Amplifying the Presence of Qatari Women in Public Space

The Case of 'Women of Qatar'
Al Jawhara Al Thani

"*In the end all we have are stories and methods of finding and using those stories. Knowledge, then, is experiences and stories. Intelligence is the apt use of experience, and the creation and telling of stories. Memory is memory for stories, and the major processes of memory are the creation, storage, and retrieval of stories.*" (Schank and Abelson, 1995)

At Women of Qatar, we aim to highlight and document the roles and contributions of Qatari women. We do so through interviewing and publishing articles focusing on the experiences of women who are nominated by fellow women.

The inception of this project came through in the latter half of 2016. After obtaining my bachelor's degree, I started questioning the present reality of women in Qatar, and specifically, three key challenges. Firstly, there exists a gender gap in Qatar's national history where men are documented more than their women counterparts. Secondly, young girls did not have the advantage of social networking in majlises (places for social gathering common amongst men). Thirdly, and lastly, continuously hearing, throughout my life, other women and young girls complain about similar challenges. One example of such challenges was young girls vocalizing that they were not able to specialize in a subject of their choosing as their family or friends told them that it is not a subject for women to specialize in.

Hearing these stories, I thought, *'maybe if women in Qatar knew that other women, from a similar background to theirs have faced, and overcome similar challenges, they would be able to overcome their own challenges, with the wisdom of the women that came before them.'* Knowing that other women have faced similar challenges to ours and were able to overcome them, would give us the confidence to do the same. For this very reason, I brainstormed ways to address the issue of women's underrepresentation, and created the 'Women of Qatar' project.

From an idea to a website

There were two separate incidents that helped me shape the vision for Women of Qatar; both incidents were conversations I had with two different cousins at two separate moments. The first incident was with Al Jawhara Hassan Al Thani, the head of Wellbeing and Safeguarding at Qatar foundation, in which we were both discussing the importance of representation and visibility of women in our community. Al Jawhara argued that despite there being no shortage of inspirational Qatari women, they are not visible to most people, and their successes remained hidden. I then became hyper-aware of women's absence in the media, with a possible consequence of being the reason that there are no known women in public spaces.

This is critical when considering young Qatari girls, as it shapes their beliefs about their own selves, and their prospects for the future. Representation allows us to be able to envision ourselves in the position of the people we see. Women may not be visible in the media due to some of them being uncomfortable in the public eye. Thus tending not to publish their photos, or appear in interviews. This discomfort, stemming from cultural and personal reasons, has an impact on how young girls perceive public spaces.

The second conversation was with my younger cousin, who was 7 at the time. She and I were watching Qatar Television where an interview was aired with a minister. My younger cousin turned to me and said, "My mother always says that my younger brother will become a minister one day." To which I replied, "Yes and you will be one as well." She laughed and said, "No, a woman can't be a minister."

I knew I wanted to create visibility for Qatari women in order to do my part in ensuring that no young Qatari girl would doubt her potential. My vision was, and still is to create a space where Qatari women can network for jobs, and address gender issues in Qatar. Lastly, I wanted a place in which I can document Qatari women's history. That space is now the Women of Qatar website.

Launching the project

At the beginning of 2017, I decided to start a website where I would blog about my opinion on gender issues in Qatar. At the time I did not have any experience in creating or running a website. I knew, however, that it was important to create this space. I, therefore, created a website and inaugurated it with my first blog post consisting of an introductory message about Women of Qatar.

The next steps were not as clear. Once the first blog post was published, I was befuddled with the historical blockade imposed on Qatar. At the time, I could only focus on the demands of my work with Ministry of Education and Higher Education, meaning that I had to step away from working on my project, Women of Qatar.

A few months later, once things were settled, I was reminded of my purpose once more, and my next step became clear. While browsing the Qatari authors' section of the bookstore, I was drawn to published work by female authors of whom I had never heard of before. I picked up a children's book, Al Asateer (Myths), by Dr. Kaltham Al-Ghanim that contained Gulf Folklore. I was taken away by the book completely. The concept of documenting local folklore in an illustrated book, made me want to meet Dr. Kaltham and to learn more about her creative process, from documentation to illustration. Picking up this book, and the quality of its production made me wonder as to why I had not heard of this book or Dr. Kaltham before. When I started to look for means for contacting Dr. Kaltham, mother saw the book and immediately recognized her. It amused me how so many Qatari women, know one another.

It struck me how much the information that goes around via word of mouth will be lost to future generations if left undocumented. It was at that time that I found my next step, I decided to meet and interview Dr. Kaltham. I was able to get her contact information via my aunt, Dr. Asma Ali Al Thani who was the one that helped me set up the interview, as they both work at Qatar University and are acquainted with one another. It was only after conducting that interview that I knew how I wanted to move forward with the project, by interviewing and documenting the lives, roles and contributions that Qatari women have had.

Building a team

The scope of the project was big and required a team to support and help it fulfil its mandate. This team had to be made of local, Qatari women, as only a local would be able to truthfully capture the stories of the interviewees, and convey them the way our interviewees' intend.

I advertised a part-time position which was met with interest by two ladies, and members: Al Anoud Saleh Al Kuwari and Fatima Mohammed Al Naimi, who helped me create the website we have in the present day. In our first meeting, I asked the team to name Qatari women that they found inspirational, be it someone they knew personally or otherwise, and together, we created a list and started contacting women to interview. We continued this cycle by asking the women we interviewed to name women they found inspirational and requesting that they provide us with their contact information in order to contact and conduct interviews with them.

Women of Qatar remains a project founded by Qatari women for Qatari women. We aim to create an environment in which Qatari women can feel free to tell their stories on their own terms. We do that by giving the interviewee full agency over the final outcome of their interview, and by giving them the option to upload their photo, and by allowing them to indicate when and where they would like us to conduct the interview. Slowly, the Women of Qatar website has become a reference page for anyone who is interested in learning more about Qatari women and Qatari culture.

That said, the Women of Qatar project still has a long journey ahead to fulfill its vision. We face a number of challenges that hinder us from reaching our full potential. With our main, and most urgent challenge being financial support; the process of keeping our team members, hosting the website, and conducting interviews is costly and it prevents me from expanding the scope of the project to its true vision. Although handling this project by Qatari women causes some difficulties, I am insistent on this because as it is the best way to convey the stories of the Qatari women. Moreover, as a historian, I have

seen the impact that a "Western" or another lens can have when writing about the Gulf, especially on gender issues, and I wanted to give Qatari women the agency to tell their own histories.

Conclusion

Women of Qatar now is run by a new team with the mandate of expanding the project. I have been highly fortunate in finding women who share the same passion I have for this project, and we continue to grow.

This project gives me as much as I give it. Through this work, I can fulfill my passion as a historian, and my eagerness to be of service to women in Qatar. With every new interview we conduct, I am reminded as to why I started the project in the first place. The number of talented, trailblazing, and dedicated women who have gone unrecognized and undocumented is unfair to the women themselves and to the future generations of Qatari women who will be inspired by their success alike.

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References

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