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The (in)hospitality of Qatar for migrant women workers: A Case Study in the Hospitality Industry

The hospitality industry in Qatar is rapidly expanding and heavily reliant on migrant labour to staff its hotels and restaurants, with women migrants forming an increasingly important part of the workforce. Global perceptions of Qatar as a location for female migrant workers are ambiguous: it is a patriarchal and traditional country, which limits women's career opportunities, yet at the same time offers relatively high wages, low taxes and multiple job options for women in the hospitality industry. This study draws on an ethnographic study of migrant women workers in a five-star hotel in Doha to examine various ways in which they navigate this ambiguity and their perceptions and motivations for working and living in Qatar. Findings illustrate that the women in the study had positive perceptions of Qatar as a safe environment where they could earn money to send to support families back home. For many women from the Global South, Qatar offers a hospitable environment and the hospitality industry provides opportunities to capitalise on the benefits of migrating to work in Qatar, for both the individual worker and her wider family.

Key words: Gender, Hospitality, Migration, Qatar, Perceptions

1. Introduction

Cross-border movement, diaspora, or international migration are all terms used by researchers to describe the mobility of groups or individuals away from their home country. Castellani and Martin-Diaz (2019) stated that female migrants are referred to as transnational mobiles as they are (usually) returnees to their home country as they have families left behind, with whom they have durable family ties. According to The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2020), women comprise around 47% of all international migrants. There are several reasons behind female migration, including forced marriage, education, lack of work opportunities, gender discrimination, family or social factors, conflicts, and natural disasters (Kuehnis, 2021; Rydzik & Anitha, 2019; Ruysen & Salomone, 2018). In recent years, women have been entering the workplace with higher intensity. Data from the IOM (2020) show that the number of female migrants has increased steadily, and in some countries, exceeded the number of male migrants. The hospitality sector offers many employment opportunities for migrant women, particularly in low-skilled, feminised positions (Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015).

Over the past twenty years, Qatar has witnessed an increase in migration flows from different places in the world, mainly Asia, Europe, and neighbouring Arab countries. According to the latest Census (2015), migrants make up over 98% of Qatar's workforce and over 50% of its total population. In

addition, the total number of female migrants reached 66,651 in 2015, representing 5.5% of the total non-Qatari workforce. By the time of the next Census, these figures are likely to have risen further. Qatar is thus heavily reliant on migrants for its workforce. Although women only make up a relatively small proportion of that migrant workforce, their importance is growing as Qatar diversifies its economy away from male-dominated sectors like oil towards female-dominated sectors like hospitality and tourism.

However, the Gulf region provides numerous challenges for women in general, and migrant women workers in particular. The six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain – share a common language (Arabic), religion (Islam) and culture, rooted in Islamic civilisation. Women's roles have traditionally been limited to the domestic sphere and the family, and cultural and religious norms and expectations, as well as legislation, have limited women's progression in the workplace and participation in public life. Although there have been some improvements, women remain underrepresented in economic and political life across the GCC (Al Gharubeh, 2015). There are differences between the countries of the GCC, and Qatar represents one of the more progressive Arab states for women in the workplace. In Qatar, migrants have more rights than in other countries in the region. The abolishment of exit permits, due to the implementation of international labour laws, means that migrants in Qatar can now leave the country without permission whenever they seek to do so. Moreover, women are allowed to enter and work in the country if they are sponsored by an employer, and a male guardianship is not required, unlike other countries in the GCC. However, despite improvements for migrant workers, and specifically women, frequent reports in international media continue to highlight worker mistreatment and human rights abuses, particularly in the context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The attraction of Qatar for migrant women is thus ambiguous. On the one hand, international media represent a hostile and inhospitable location for migrant workers and for women, a location where worker rights are minimal, and women's freedoms and status in the workplace may be limited, with women substantially underrepresented in senior roles (Kemp et al., 2015). Yet on the other hand, Qatar offers migrant workers relatively high wages and tax breaks, and more employment protections than many neighbouring states. Qatar's rapidly expanding hospitality sector requires large numbers of migrant workers, providing many opportunities for women. Thus, the extent to which Qatar as a nation, and the hospitality sector within that nation, offers female migrants a welcoming and hospitable environment is important (see Lynch et al., 2011), not only for the experiences of the women who do migrate there for work but also for the hospitality industry's ability to attract and retain the staff needed to sustain the expanding sector.

This paper explores various ways in which migrant women navigate this ambiguity. As women, hospitality offers them acceptable employment in the highly gendered and patriarchal context of Qatari society that still poses barriers for women in the workplace, despite wider reform policies (Lari, 2019). As migrant women, they often carry heavy responsibility for supporting family members back home, and thus the economic benefits of working in Qatar are highly attractive. Drawing on an ethnographic study of migrant women working in a five-star hotel in Doha we explore experiences of this ambiguity and questions the perceived (in)hospitality of Qatar to migrant women.

2. Understanding female migration

Female migration tends to be concentrated in occupations that are traditionally associated with women, such as healthcare, tourism, and hospitality. A key example can be care work, including nursing, childcare, cleaning, and other related household work. Aging populations and low fertility levels have triggered a global shortage in care work, which in return requires more female migrants to fill the gap (King-Dejardin, 2019). Such work is often deemed to be 'feminised' as it is associated with gendered roles that women have traditionally played in the household. The same can be said for some aspects of hospitality work. Women are severely under-represented at senior levels in the hospitality industry and are often concentrated in low-skilled, low paid occupations such as housekeeping that mimic women's traditional roles in families (Mooney & Ryan, 2009; Morgan & Pritchard, 2019). Domestic roles are naturalised as 'women's work' and accorded less status and reward. In contrast, when men dominate roles such as cheff-ing, work is transformed from the domestic sphere to the more valued public sphere and attracts greater status and reward (Harris & Guiffre, 2010a, 2010b; Neuman & Fjellstrom, 2014). Consequently, although hospitality provides migrant women with employment opportunities and thus potential economic reward, this may be limited by gendered perceptions of different roles and those who perform those roles (Ashcraft, 2013).

Female migrants are often closely tied to their families back home, sending more remittances to their families than migrant men do and contributing more to development in their home countries. According to a policy brief developed by the European Union and UN Women (2014), female migrant remittances exceed foreign direct investment in some countries. Those remittances are sent to their families which most likely are then spent on healthcare, education, and family and community development (UN Women, 2013; Orozco, et al., 2006). In countries such as Nepal, female migrants contribute to around 23% of the country's GDP. Amirapu et al. (2022) argue that those remittances are essential for both social and economic development of the migrants' home countries.

More women are now migrating independently in search of jobs, rather than migrating as family dependents, travelling with their partners or joining them abroad (Migration Data Portal, 2020). The relatively equal share of women and men in migration flows has caused a change in the level of awareness on the part of migration experts and other stakeholders about the significance of female migration. Interestingly, since women tend to send more remittances to their families back home, women have sometimes become more desirable as labour migrants within their families (Hofman & Buckley, 2011).

Female migration, although seen as offering great financial support for families, can also have negative impacts on migrant women and their families. Rossi (2008) argues that leaving children behind represents a potentially high social cost of migration. Children with absent mothers tend to perform less well in their education (Yeoh, 2006) and in terms of their physical and emotional health (Lam, 2006). This implies that children suffer emotionally from the absence of their mothers and are negatively impacted by their mothers migrating for work. These suggestions were reinforced in Apatinga et al.'s (2019) study to assess the implications of the feminisation of migration on families left behind in Ghana.

However, migrant women can influence changes in several areas including social, cultural, and political norms, and instilling positive change across households and communities, in both their host and home countries (Berlepsch, et al., 2018). One example is when female migrants become the breadwinners, when they can influence the decision making of their families. Migration enables home countries to benefit from the transfer of knowledge, ideas, practices, skills and technologies (European Union & UN Women, 2014). As for the host country, female migrants support the growth of a productive workforce that is able to fill the gap in industries such as healthcare and hospitality (European Union & UN Women, 2014). Although many female migrants often engage in low paid jobs, especially in the hospitality industry, there are other examples of the migration of skilled female workers that help the host country build a stock of required knowledge and skills, such as the migration of nurses from the Philippines to GCC States (including Qatar) (European Union & UN Women, 2014). A recent study conducted by Amirapu et al. (2022) to discuss the social contribution of female migrants from Bangladesh found that migrant women have a direct role in raising awareness about education and the importance of having a job to generate income for their families.

Migrant women thus play important roles in both their home and host countries. Migrant workers have often been treated as a homogenous group, with the experiences of migrant men taken to represent the universal experience and not recognised as gendered experiences. In this paper we recognise that the experiences of migrant women in our study are gendered in that their experiences

as women are fundamental to understanding both their motivations for migrating to Qatar and their experiences once there.

3. Gender and work in Qatar

Qatar is heavily reliant on migrant labour, as it has a very small citizen population who, due to considerable wealth, often do not work. In Qatar, the lack of available Qatari nationals to work in the hospitality sector necessitates the hiring of migrants (both male and female) to fill these roles. Qatar offers a potentially attractive location to female migrants, as pay is relatively high due to low tax requirements and legal and social restrictions for women are less restrictive than in neighbouring countries in the GCC. Thus, migrant women make up an increasingly important proportion of the workforce in Qatar's expanding hospitality industry.

However, although Qatar offers many economic opportunities to migrant women and is relatively more open and liberal than many of its neighbours in the GCC, it is still a highly gendered social and working environment. For female Qatari citizens who do work, the ongoing restrictions of patriarchy continue to restrict their working lives, for example through gender segregated workplaces that enable Qatari women to protect their reputations, and therefore their marriageability, but reinforce gendered hierarchies and divisions (Salem & Yount, 2019).

The Qatari government has recognised the issue of the 'glass ceiling' and the underrepresentation of women in senior positions. As part of the Qatar National Vision 2030 the government is working towards improving the number of (Qatari) women in leadership positions (General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2011). However, Naguib and Madeeha (2023) found that despite legislative changes, both men and women continue to hold deeply ingrained gender biases that lead to a preference for male over female managers, and thus help perpetuate gender inequality. Liloia (2019) also reported the ongoing prevalence of gender biases and the desire of Qatari women in her study to maintain established gender paradigms and protect traditional values in the face of modernisation.

Qatari women are thus subject to ongoing gendered restrictions, despite state-wide efforts towards supporting greater gender equality. Migrant women are affected by the gendered norms and biases of the Qatari workplace but are also positioned as outsiders by virtue of their migrant status. Rodriguez and Scurry's (2019) study of skilled migrant women in Qatar illustrates how the intersection of gender and foreignness is "mobilized in ways that control, subordinate, marginalize and exclude skilled migrant women in work and social spaces" (p.493). They suggest that skilled migrant women are marked as unfamiliar and positioned as outsiders to both the country (through their foreignness)

and its cultural order (through gender power relations). If skilled migrant women, who are generally perceived as more desirable in international labour markets, experience this marginalisation then it is possible that unskilled migrant women – such as many of those within our study – are also side-lined and othered as foreigners, as women, and as low skilled workers. We explored these issues through our ethnographic study of migrant women workers in a five-star hotel in Doha.

4. Case study and methods

This research examines the experiences of female migrants in Qatar, through an ethnographic study of employees in a five-star hotel. Over a nine-month period, the first author, herself a Turkish migrant woman working in Qatar, visited the hotel frequently to try to understand the experiences of the migrant women working there. Their shared identity as migrant women helped establish rapport and build trust with participants. She visited the hotel regularly, observing routine interactions and partaking in casual conversations with workers at different levels and performing different roles in the hotel. A total of 25 more formal interviews were completed with female migrants working in a variety of roles across the organisation – from housekeeping to waitresses and senior managers. Interviews took place at the hotel and covered a variety of topics including the women’s reasons for migrating to Qatar, any prior experiences of migration, their roles and experiences at the hotel, and their lives in Qatar (see Table 1 for details about interview participants).

Number	Name	Age	Position	Nationality	Marital Status
1	Andrea	23	Spa Assistant	Bali	Single
2	Mercy	22	Security Officer	Kenya	Single
3	Rijana	25	Housekeeper	Bangladesh	Single
4	Marial	39	Marketing Director	Philippines	Single Mum
5	Nawal	40	Senior Sales Manager	Egypt	Single Mum
6	Rima	40	Events Manager	Lebanon	Married
7	Eve	29	Food and Beverage Coordinator	Philippines	Single
8	Lani	33	Sales Coordinator	Philippines	Single
9	Elena	28	Receptionist	Albania	Single

10	Sasha	28	Hostess	Ukraine	Single
11	Leanne	28	Waitress	Philippines	Single
12	Christina	32	Room Attendant	Sri Lanka	Married
13	Sania	26	Cleaner	Bangladesh	Single
14	Merry	42	Laundry Assistant	Nepal	Single Mum
15	Fatma	25	Front Office Employee	Morocco	Single
16	Monica	23	Front Office Employee	India	Single
17	Kris	29	Front Office Supervisor	Philippines	Single
18	Marion	29	HR and Learning and Development coordinator	Philippines	Single
19	Mrs. H	45	GM	Egypt	Married
20	Yulia	25	Receptionist	Ukraine	Single
21	Jamie	37	Guest Relations Supervisor	Philippines	Single
22	Helen	26	Waitress	Philippines	Single
23	Jane	25	Security Officer	Kenya	Single
24	Rose	30	Sales Coordinator	Philippines	Single
25	Sue	33	Marketing Coordinator	India	Single

Table 1: Interview participants

All employees at the hotel are migrants, as Qatari nationals very rarely work in positions in hospitality. The women originated from a variety of places, namely Arabic countries (such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan), Asia (India, Philippines, Sri Lanka), some Eastern European countries such as Albania and Ukraine, and Africa (Morocco, Kenya), but the majority originated from nations in the Global South. The age of respondents varied between mid-twenties to early forties. As the focus of the study was to understand more about the experiences of female migration, participation was restricted to women only. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality of personal stories was ensured through processes of anonymisation of data and use of pseudonyms. Interviews and informal conversations were conducted in English. Whilst the women participants in the study had varying levels of English fluency, English is the language used at the hotel and was the one language shared by all participants and the first author. Interviews were transcribed in full, and observations recorded as fieldnotes.

Data were analysed using a multi-staged approach as explained by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) that includes 1) become familiar with the data, 2) focus the analysis, 3) categorise the data and create a framework, 4) identify patterns and make connections, and 5) interpret the data and explain

findings. This paper focuses on participants' migration journeys and motivations, and so draws predominantly on interview data.

5. Findings: The perceived (in)hospitality of Qatar for migrant women

The women working at the hotel told many stories regarding their migration to Qatar and the motives underpinning it. Although they share commonalities, as Brah (1996) emphasises, every migrant woman had a unique story, related to their own personal and familial history, their relationships back home, and their future hopes and aspirations. Their choices to travel to Qatar specifically reflect the ambiguity of Qatar as a destination, as discussed above. Participants spoke about the attractions of Qatar (such as financial benefits, relative safety) and also compared it to their home nations and (lack of) opportunities therein.

5.1. Family support, economic burdens and lack of job opportunities

The need to provide financially for their families tends to be at the heart of most migrant stories. Due to ongoing gender norms, women may feel responsibility for family more heavily than men, and this is a strong influencer for migration. Andrea is a single 23-year-old spa assistant from Bali. She spoke of leaving her country for financial reasons:

I just finished my high school exams, and my parents tried to push me to go to college, but at that time I saw that my father was sick, and I have to take care of my sisters. My older sister was already in college, and she was benefiting from a full scholarship. However, I was always thinking, "how can I secure the tuition fees for my younger sister?" My parents were in a tough position. Therefore, I took my decision to go and start working overseas, and I told my parents not to try and influence my decision.

Many of the women articulated similar financial motivations. Rijana, from Bangladesh, is a 25-year-old single woman. The reasons underpinning her journey were similar:

I had to leave my hometown to support my family financially. I need to support my family with the land rent and to be able to buy raw material to work in agriculture. Also, I immigrated to Qatar to support my younger brothers' education. You know life is not easy and we all have many responsibilities. If I stayed in Bangladesh, I would earn between 100 to 200 USD per month. Here it's much better. I can even help my mum to buy new things for the house.

Mercy, who is 22 years old, migrated from Kenya and works as a security officer in the hotel. Mercy sends remittances for her single mum and two siblings back home:

I have been raised by a single mum. I didn't have a father, he died, so I was raised by my mum. I am not the only child. We are three siblings. And I never had the opportunity to go to the university. My mum was only able to send me to college. When I finished school, I did a lifesaving course. I am a professional lifeguard. After I got the certificate, I started working here and there. I was helping my mum. But I realised that my earnings were not enough to support the family, and it was time for me to travel abroad and help my mum.

Many of the women's stories resonate with the work of Humera and Ambreen (2017) who showed that the main drivers behind female migration from Bangladesh to Middle Eastern countries are the low wages and lack of jobs in the home nation. These factors are common among many developing nations, and it is unsurprising therefore, that many of the women involved in this study were from the Global South. In contrast to their home countries, Qatar offers a very attractive location for work due to the financial benefits of relatively high wages and low taxes.

This was the case for Eve, 26, from the Philippines. She has been working in the hotel for eight months as a food and beverage coordinator. For Eve, the pull of Qatar's tax-free salaries was particularly attractive compared to other common migrant destinations:

I like it here in Qatar because, you know, there is no tax. That's what all people from my country want. That's the first thing that, especially for a Filipino, they want no tax because in other countries, especially Dubai, they now have tax. Qatar is so good this way.

Another example was 39-year-old Marial, the hotel's marketing director from the Philippines. She spoke of migrating in order to give her child a better life and to financially support her retired father. Unlike many of the other women in this study, prior to migration Marial was working in the hospitality industry, in a five-star hotel in her home country. As with the above narratives, this role did not pay well, leading Marial to seek better paying opportunities elsewhere. Clearly, the lack of employment opportunities in their home countries is a significant factor underpinning the migration journeys of the women involved in this study, and Qatar provides a particularly attractive destination due to the financial system.

Financial gain is one of the main pull factors of migrating to Qatar and working in the hospitality industry, as the sector provides numerous employment opportunities for women that do not require specific qualifications or experience. Although low-skilled hospitality work may also be relatively low paid (Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015), for many of the women in our study this pay was still far higher

than anything they could hope to earn in their home countries. Women generally face more drastic decision-making and financial restrictions than do men as they tend to be more committed to family obligations (Kuehnis, 2021). Remittance transfers invariably relax budget constraints and thereby increase health and education opportunities for family members in the homeland (Tittensor & Mansouri, 2017; Fleury, 2016). For migrant women – predominantly from the Global South – seeking to maximise their earnings and send as much money as possible back home, hospitality work in Qatar offers the best financial rewards available.

5.2. Safety

For many Western observers, the GCC does not seem to offer an obviously safe environment for women due to restrictive laws and patriarchal norms and systems that limit the freedoms of women in and beyond the workplace (Salem & Yount, 2019). Qatar has received negative publicity on a global scale as a result of issues related to (usually male) migrant workers involved in different aspects of the FIFA 2022 World Cup (Human Rights Watch, 2023). However, this was not the perception – or the experience – of the migrant women in our study who identified Qatar as a safe and hospitable environment, particularly in comparison to their home countries.

Female migrants often cite wanting to move away from unstable, unsafe or hostile environments as a primary reason for their migration. According to Pearson and Sweetman (2019) female migration is most likely due to economic or security instabilities. Safety was definitely the priority for 40-year-old Rima from Lebanon. Rima, one of the managers of the hotel, cited the influence of political uncertainties in her home country. Rima was a repeat migrant, having grown up in Geneva, returning back to Lebanon with her family in 2000, before migrating again:

I didn't want to stay back in Europe alone. It is because my parents were moving back to Lebanon. Also, I don't have the Swiss nationality. It's true that I grew up in Europe between the age of 5, 6 till the age of 18, but I didn't get the nationality. So, I was not able to stay alone there. It was a bad choice going back to Lebanon as we always have wars. Now I understand that moving back to Lebanon was a bad choice.

After the war between Lebanon and Israel in 2006, followed by the civil war in Lebanon in 2008, Rima migrated to Qatar in the hope of finding safety, security and acceptance:

I needed a place where I can work safely without expecting a war to happen every day. I also needed a country that accepted Lebanese citizens and Europe was really hard, so Qatar was the best choice.

Similar to Rima, 40-year-old Nawal, the hotel sales director from Egypt, migrated to Qatar for the combination of financial stability and political safety. Nawal, who is divorced, has a ten-year-old daughter who lives with her parents in Egypt. Nawal has worked for the hotel for the past three years:

Before I moved to Qatar, I was working in the hotel industry in Egypt for 16 years. At that period, when I came to Doha, you know how was the political situation in Egypt? It was bad. After the revolution we had an economic downturn and the economy was impacted by the revolution, especially the hotel industry was impacted, because the hotel industry gets impacted by the safety of the place.

Related to safety, other factors contributing to migration included the need to flee forced or traditional marriages, a common migration push factor for women (Kuehnis, 2021; Pearson & Sweetman, 2019). Fatma, a 25-year-old front office employee from Morocco, explained that if she had stayed in Morocco her parents would have forced her into marrying one of her relatives. Determined to maintain her autonomy, Fatma had moved to Qatar:

I needed a job and wanted to work, but I didn't want to stay with my family in Morocco because they will force me to marry one of my relatives. That's how things go in our country. I preferred to go abroad, away from all of them. I don't mind Qatar, but I don't want Morocco.

Whereas Fatma migrated to avoid the exploitative influence of her parents, others had migrated on the recommendations of their parents. Monica, from India, is a 23-year-old front office employee, who had been working in the hotel for little over a year. She cited the influence of her father:

My father encouraged me to go to GCC. He always said Qatar is safer to work for me. That's actually, I can say, the main reason that I came here. I was following to my father mostly.

In India, women's safety is a significant concern. According to an article published by Prajapati (2020) in the *Times of India*, in India a girl is raped every 20 minutes. The country has been ranked as the world's most dangerous place for women. In contrast, Qatar was recognised to be a relatively safe place for women. The availability of hospitality work and relatively good pay, in a stable environment, provided a strong pull for many of the women in this study. Thus, contrary to some of the global media stories about migrant workers, Qatar was perceived to provide a safe and hospitable environment for the women in our study who experienced greater personal freedom (such as escaping forced marriages) and physical safety than in their home countries.

5.3. Word of mouth

The sense of Qatar as a safe and hospitable working environment for migrant women was reinforced by many women in our study through the input of family and friends who had prior experience of the country. Hsiao and Dillahunt (2018) have argued for the importance of word of mouth from family and friends in determining migrant destinations. Many of the women in this study had been unaware of Qatar prior to hearing about it via family and friends. Having limited knowledge of the place personally meant that positive word of mouth coming from people within their trusted social circle made the women feel more secure about Qatar as a destination. In short, positive endorsements from family and friends gave many of the women the confidence to travel. For example, Mercy heard about Qatar through her cousin who was already working there:

My cousin was working here in this hotel in the finance department, and he informed me about a job opening that is suitable for me. I was working in Kenya, but it was not enough. Me and my mum struggled a lot, we could not afford our monthly expenses, and our life was so hard. I heard that Qatar was a very nice destination to work in and that the salaries were good. I also heard that Qatar was a very safe and secure country to live in and was told by my cousin that it was safer than Kenya. So, I went for it.

Single mother, Sasha, 28, from Ukraine heard about Qatar through a family friend. Her friend had informed her that there are a lot of job opportunities in the hospitality sector in the Middle East. She actually began looking for work in Dubai, but during her research learned about Qatar, and was drawn in by its image on social media:

Actually, it (moving to Qatar) was accidental because I was working at my job in Ukraine. It was a debt collectors' job, so I would go and collect money from people. In that company I had several friends and one of my friends was a colleague that used to work in Dubai previously and then returned to Ukraine. I told him I was not happy with my job. I had many expenses, and my job did not pay me enough. My friend then said that I should go to Dubai. So, I looked for jobs in Dubai and different countries in the Middle East and I found this job here in Qatar. I looked at Qatar on social media and I liked it. I then talked to my sister and I told her that Qatar looked so beautiful in the pictures. She also looked at Qatar and was very amazed. She actually convinced me to come to Qatar, so I came, and I did not hesitate for a second. I was actually very excited.

Many of the women experienced a form of chain migration where migration networks have an influence on female migrants' decisions. In this case, the women referred to the influence of endorsements from family and friends whose personal experiences of Qatar provided much-needed confidence in a place they knew very little about (Djundeva & Lea Ellwardt, 2020; Eurenus, 2020).

Some of the women had had negative experiences of other countries in the GCC. Leanne, a 28-year-old waitress from the Philippines, had previously worked in Saudi Arabia, but spoke about how she had struggled to adapt to the conservative Muslim culture and lifestyle. She went back to the Philippines, but had again struggled to find suitable employment. An agency had convinced her to take another job in the GCC, this time in Qatar:

I went to an agency in the Philippines. The first job vacancy I found was in Saudi Arabia. I worked there for two years, and then I went back to my country. Then I decided to go to another country because Saudi Arabia is hard to live in, it's a very strict country. I need to wear a headscarf and I need to be covered at all times. The only place I can remove my headscarf is at home. Also, I am not allowed to socialise with males, and I cannot go out to places by myself. It was very strict there and I didn't like it at all. In the agency I heard that there was a waitress job available in Qatar. At first, I didn't want it because I thought Qatar is the same as Saudi Arabia, but in the agency, they explained to me that Qatar was completely different, and women in Qatar are more free. So, they convinced me, I applied for the job and now I am here.

As alluded to by Leanne, female migrants are often vulnerable to a series of gender-related challenges post-migration, principally gender discrimination and exploitation (Pearson & Sweetman, 2019; Rydzik et al., 2017). Despite the strict labour laws concerning females working in Saudi Arabia, positions such as restaurant hostess are still occupied by women, but their lives outside of work are heavily constrained. Leanne struggled to adhere to the country's strict Islamic Sharia law which, she felt, had negatively impacted her autonomy. In this context, Qatar provides a more appealing option. However, as discussed, as many women were unaware of Qatar - and its differences to its Gulf neighbours - agencies and friends and family played important roles in informing women of the possibilities that Qatar offers. In such ways, the relative hospitality of Qatar as a destination for migrant workers, and women in particular, was reinforced through personal and professional networks.

5.4. Desire to travel

Evidence from this study reinforces the view that migrant journeys are various and heterogeneous. While most of the women in this study had migrated in order to better their lives and the lives of their families - for example, through better salaries, job security and safety - others spoke of 'softer' reasons - most notably to travel and experience new places. This was certainly the case for 28-year-old Elena, a receptionist from Albania. Elena is over-qualified to work as a receptionist, being educated to master's level in Albania, but she took the role because she wanted to explore the world with a

friend. Her friend is a flight attendant, based out of Doha, and thus Qatar was a convenient base for Elena:

After I did my master's in criminal law, I started working on a two-year voluntary job to get my licence. At the end of my second year, I was thinking "what I am going to do next?". My best friend works in Doha as a flight attendant; I was seeing her sharing beautiful pictures from her travel destinations. I wanted to be like her and travel the world easily. But this was impossible as I won't be able to earn enough money to travel in Albania. I decided to follow my dream and came to Doha.

Similarly, Sasha from Ukraine has been working in the hotel restaurant for the past two years. She wanted to travel and explore the world, while gathering international experience in the process. For Sasha, Qatar was described as a "bridge to the rest of the world":

I see Qatar as a bridge to the rest of the world. Once you have an international experience, it is easy to find a job in the other parts of the world. In order to travel the world, I chose the first available job which was in Qatar, and I wasn't concerned much about my salary. I knew it will be a good experience and this is necessary for me.

For women like Sasha and Elena, hospitality work provides them with the financial resources to travel to, and live in, different countries. The roles that they undertake in Qatar, or any other country, may not reflect their qualifications, or even areas of interest, but this does not matter. For them, Qatar is a conduit to other destinations, rather than a long-term home. Such testimonies resonate with the work of Ladkin (2011), who suggests that for some people, their work in tourism and hospitality was always intended to be a temporary arrangement. This might be on a seasonal basis, or longer where opportunities for income were evident. For some of the women in this study, working in the hotel provides temporary income to cover their living and travel expenses, but is not considered a long-term arrangement. Moreover, in moving away from narratives of oppression, these testimonies reinforce the need for research that accounts for migrant communities who are in control of their movements (Stephenson, 2014). Qatar is an attractive destination for the opportunities it offers to travel to other destinations, rather than just in itself.

6. Conclusions

Since the awarding of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in 2010, the international profile of the small Gulf state of Qatar has skyrocketed. Starting with the 15th Asian Games in 2006, Qatar has used the hosting of major sports events as a mechanism to raise its international profile and begin to diversify the

economy away from oil and towards hospitality and tourism (Foley et al., 2012). This has brought scrutiny and much controversy, whether that be about human rights and the treatment of migrant workers (Al Thani, 2021) or the empowerment (or otherwise) of women (Harkness et al., 2018). Although more socially liberal than many of its GCC neighbours, Qatar is still a strongly patriarchal society with social norms based in Islamic traditions that shape interactions between men and women, expectations about appropriate roles and behaviours for women, and limit women's participation in the workplace (Al Gharaibeh, 2015). All of these factors may conceivably make Qatar an inhospitable working environment for migrant women.

However, Qatar is also heavily reliant on migrant workers due to its small citizen population and relatively low levels of citizen employment, especially in low-skilled roles in sectors like hospitality. Qatar attracts migrant workers in large part through its relatively high wages and low taxation. For women like those in our study, who were migrating mainly for economic reasons to support family back home, this makes Qatar a very appealing destination. Cultural norms and comparatively lower wages in Qatar discourage Qatari women from seeking employment in the hotel industry. This situation, however, opens up more opportunities for female migrant workers. Given the strong female presence in the hospitality sector and the demand for female employees, it is notably easier for female migrants to secure jobs in this industry.

Our findings show that the women choose to work in Qatar due to social and economic difficulties in their home countries. They make this decision in pursuit of improved working conditions, which they perceive as an enhancement compared to the situations in their homeland. These circumstances can also become particularly binding for migrant women who, for a variety of reasons, such as financial gain to support families back home, feel powerless to leave their roles, even if they are dissatisfied with their job and working environment. This poses an additional burden for some skilled migrant women who, despite being desirable in international labour markets, find themselves marginalised and labelled as foreigners, women, and low-skilled workers. Feeling isolated and alone can cause migrant women to consider leaving their jobs to return home to friends and family. For many of the female migrants in this study, abandoning their jobs is not an option (even if sometimes they wish they could), as their wages/jobs are the primary motivation for migrating in the first place, and essential to supporting loved ones back home. Therefore, while migrant women experience marginalisation, in many cases, their lived experiences in Qatar remain favourable compared to the realities back home. Moreover, when migrants in Qatar lose/leave their job, they are obliged to leave the country as sponsorship from the employer comes to an end. This further reinforces the precariousness of their lives.

In this paper, we have drawn on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a five-star hotel to consider how migrant women navigate this ambiguity in perceptions of Qatar as a destination for female migrants. Our findings illustrate that for the women in our study Qatar offers a very hospitable and welcoming environment, contrary to the perceptions of many external commentators and critics. Coming mainly from countries in the Global South, Qatar provided the women in our study with opportunity to make considerably more money than they could hope to do at home, and thus to support their families – their primary motivation for migrating in the first place. Qatar was also seen as relatively safe for women, again in comparison to many of their home countries, and none of our participants expressed concerns about human rights and gendered restrictions on their behaviours.

This study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of female migrants in the hospitality industry in Qatar. Hospitality provides acceptable work opportunities for migrant women in a state like Qatar that is still underpinned by patriarchal norms and traditions that limit women's opportunities in the workplace (Lari, 2019; Salem & Yount, 2019). Hospitality work is often feminised (Campos Soria & Robles Teigeiro, 2019), especially roles like housekeeping that mimic women's traditional roles in the home. Although this does lead to the devaluing of these roles, resulting in relatively low pay and status (Santero-Sanchez et al., 2015), it also provides migrant women with employment and the opportunity to access the financial rewards outlined above which, whilst perhaps low in relation to other sectors, are relatively high for many women from the Global South. The hotel in this study provided our participants with a relatively safe working environment from which they could earn significant money, and also expand their international experiences. Thus, hospitality work provides important employment opportunities for migrant women in countries like Qatar that are still based on patriarchal norms that limit acceptable roles for women (Lilo, 2019; Naguib & Madeeha, 2023).

Given the rapid growth of Qatar's hospitality industry, coupled with its reliance on migrant labour, these findings also have significant practical applications. It is ever-more important for the hospitality industry to understand the motivations behind women's migration journeys. In so doing, more attractive employment opportunities can be developed and systems put in place to recruit, train, develop and retain female migrant talent. In a country like Qatar that is so heavily reliant on migrant labour, and which is experiencing rapid growth in its hospitality industry, greater understanding of why different women migrate to the country and what they want from working there (whether that be focused on economic outcomes, career development or travel opportunities, among other reasons), can help recruiters and managers ensure that appropriate jobs, support and reward packages are tailored to meet their needs. The hospitality sector can thus provide important employment opportunities for migrant women, and also help in the (re)branding of Qatar as a

welcoming and hospitable destination for migrant women especially. Indeed, against a backdrop of damaging media coverage, more work is required into the experiences of male migrant workers in hospitality and aligned industries.

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