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Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities - Paper Presentation

<http://doi.org/10.5339/qfarc.2018.SSAHPP1145>

Social Media Usage and Women's Empowerment in Qatar: Evidence from a National Representative Survey

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Introduction Social media usage has grown in importance over the past decade, particularly in Middle East. During this period, it has come to be recognized as more than a tool for social connections between individuals, with research demonstrating how it can empowering people socially, politically and economically[1]. Past research has demonstrated the impact of social media in areas as diverse as such as healthcare provision, political participation, and marketing[2]. However, how and to what extent social media usage contributes to women's empowerment in the Arab region has not been thoroughly examined. Academic and non-academic studies alike have focused heavily on a few well-known cases of social media activism and woman's rights, such as, women driving in Saudi Arabia[3] or the Arab Spring in Egypt[4]. These studies raise a number of relevant questions. Is social media potent in the population more broadly, or is it just a tool for activists and polemics? If it does empower women, does it do so by shaping deeply rooted attitudes and norms or does it mere reflect the value of the general population? How can we understand the role of traditional education in shaping attitudes and values in light of the large volumes of readily available information provided by social media? The current paper examines social media usage in Qatar and its influences on attitudes toward women's empowerment and considers the complex role of education. We use a national representative survey data from a 2017 survey of Qatari nationals to test our expectations. In the last twenty years, Qatar has experienced a significant shift in economic development, and education accessibility. The State of Qatar has widely sought to include women in public life, particularly in the process of decision-making. Yet, the debate about the role of social media

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دار جامعة حمد بن خليفة للنشر
HAMAD BIN KHALIFA UNIVERSITY PRESS



Cite this article as: Shockley B et al. (2018). Social Media Usage and Women's Empowerment in Qatar: Evidence from a National Representative Survey. Qatar Foundation Annual Research Conference Proceedings 2018: SSAHPP1145
<http://doi.org/10.5339/qfarc.2018.SSAHPP1145>.



in increasing women's awareness of their equal rights in holding positions of power and contributing to their political and economic empowerment is not widely discussed in Qatar. Thus, Qatar is a case where researchers might expect to find changing attitudes in spite of the absence of major social media feminist activists. The paper also explores a number of trends emerging in the analysis of social media usage, across demographic groups such as age, gender, marital status and socio-economic differences including education levels and household income. Methodology A questionnaire was initially designed in English and then translated into Arabic by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) to collect all necessary information related to the study. In this survey, the target population included people who are 18 years or older and live in residential housing units in Qatar during the survey reference period (May 6th-27th, 2017). It includes groups of Qataris and expatriates, though the analysis in this paper focuses on Qataris. It is important to note that while preparing the sample for the survey, the Qatari population sub-group was over sampled in order to ensure that Qataris were well represented in the survey. The survey was administered in CAPI (computer assisted data collection) method for face to face interviews. The interviews were conducted at the home of the respondent. In terms of data analysis, all individual interviews were merged and saved in a single BLAISE data file. This dataset was then cleaned, coded and saved in STATA formats for analysis. Analysis of the data included order logistical regression with appropriate calculation of interactive effects and predicted probabilities for interpretation. Findings and Implications Data from the 2017 survey are newly available and thus the findings discussed here are preliminary. We find that social media usage in the examined population is related to increased support for woman in community leadership among Qatari females but not males. This finding is robust to a number of statistical controls, including for the respondent's level of education. In fact, a respondent's level of formal education has much less predictive power than social media usage among female Qataris. Furthermore, we find that social media usage is only weakly related to political variables, such as interest in politics. This suggests that social media may be working to empower women first through changing gender attitudes and only secondly through engagement with the political sphere. These findings are relevant to both academics who are seeking to understand the mechanisms through which social media may empower women and policymakers in Qatar who are concerned with advancing their welfare. It shows that woman can use social media to find their voice and engage with the public sphere, even where political activism has not been common. [1] Dubai School of Government, "Arab Social Media Report, Vol 1, No. 3, November 2011. [2] TNS, "Arab Social Media Report", First Report 2015. [3] Begum, Rothna, "The Brave Female Activists Who Fought to Lift Saudi Arabia's Driving Ban", News Deeply, September 29th, 2017. [4] Tufekci, Zeynep and Wilson, Christopher, "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square", Journal of Communication, 62 (2012) 363-37.