

Conference Report: Women's Empowerment? New Social
Media and Women as Agents of Change in the Arab Region,
2012-01-17

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Conference Program

Department of Political Science, Stockholm University

International Symposium:

Women's Empowerment?

New Social Media and Women as Agents of Change in the Arab Region

Seminar room Spelbomskan, Aula Magna, Stockholm University, 17 January 2013

Conference program:

- 09.30 **Registration and coffee**
- 10.00 **Opening remarks and presentation of the research program:** 'New Avenues for Political Influence for Women in the Arab Region'.
By Professor Drude Dahlerup, Stockholm University, and Giorgia Depaoli, CAWTAR
- 10.30 **1. *Women as agents of change in the Arab Uprisings***
By Professor Fatima Sadiqi, University of Fez, Morocco
Discussion chaired by Professor Annika Rabo, Stockholm University
- 2. *The Role of Social Media in Arab Women's Empowerment***
By Research Associate Racha Mourtada, Dubai School of Government.
Discussion chaired by Lily Lanefelt, Stockholm University
- 12.30-13.30 **Lunch**
- 13.30 **3. *A Survey of TV-watching Among University Students in Jordan and on the West Bank***
By Professor Anne Sofie Roald, Malmö University.
Discussion chaired by Fredrik Ugglå, Stockholm University
- 14.30 **Coffee break**
- 15.00 **4. *Popular Arab Women Bloggers: their lives, their passions, their politics***
By Professor Kristina Riegert, Stockholm University
Discussion chaired by Associate Professor Lenita Freidenvall, Stockholm University
- 16.00 **5. Presentation of Ph.D. projects and general discussion**
- 16.45 **Closure**

This symposium is organized by the research program “New Avenues for Political Influence for Women in the Arab Region” at the Department of Political Science, Stockholm University. This is a program for international research collaboration, financed by the Swedish Research Council.

Conference Summary

1. Opening remarks and presentation of the research program 'New Avenues for Political Influence for Women in the Arab Region' by Professor Drude Dahlerup, Stockholm University. Giorgia Depaoli presented CAWTAR, Center of Arab Women for Training and Research, Tunis, who is the Arab partner of the research program (www.cawtar.org).

2. 1st lecture: Women as Agents of Change in the Arab Uprisings, by Professor Fatima Sadiqi, University of Fez, Morocco. The lecture was followed by 30 minutes of discussion chaired by Professor Annika Rabo, Stockholm University

Ms. Sadiqi gave a lecture on the women's rights in the Maghreb, and in Morocco in particular. She outlined two paradoxes. First, although women from all ages, secular and Islamist, from different political parties, from NGO's, participated as protestors, as political candidates and as voters during the uprisings in the Arab region the outcome was not in women's favour. The women representation in institutions, parliaments, political parties, trade unions etc. remains weak. Second, the Islamisation of the MENA-region is a fact, yet in the past Islam was not a problem for women's rights advocates.

Ms. Sadiqi further compared the Maghreb with the Middle East and argued that women's rights movements have always been part of the socio-political dynamics in Maghreb.

Finally she presented a number of strategies: i) highlight that women's rights are prerequisite for democracy, ii) acknowledge the strength of legal action, iii) fight the side-lining of gender equality as a human right in the new constitutions, iv) stress the inclusion of gender equality in every process of democratisation, v) push for more interaction between liberal/secular and Islamist feminists, vi) avoid blaming religion, vii) keep an eye on the national and international political scene, viii) use social media to foster grassroots movements, ix) promote political and socio-economic empowerment of women based on women's stories, x) see e.g. the economic crisis in Europe and the reform process in North Africa as an opportunity.

3. 2nd lecture: The Role of Social Media in Arab Women's Empowerment, by Research Associate Racha Mourtada, Dubai School of Government. The lecture was followed by 30 minutes of discussion chaired by PhD Lily Lanefelt, Stockholm University.

Racha Mourtada presented the findings of the Arab Social Media Report (<http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com>) that focuses on 22 Arab countries as well as Israel, Iran and Turkey. The conclusions can be summarised as follows.

Facebook and Twitter have grown exponential in the Arab region in the past two years, which can be related to the Arab Spring. The most popular topics/'hashtags' on e.g. Twitter are Syria and Bahrain probably because of a lack of 'regular' media reporting.

The use of Arabic is growing both on Twitter and on Facebook and indicates that the users are not only educated or middle class. Youth is a driving force behind the increased use of Facebook. Women however only remain 1/3 of users in the region which differs Middle East from other parts of the world. According to surveys among social media users, the largest obstacles for women's participation in social media are social and cultural limitations. Women seem to use social media to organise politically to a larger extent than men.

Social media has in general changed from being mainly an instrument for entertainment, debate and media to become an arena for political activism, citizen journalism and for organising protests. However, social media is increasingly used also by governments to prosecute protestors etc.

4. 3rd lecture: A Survey of TV-watching among University Students in Jordan and on the West Bank, by Professor Anne Sofie Roald, Malmö University. The lecture was followed by 30 minutes of discussion chaired by Professor Fredrik Ugglå, Stockholm University.

Ms. Roald presented preliminary results from her study of television habits among students in Syria, Jordan and in the West Bank. The study was based on surveys and focus groups. The survey indicates that 90 % have Internet access at home and many use Internet to watch television programs. The most popular new program proved to be Al Jazeera and the most popular series were a Syrian, Turkish and American series. Half of the respondents watch religious programs including e.g. Quran-readings and stories about Muhammad. Over 60 % watch American films at least once a week.

Ms. Roald presented three types of religious female TV-hosts: the spiritual guide, the jurist and the sexologist, who differ in style of expression and argued that these three women all represent 'women of change'.

5. 4th lecture: Popular Arab Women Bloggers: their lives, their passions, their politics, by Professor Kristina Riegert, Stockholm University. The lecture was followed by 30 minutes of discussion chaired by Associate Professor Lenita Freidenvall, Stockholm University

Professor Kristina Riegert presented a project on the Arab blogosphere that she is conducting together with professor Gail Ramsay, Uppsala University. Ms. Riegert presented findings from the study of the female Arab blogospheres, 2009-2010. Lebanon, Egypt and Kuwait were targeted countries and the ten most popular blogs were chosen.

The findings show that the blogosphere differs between the three countries. In Kuwait, where the web is extremely commercialized, the blogs are to a large extent e.g. 'diary style' and cultural events blogs that do not openly challenge gender norms. The Egyptian female bloggers on the other hand expose taboo subjects and also push women's rights issues harder.

Several of the bloggers have advanced their career through their blogs; however this has not hindered feminist/activist agendas. Women are active, participating in the online discussions

but only one of the studied blogs focus on women's issues. Some have chosen to stay away from politics while others are political. All claim however to be autonomous and independent. Although many do free-lance work for e.g. news organisations or 'help out' activist campaigns, they emphasise their autonomy from civil society/media. The issues were very local although the bloggers themselves were cosmopolitans.

The new Arab media (satellite TV, internet and mobile phones) have strengthened pan-Arab regional identity, stretched the boundaries of mediated public sphere, increased the volume of women's voices, broaden their networks and new career opportunities. However, increased commercialisation and authorities trying to control Internet might push activism out (cf Kuwait where many use Twitter instead)

6. Presentation of PhD-projects, by Lily Lanefelt, Stockholm University, Dustin Wellbaum, Lund University and Mona Haji, Stockholm University.

7. Closure

Speakers Biography

Fatima Sadiqi, University of Fez, Morocco

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Fatima Sadiqi is currently a professor of Linguistics and Gender Studies at University of Fez in Morocco. Sadiqi founded the first Moroccan Centre for Studies and Research on Women in 1998; the first graduate program on Gender Studies in 2000 at the University of Fez; and the Isis Centre for Women and Development, a women's organization working on family law reforms and women's rights in Morocco.

In 2009, Ms. Sadiqi was elected President of the National Union of Women's Associations. In the same year she also co-founded the International Institute for Languages and Cultures together with Moha Ennaji. She was appointed by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the UN Committee for Development Policy and by the king of Morocco to the administrative board of the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture.

Publications include e.g.:

Sadiqi, Fatima (2003) *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco*, Brill Academic Publications

Sadiqi, Fatima, Nowaira Amira, El Kholy, Azza and Ennaji, Moha (2009) *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region*, The Feminist Press

Sadiqi, Fatima, Ennaji, Moha (2010) *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of Change*, Routledge

Ennaji, Moha and Sadiqi, Fatima (2011) *Gender and Violence in the Middle East*, Routledge

Racha Mourtada, Dubai School of Government

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Racha Mourtada is a Research Associate with the Governance and Innovation Program at the Dubai School of Government. She studies the impact of ICT on societal and governmental transformation in the Arab world. Ms. Mourtada's research is currently focused on social media, 'Gov 2.0' and ICT and innovation. She is the lead author of the 'Arab Social Media Report' series, (ArabSocialMediaReport.com), a recurring publication that analyses social media trends and usage with the aim of understanding their impact on growth and development in the Arab region.

Ms. Mourtada has previously worked as a researcher in the ICT division of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in Beirut. She has also worked as a freelance writer and editor with several magazines and websites including OpenDemocracy.net and Sublime International.

Publications include e.g.:

Mourtada, R. and Salem, F. (2012) "Social Media in the Arab World: the Impact on Youth, Women and Social Change" in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2012*, pp. 269-274, Barcelona, European Institute of the Mediterranean

Mourtada, R. and Salem, F. (2012) "Social Media, Employment and Entrepreneurship: New Frontiers for the Economic Empowerment of Arab Youth?" *Dubai School of Government*

Mourtada, R. and Salem, F. (2010) "The Role of ICT in Cultivating Innovation: the Case of the UAE", in *International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance - ICEGOV*, October 25-28, 2010, Beijing, 375-376. New York, ACM

Mourtada, R. (2010) "Innovation Culture for Youth Empowerment in the UAE: The Role of ICT". *Dubai School of Government*

Anne Sofie Roald, Malmö University

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Anne Sofie Roald is a professor of religious studies and specialised in Islam. Ms. Roald is currently involved in a research project on Arab media and social change. Previously, Ms. Roald has amongst other projects studied how Islam is being used to empower Palestinian women at the West Bank and in Jordan.

Roald has been a researcher at Lund's University, a guest researcher at Wales University as well as at Abertay University in Scotland and at University of Florida, Gainesville. Ms. Roald was also the director for the research program "Politics of Faith" at Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway.

Publications include e.g.:

Roald, Anne Sofie (2001) *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*, Routledge: London.

Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald (eds.)(2011) *Religious Minorities in the Middle East. Domination, Self-empowerment, Accommodation*, Brill: Leiden.

Roald, Anne Sofie (2009) "Islamists in Jordan: Promoters of or Obstacles to Female Empowerment and Gender Equality?" in *Religion and Human Rights*, Volume 4, Number 1, May 2009, pp. 41-63(23)

Roald, Anne Sofie (2008) "From Theocracy to Democracy? Towards secularisation and individualisation in the policy of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan" in *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 8, pp 85-107.

Anne Sofie Roald (2001) "The Wise Men: Democratisation and gender equalisation in the Islamic message: Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Ahmad al-Kubaisi on the air" in *Encounters* 7:1. pp. 29-55.

Anne Sofie Roald (2003) Polygyny on the air: Reception analysis of the Egyptian TV-serial *al-Hajj Mutawalli* in *Social Compass* 50(1), pp. 47-57.

Kristina Riegert, Stockholm University

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Kristina Riegert is a Professor of Media and Communication Studies, section of Journalism, Media and Communication, Department of Media Studies, Stockholm University. Her research interests are television coverage of wars and crisis, television's role in national identity and globalisation, politics in television entertainment, and the phenomenon of Arabic blogging. She has also studied the links between the transnational and national television media in global crisis and the relationship between architecture and journalist organizations as a focus for mediated centrality in a mobile digital world.

Ms. Riegert is currently working on a project, together with Arabist Gail Ramsay, on the nature and impact of top bloggers in three Arab mediascapes. See <http://www.jmk.su.se/forskning/forskare-vid-jmk/kristina-riegert/en/>

Publications include e.g.:

Riegert, K. & Ramsay, G. (2012) "Activists, Individualists or Comics: The Counter-Publicness of Lebanese Blogs". Special Middle East Issue. *Television and New Media*. December 5, 2012 Published online before print.

Hellman, M. & Riegert, K (2012) "Emerging Transnational News Spheres in Global Crisis Reporting" in Volkmer, I. (ed) *Handbook of Global Media Research*. Malden, Ma.,USA: Wiley Blackwell.

Riegert, K. (2012) "Before the Revolutionary Moment: The Significance of Lebanese and Egyptian Bloggers for Mediated Public Spheres" in *Information Orders and New Communications Technology: Democratic Hopes and Authoritarian Pitfalls*. (ed.) Johan Lagerkvist. UI Occasional Papers. Swedish Institute for International Affairs. No. 10

List of Participants

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PhD, Researcher, Department of Political Science, Uppsala University

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PhD Candidate, Media and Communication Studies, Stockholm University

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Freelance journalist

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