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Lena Herzog

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Woman preachers, audiovisual media and the construction of religious authority in Niamey, Niger

In a recently published contribution in *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*, Dr Abdoulaye Sounaye from Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient shows, how Muslim women gain an increased public presence in Niger's urban space by appearing in or even having their own television and radio shows. There they do not only promote women's preaching, but also discuss women's rights and their role in society. Sounaye concludes that their theological standpoint may hinder a secular and liberal feminist agenda, but they show that women's agency can reconstruct the terms of public debate and allows them to construct an authority against certain gender roles.

Liberalisation of the media in the mid 1990s led to a growing number of media outlets in Niger's capital city Niamey. Those media initiatives were provided by various actors, among them male Muslim leaders who took advantage of those platforms to advance their religious reform agenda. Female figures were hardly part of those media platforms as their traditional place was seen in the domestic sphere. More recently, a vast number of Muslim female figures appeared on TV and radio in Niamey. This can be explained on the one hand with an expanding role of religion in social life illustrated by a committed audience (especially housewives and youth) that seeks to improve their knowledge of Islam; and on the other hand, the development and availability of technical infrastructure that offers a broader public access to the media. With their media presence, the so-called "Malama" are seeking to popularize the "sunna" (tradition of the prophet Muhammad), a responsibility that, according to the female activists, has to be taken by all Muslims, regardless of their status. But the content of the programs extends much further: The Malama are also prompting discussions on family law, women's rights and on Muslim gender politics.

For his research, Sounaye conducted Interviews and field observations in Niamey from 2016 to 2018. Two interviews with very popular women preachers are highlighted in the chapter. One of these women is Malama Bushara, a young scholar. She represents a growing anti-hegemonic standpoint and calls actively on women to learn and teach the Qur'an to other women. Bushara sees her actions as a contribution to religion itself, but she is also concerned about women's position in society. In the interview she brought up the issue that many men are opposed to her practice and are even trying to hinder her and other women, as she and a friend experienced it at a conference: "I think this can be interpreted as the result of [male's] jealousy ... Those who oppose women's preaching have no arguments ... they can't provide any sound justification of this prohibition."

Although traditional Muslim institutions oppose the women's preaching, their popularity in the society can't be denied. "Democratization has provided the context for such processes, media proliferation the stage and women's entrepreneurship the agency", writes Sounaye. These newly occurring gendered configurations of media and religion also give a good insight into societal, historical and ideological transformations in today's Niger. As the recent general elections on 13 December 2020 and 21 February 2021 also show, this is only an illustration of the growing public and political role women take in the country.

Dr Abdoulaye Sounaye is head of the research unit “Contested Religion” at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. He is also leading a Leibniz Junior Research Group that is working on the topic "Religion, Morality and Boko in West Africa: Students Training for a Good Life (REMOBOKO)". His research focus is on religiosity salafism, secularism, youth and society in West Africa.

wissenschaftliche Ansprechpartner:

Dr. Abdoulaye Sounaye: abdoulaye.sounaye@zmo.de

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