

The ethics of ethics conferences: Is Qatar a desirable location for a bioethics conference?

Rieke van der Graaf¹  | Karin Jongsma¹  | Suzanne van de Vathorst² |
Martine de Vries³ | Ineke Bolt⁴

¹Department of Bioethics and Health Humanities, Julius Center, University Medical Center Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands

²Amsterdam UMC, Department of Ethics, Law and Humanities, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

³Department of Medical Ethics and Health Law, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands

⁴Department of Medical Ethics, Philosophy and History of Medicine, Erasmus Medical Center, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Rieke van der Graaf, Department of Bioethics and Health Humanities, Julius Center, University Medical Center Utrecht, P.O. Box 85500 Huispost STR 6.131, Utrecht 3508 GA, The Netherlands.
Email: r.vandergaaf@umcutrecht.nl

Abstract

The next World Congress of Bioethics will be held in Doha, Qatar. Although this location provides opportunities to interact with a more culturally diverse audience, to advance dialogue between cultures and religions, offer opportunities for mutual learning, there are also huge moral concerns. Qatar is known for violations of human rights - including the treatment of migrant workers and the rights of women - corruption, criminalization of LGBTQI+ persons, and climate impact. Since these concerns are also key (bio)ethical concern we call for a broad debate within the bioethics community whether organizing and attending the World Congress in Qatar is ethically problematic and how ethical concerns should be dealt with.

KEYWORDS

climate impact, conference ethics, ethics washing, human rights, LGBTQI+ persons, Qatar

1 | INTRODUCTION

In July 2022, the International Association of Bioethics (IAB) announced that its next World Congress of Bioethics (WCB) will be held in Doha, Qatar.¹ It is the first time that the WCB will be organized in the Middle East, and in an Arab country. The IAB argues that this location provides opportunities to interact with a more culturally diverse audience, to advance dialogue between cultures and religions, and that it offers opportunities for mutual learning amongst bioethicists.² However, the announcement has also raised questions to which the IAB has responded on its website.³ Qatar is under scrutiny since the Federation of International Football Associations, FIFA, decided to have its 2022

World Cup in Qatar. Amongst others, there are concerns about violations of human rights—including the treatment of migrant workers and the rights of women—corruption, criminalization of LGBTQI+ persons, and climate impact.⁴ Even though many international conferences are held in Qatar, bioethicists face particular dilemmas when deciding whether to attend the upcoming WCB, as human rights, inclusivity, and environmental protection are key (bio)ethical concerns. Therefore, is a WCB in Qatar ethically problematic and if so, how should ethical concerns be dealt with?

Critique on Qatar from the Global West is often considered hypocritical, among others because of Western colonialism. Yet, moral criticism is not necessarily the same as hypocrisy, especially not when it considers human rights violations, which is universally considered morally problematic. Moreover, even though no country

¹International Association of Bioethics. (2022). *Selection of Qatar to host the 2024 WCB*. Retrieved from <https://iabioethics.org/2024-congress>

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Human Rights Watch. (2022). *World Report 2022*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/qatar>

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is morally flawless, this argument does not exempt us from questioning whether Qatar is a desirable location for a bioethics conference. Others may argue that we as a bioethics community have thus far largely ignored conference ethics and henceforth there is no reason to debate it now. The IAB admits that previous ethics conferences took place in other countries "where questions about human rights violations and the treatment of minorities exist."⁵ However, these issues have received too little attention in the past. Bioethicists from the Global South may have faced difficulties in obtaining a visa.⁶ Others may not have felt comfortable, free, or safe to attend in person. Now that we are more aware of these issues, we should try to do better for future WCBs instead of using it as an argument to continue current practice.

Below, we will point out morally relevant issues that we identify about the upcoming WCB in Qatar. We also discuss the necessary conditions for an ethical World Congress in Qatar. We do not think that this is an exhaustive list of issues and conditions, nor do we expect everyone to agree. We do think, however, that a wider debate within the bioethics community about the location of the upcoming WCB is merited.

2 | CONCERNS ABOUT THE IAB WCB IN QATAR

2.1 | Human rights, inclusivity, diversity, and equity

In a recent report, Amnesty International argues that the Kafala (sponsorship-based employment) system has significantly contributed to the abuse and forced labor of migrant workers.⁷ Although steps have been taken to improve respect for human rights of migrant workers in the past 2 years, labor circumstances are still beyond optimal as abusive elements of the Kafala system seem to remain.⁸ Amnesty International also describes various cases of violations of freedom of expression and assembly for journalists, migrant workers, and minority tribes.⁹ Women face discrimination and are denied from making key decisions about their own lives, including working, traveling, and reproductive choices under the male guardianship system.¹⁰ Moreover, Qatar is reported to criminalize sexual activity, and gender expression and identity of LGBTQI+ people with imprisonment, and under their interpretation of Sharia

law, even the death penalty can be imposed.¹¹ Human Rights Watch recently reported that LGBTQI+ people have been arbitrarily arrested and treated poorly during their detention.¹² Many of the issues related to these policies have received media attention, focusing mainly on the negative implications for those living or working in Qatar. From the perspective of conference ethics, these policies will pose a problem for freedom of speech, and for diverse, inclusive, and equitable access, as not everyone will feel free, safe, or comfortable traveling to Qatar for this conference.

2.2 | Climate impact

Qatar has a desert climate with temperatures increasing above 45°C between May and September.¹³ The climate in the region necessitated Qatar to make environmental policy a priority and to invest in the reduction of its ecological footprint. Carbon dioxide emissions are among the highest in the world at around 40 metric tons per person (the world average is about 10 metric tons per person).¹⁴ A considerable amount comes from air conditioning.¹⁵ There are huge climate concerns with the organization of a conference in Qatar in May or June, as has been proposed. The conference will be held in the Qatar Conference Center, a fully air-conditioned building completed in 2011.¹⁶ In the proposed period, intensive use of the air conditioning system of the building, regardless of the building's golden LEEDS certificate, will be necessary.

3 | CONDITIONS FOR AN ETHICAL WORLD CONGRESS IN QATAR

3.1 | Dialogue on human rights and climate concerns and prevention of ethics washing

One of the IAB's ambitions for the WCB in Qatar is "to build cultural bridges" and to "foster mutual learning among bioethicists."¹⁷ It remains unclear how these bridges will be built. In theory, the conference in Qatar could bring global and local bioethics together. But mutual learning and cultural bridges ask for substantial efforts

⁵International Association of Bioethics, op. cit. note 1.

⁶Madhukar, P. (2022, June). Passport and visa privileges in global health. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/madhukarpai/2022/06/06/passport-and-visa-privileges-in-global-health/?sh=148654634272>

⁷Amnesty International. (2022). *Qatar*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/qatar/report-qatar/>

⁸Human Rights Watch, op. cit. note 4; Human Rights Watch. (2020, September 24). *Qatar: Significant labor and Kafala reforms*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/24/qatar-significant-labor-and-kafala-reforms>

⁹Amnesty International. (2022). *Qatar*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/qatar/report-qatar/>

¹⁰Human Rights Watch. (2021, March 29). "Everything I have to do is tied to a man". *Women and Qatar's male guardianship rules*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/03/29/everything-i-have-to-tied-man/women-and-qatars-male-guardianship-rules>

¹¹Human Rights Watch (2022, October 24). *Qatar: Security forces arrest, abuse LGBT people discrimination, ill-treatment in detention, privacy violations, conversion practices*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/24/qatar-security-forces-arrest-abuse-lgbt-people>

¹²Ibid.

¹³Climate Change Knowledge Portal. (2022) *For development practitioners and policy makers. Qatar*. <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/qatar/climate-data-historical#:~:text=Qatar%20has%20a%20desert%20climate,fall%20below%205%C2%B0C>

¹⁴International Energy Agency. (2020). *Statistics report Key World Energy Statistics 2020*. https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/1b7781df-5c93-492a-acd6-01fc90388b0f/Key_World_Energy_Statistics_2020.pdf; Climate Watch Data. (2022). *Historical human-caused greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions*. https://www.climatewatchdata.org/ghg-emissions?calculation=PER_CAPITA&end_year=2019&source=CAIT&start_year=1990

¹⁵Mufson, S. (2019, October 16). Facing unbearable heat, Qatar has begun to air-condition the outdoors. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/world/climate-environment/climate-change-qatar-air-conditioning-outdoors/>

¹⁶Qatar National Convention Center. (2022). <https://www.qncc.qa/>

¹⁷International Association of Bioethics, op. cit. note 1.

beyond inviting scholars from around the world to join. When the location of a conference matters, a radical change to the way in which bioethics conference sessions are set up and bioethics papers are presented at conferences will be essential. Even if a substantial majority of bioethicists with different backgrounds are willing and able to attend this conference, it is questionable whether an open dialogue that also addresses injustices is possible in a repressive regime, especially when there is no rule of law to protect freedom of speech, and it is questionable whether the local population is not able to make real changes as a result of the mutual exchange.

Another IAB ambition is “to foster bioethics work from around the world that calls out and addresses injustice.”¹⁸ The conference could function as a means to exert positive influence on human rights violations, LHBTQI+ rights, and environmental policy of the host country through a dialogue between participants, local (healthcare) professionals, and government officials. But both as bioethicists and as an organization, we must be extremely careful to avoid ethics washing of an authoritarian regime. It is unclear whether a dialogue will be sufficient to avoid it at all. As a start, we feel that the IAB must launch human rights and climate statements urging the government of Qatar for change.

3.2 | Freedom of speech and protection of safety

Although the IAB has guaranteed freedom of speech in Qatar, further clarification and guarantees are needed. Is freedom of speech without any repercussions during and after the conference guaranteed for regional participants? Can (local) scientists and teachers who attend the conference freely criticize the Qatari government policy on bioethical issues? Can (local) journalists and scientists attend when they run the risk of being punished when they spread “false news” or content that “violates social values or principles”?¹⁹ Is freedom of speech also guaranteed on social media, in particular when social media are only accessible through the use of a Virtual Private Network connection?²⁰ A related issue for clarification is to what extent the IAB is able to mitigate risks to the physical safety of conference attendants, in particular when it is known that certain groups may face increased risks of being arrested or punished.

3.3 | Diversity, equity, and inclusivity

Focus on inclusion of bioethicists from the Arab region may lead to exclusion of bioethicists from other settings and countries, which may hamper the diversity of the attendants in terms of cultural backgrounds and moral-political convictions. The reported

maltreatment and criminalization of LHBTQI+ people and restrictions of women under the male guardianship system may pose a problem for LHBTQI+ and female bioethicists who want to participate in this conference and for those who deem the exclusion and discrimination of these colleagues based on their sexual orientation or gender identity problematic. The current solution that the IAB proposes for these people is to participate online.²¹ Yet, this solution merely demonstrates that more diversity of conference locations does not necessarily lead to diverse audiences or to equitable access.

A diverse, equitable, and inclusive approach to ethics conferences also implies that the bidding process should be transparent. For the 2024 Congress, it is unclear which other bids have been made and why other countries were not successful. Information about bids to host previous WCB is also not publicly available for previous WCBs. Also, the sources of funding should be transparent. An important point to consider for the future as well is how we can prevent that conferences are organized primarily in resource-rich nations.

4 | CONCLUSION

The location of a bioethics conference matters morally. As bioethicists, we need to discuss how we want to act and behave as bioethicists at ethics conferences in the future, in particular whether we can continue attending conferences as we did in the past with poor attention for local moral issues related to our presentations and for the diversity, equity, and inclusiveness of the attendees. Specific attention for the choice of a location is warranted when bioethical topics are hugely controversial in the host country. If the IAB wants to organize its World Congress in Qatar and we as bioethicists want to attend, then we should start to debate now how we will address the key moral concerns that lie ahead for this location, including respect for human rights, promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and minimizing climate impact.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Rieke van der Graaf  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4907-7044>

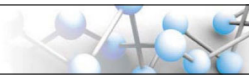
Karin Jongasma  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8135-6786>

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Human Rights Watch, op. cit. note 4

²⁰Abdallah, H. (2021, August 19). Qatar named top downloader of VPN as users attempt to bypass internet restrictions. *Doha News*. <https://dohanews.co/qatar-named-top-downloader-of-vpn-as-users-attempt-to-bypass-internet-restrictions/>

²¹International Association of Bioethics, op. cit. note 1.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Rieke van der Graaf is associate professor of bioethics at the University Medical Center Utrecht and head of the Department of Bioethics and Health Humanities. Her research interests are global health ethics and research ethics.

Karin Jongsma is associate professor of bioethics at the University Medical Center Utrecht at the Department of Bioethics and Health Humanities. She currently leads a research group focusing on the ethics of emerging (bio)medical technologies, with a particular interest in medical AI.

Suzanne van de Vathorst is professor by special appointment at Amsterdam UMC and associate professor of medical ethics at the

Erasmus Medical Center. Her research interests include end-of-life ethics, clinical ethics, and research integrity.

Martine de Vries is full professor and head of the Department of Bioethics and Health Law at the Leiden University Medical Center (LUMC), as well as pediatrician at the same institution. Her research interests are global health ethics and empirical ethics methodology. De Vries is chair of the Netherlands Center for Ethics and Health (CEG).

Ineke Bolt is assistant professor of bioethics at the Department of Medical Ethics, Philosophy and History of Medicine at the Erasmus Medical Center. Her research interests are the ethics of new medical technologies, predictive (genetic) medicine, and informed decision-making.