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### Meanings of Women's Agency: Improving Measurement in Context

Yara Qutteina<sup>1</sup>, Laurie James-Hawkins<sup>2</sup>, Buthaina A. Al-Khelaifi<sup>1</sup>, Kathryn M. Yount<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Qatar University, QA

<sup>2</sup>Emory University, US

Email: [yara@qu.edu.qa](mailto:yara@qu.edu.qa)

Decades of research has been conducted to understand the processes that under gird women's empowerment and one of its core components—women's agency. However, few inroads have been made into the study of how these processes work in Arab Middle Eastern societies. In fact, research on women's agency in the Arab Middle East has generally relied on measurement instruments that have been adapted without rigorous testing. This study is the first in Qatar to explore how women in Qatar understand women's agency scale items.

#### Aim

The aim of this study is to explore women's interpretations of selected scale items about decision-making, freedom of movement, and gender attitudes.

#### Methods

Cognitive interviews were conducted with 24 Qatari women ages 18–21. These women previously responded to agency scales as part of a bigger two wave survey study on influences of kin on women's participation in the labor market. The semi-structured cognitive interviews explore one decision-making item, one freedom-of-movement item, and five gender attitude items. Grounded theory analysis techniques were used. Women's responses were coded and analyzed for themes and patterns.

#### Results

For the decision-making item, the majority of women originally reported that they made their own decisions; yet probing revealed family input as an important part of the decision-making process. We conclude that the response

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options for this item were not uniformly interpreted by participants, and this variation in interpretation results in the group of women who reported making the decision on their own to be more heterogeneous than the researchers intended. Women's multiple interpretations of the decision-making scale suggest that the item was too vague for the context in which it was measured. On the other hand, women seemed to understand the item measuring freedom of movement as the researchers intended, as almost all participants easily indicated that they needed input from others on the freedom-of-movement item. We conclude that the uniformity in responses is due to the specificity of the item which led to women interpreting the item as intended. Women's responses to gender attitude items were reflective of broader Qatari societal norms rather than their own individual opinions. In their survey responses, women participants reflected less gender-equitable attitudes on some items and higher gender-equitable attitudes on other items. When probed during the cognitive interviews, inconsistencies appeared between their initial responses and their subsequent discussion of gender roles in Qatari society. It appears that these young women are caught between their own beliefs about gender equality and larger Qatari societal norms. These conflicts resulted in inconsistent responses across the gender attitude scale.

### Conclusion

Agency measures commonly used in the Arab Middle East are not necessarily appropriate for such a context, especially when used with Qatari young women. Generally, the scale items tested revealed that the items were interpreted in different ways by different women. This highlights the need for deeper exploration into women's understanding of agency scale items before their use in new social contexts. Accordingly, we recommend that scale items be systematically tested whenever a researcher wants to field it in a new cultural context to determine if it is being interpreted consistently across women, and in line with the researchers intent. It is also important to identify scale items which may elicit responses that are representative of societal norms rather than personal beliefs. We recommend that such items are modified to encourage women to express their own opinions.