

The Dualities of Traditions and Feminist Movements on the Omani Twitter Platform

An Extension of the Patriarchal Actuality or an Attempt to Create a Safer Space for Women?

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Introduction

Feminist movements are a serious controversy in the Arab world, which is glutted with customs and traditions. Oman is no exception, where feminist movements are a controversial realm dividing people to supporters and opposers. We often see that the social and cultural systems place certain segments of the society in a single social, political, cultural, and economic mold. This justified the legal system in the name of tradition, which is often implicitly proportional to the interest of the power hierarchy within the society. Omani women are a big part of these marginalized segments as they are judged by specific behavioral patterns within the society based on a set of traditions and civil laws. With the common use of social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, among others, different versions of traditions and social visions, often different from the actual reality in the Omani society, have emerged. This has led to the birth of digital online conflicts between two constructed opposing camps, the conservatives and women's rights advocates.

Omani women's voices on Twitter: what are feminists' demands?

The link between traditions, nationalism and identity strongly impacts Omani women. In the age of social media, the practice of traditions and societal guardianship on women extends to the internet. It is an attempt to impose traditional and jurisprudential views on women in the digital world. However, such attempts are rejected and resisted by feminist voices disapproving the concept of guardianship in its neo-traditional form. These voices on social media platforms discuss male authority and domination within traditional interpretation. They question the patriarchal interpretation of the Islamic text which evolved into gender discrimination, while Islamic sources call for equality and combat patriarchal thought.

Despite the great stride made hitherto in Omani women's education and empowerment in political, economic, social, and cultural life, which provides a degree of participation in decision-making and control over resources, the majority of sectors are slow-paced in achieving gender equality. This has led to the rise of women voices calling for equality on social media. The Omani feminist voices have become louder and bolder on social media, especially on Twitter. Though as small as 26% of female Twitter users in Oman were active on in 2020, their campaign against discrimination has increased significantly.

Post Arab Spring, Omani feminist voices began with a clear and semi-structured goal on social media. For example, in September 2019, several hashtags and accounts were created on Twitter. The prominent (نسويات_#عمانيات) (Omani Feminists) Twitter account was the first to discuss Omani women's rights in the digital arena. It was suspended a year later due to defamation campaigns by Omani Twitter users. Nevertheless, individual feminist voices on Twitter continued to demand amendments to the status of women, as discrimination against women is deeply institutionalized including:

1. Omani woman still cannot pass her nationality on to her children if she is married to a non-Omani man. Article no. (1) in provision (1) of the Omani Nationality Law, for example, allows the Omani

father to pass on nationality to his children unlike the mother who cannot pass nationality to her children..¹

2. The presence of women in the political field and decision-making positions is still very limited, as the number of women in the Shura Council during the electoral period (2019-2023) reached only four female candidates, a small percentage compared to the number of 717 male candidates who competed for the 86 council seats..²
3. Omani women are not allowed to hold some positions, such as the position of judge, although there are women in high positions such as "prosecutor general" or "chief public prosecutor." Though it was stated in the Basic Law of the State in Article (21)³ that discrimination based on sex is prohibited.
4. Although there is a law criminalizing the marriage of underage girls, it is still prevalent in some governorates of the Sultanate. As the Omani Personal Status Law prohibits the marriage of a person under the age of eighteen years,⁴ but legal penalties are still not applied if the marriage is consensual between the parents of the girl and the man who is to marry.
5. There is no strict law criminalizing the marriage of a girl to her rapist.
6. There is gender discrimination in some jobs, as some private companies allocate some jobs to males while eliminating women.
7. Inequality in the first university seats between males and females, as the male with a lower average competes with the female with a higher average.

Omani Twitter and conflict on concept of feminism: What is happening on digital sphere?

In 2020 and 2021, the number of hashtags supporting women's rights in Oman have grown. But, the hashtag (#وداعا_زوينة), translated in English as "Goodbye Zwina," lighted the fuse of digital war between conservatives and Omani feminists. The story of a female student who committed suicide became a public opinion over the course of a week. The debate was widely circulated on social media. Based on tweets from the hashtag, Zwina suffered from social and psychological problems that led her to commit suicide. Due to the conservative nature of the society and the rare number of suicidal cases that talked about on social media, the story received high attention on the digital platform.

By analysing approximately (6734) tweets, the hashtag turned into a public space for discussion when a group of feminists emphasized the intellectual right and cultural freedom of every woman of society. In the meantime, some users accused spectrums of the society of being responsible for the death of Zwina. An explicit accusation, using cultural rhetoric to gain the audience's support and approval, was directed against women's rights advocates.

Within months, the hashtag was followed by another one named لا_ننقد_زوينة_أخرى لكي# translated as "Let us Not Lose Another Zwina." By analysing approximately (1891) tweets, it was clear that the hashtag was run by an elite group of academics conservatives, and anti-feminist users calming to protect the society from feminism. Additionally, the hashtag included a clear hostility against feminist voices by demonizing feminism. An anti-feminist group launched a set of ready-made accusations against feminists including being Westernized, deviating from traditions, advocating atheism and homosexuality, and planning to destroy family values. On the other hand, feminism supporters believed the hashtag was an attempt to silence, marginalize, and exclude their vital role in life.

In this regard, by analyzing the hashtag, some women's voices were being accused of trying to alienate the society from traditional values and Omani culture.⁵, which was easy for the conservatives to use for pleading their power to combat feminism. Sequentially, at the societal level, these accusations against feminists led to social mobilization against them leading further to increasing hate speech and digital misogyny, while others called for violence against anyone embracing feminist thoughts, which may encourage physical and psychological attacks against women and endanger their lives.

Conservative traditional discourse in Oman has become evident in the digital sphere, where some devout have the authority to use their institutional power to talk and take actions against new emerging thoughts in the society. For instance, after women's right supporters' voices started to be dominant on Twitter, the grand Mufti,⁶ who's respected by the majority, issued a religious manifesto on Twitter to stand together

¹ [Omani Nationality Law](#)

² [Omani women participation in the Shura Council](#)

³ [Basic Law of the State](#)

⁴ [Omani Personal Status Law](#)

⁵ [Article 269 of the Omani Penal Cod. \(C\)](#)

⁶ He is a Muslim religious scholar who issue legal opinions.

against unusual thoughts in the society.⁷⁸ Thus, the law and legislation in Oman protect the conservative authorities when it comes to feminists widening thereby the gap between these authorities and the feminists' camp including its supporter in the civil society. Therefore, conservative authorities can weaken feminist voices in the digital sphere because they demonize the feminist voice, considering it a threat to society. And that may lead to being an obstacle to improving the status of women's rights in Oman, especially because they enjoy the respect of society due to their positions in the religious institutions.

Conclusion

Tweets posted by conservatives have become widespread on Twitter; they are wrapped in a traditional and cultural cover, and bear several interpretations. In most cases, the conservatives extensive use of social media and intense competition require creativity in enveloping their messages, either with fictional stories to appeal to the people or by claiming that the feminists' thoughts are dangerous on the society. In this regard, feminists' calls for Omani women's rights on Twitter is used to facilitate the accusations wrapped in a distorted discourse cover to satisfy their desire to impress the ordinary segment of the society, disregarding the impact of psychological, social, and economic mobilization on this group. Tweets against Omani women's rights in the society create a significant impact in establishing gender biases in public opinion and perpetuate the forms of marginalization, stereotypes, dependence, violence, and a double burden against women.

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⁷ [Manifest of Oman mufti against feminist on Twitter](#)

⁸ Another [manifest of Oman mufti on Twitter](#)

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