betterment of their experiences and the community as a whole. What disheartens us is the fact that we are part of the local community and would not call for ideas that do not fit our culture. There are preconceived ideas when it comes to 'feminism' where it is seen as a threat of outsider ideas that do not abide by Islamic teachings; however, that is not necessarily true as there are different ways to incorporate Islamic feminism and empowerment that is in line with culture and traditions, which we care for as much as everyone else.

The Future is Female and Georgetown gave me the platform and necessary tools to grow as a young woman and future pioneer. I was exposed to new ideas and inspirational women as well as encouraged to be creative. In GU-Q classes, I learned about relevant themes and key terms that can be applied to understand social and political issues, and the classes are designed to invoke our minds to think positively by ourselves. Dr. Amal Almalki, founding dean of CHSS at Hamad bin Khalifa University and a mentor of FIF, always told our team to be innovative and assured us that any projects we do will be supported. The institution's support provided me agency to extend this knowledge beyond the borders of the university campus and my family. It empowered me to embark on my own original research and look into the lived realities of Qatari women. As an initiative, we hope this positive change grows and continues for many years to come. I am proud to be part of this legacy that will create strong links between women in the workplace and girls.

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