



In August 2022, the Swedish Dialogue Institute, in collaboration with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and Uppsala University, organized a roundtable about women's participation on Twitter in the Middle East and North Africa, with experts, scholars, and civil society actors from the region. The objective was to better understand barriers that women in MENA region face when it comes to Twitter participation and their ways of navigating these barriers.

The discussion initially addressed the different usage patterns of specific social platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook across countries in the MENA region. Twitter was primarily used as a professional public online space according to participants. The upside of this were the opportunities to gain a broader international audience, reach out to likeminded users, while getting a sense of anonymity. The downside to Twitter's public nature, however, was that it increased exposure and vulnerability to attacks, trolling, and manipulation.

Women's low Twitter turnout in the MENA region was attributed to a variety of reasons. One reason was that social media, including Twitter, was seen as the extension of offline society. As one participant put it: "*Societies in the region are not hearing women's voices*". Social norms and social control exerted by society, including through family members, was raised as a barrier for women's Twitter participation. Another important reason mentioned was that the costs of engagement in the public sphere were often considered too high. On Twitter, as in real life, few men and even fewer women dare to show political or public engagement in many countries.

Several participants highlighted that once women do engage on Twitter, a common theme is that they often are being attacked on the basis of their gender. *"At the end of the day, we face the same harassment and intimidation on Twitter as in the real world,"* one participant noted. Women also often become main targets of defamation campaigns. Hacking, including leaking of personal photos, are used to defame women Twitter users. There was a sense of failure on the part of social media platforms and governments to protect women. *"No one will have our back".*

Topics like sexual harassment, feminism, or LGBTQI+-related issues were seen to generate particularly hateful responses. When sexual harassment cases were posted on Twitter, women were called out only to be harassed again – online. There were even social media activists facing real world trials for sharing testimonies of sexual harassment on Twitter. The sense was that the level of aggression and amount of harassment on Twitter had increased during the pandemic. Hate messaging targeting female users would frequently contain gender-based expressions. Also, in instances when women do not tweet about gender related issues, they would often be met with gender-based hate speech.

Women reportedly use different coping strategies. One response to online attacks that some women use is to adopt a tougher online persona. Other strategies mentioned included to carefully weigh costs and benefits and either engage in self-censorship or selective tweeting, by timing messages carefully, or by tweeting from a safe out-of-country location. Limiting the circle of followers – or leaving the social platform all together were also pointed to as ways that women deal with threats associated with being engaged on Twitter.

Summarizing the discussion, the Director of the Dialogue Institute, Ambassador Charlotta Sparre, pointed to the importance of context and contextualization, where digital space often serves as a mirror of society. She highlighted the threats, intimidation, and harassment that women face both on- and off-line and emphasized that Twitter ultimately is one of many different platforms, which doesn't necessarily set the agenda, but sets the tone. Sparre stressed the crucial importance of addressing questions related to freedom of expression and underlined the value of holding conversations such as this, to share insights and experiences. She added that the Institute would be keen to continue holding dialogues on this and related topics.