

ISA President Professor Margaret Abraham's Visit to Zayed University Report by Professor Rima Sabban and Alia AlFalasi

Introduction

Professor Abraham, the current President of the International Sociological Association (ISA) and Professor of Sociology at Hofstra University, was invited to give the first talk in the newly launched "Distinguished Lecture" series at [Zayed University](#) (ZU) by the [College of Humanities and Social Sciences](#) (CHSS).

The talk, titled: "Making a Difference: Connecting Research, Teaching and Practice in Building Tolerant and Inclusive Societies" took place on the 9th of Feb, 2017.



Professor Abraham arrived at ZU campus on Wednesday 8 Feb and was taken on a tour around the various venues in the campus by representatives from CHSS. Afterwards, she met with the Dean of the College and discussed contemporary issues related to Social Sciences, the ISA's major projects including two of the ISA

Presidential Projects (1) Global Mapping of Sociologists for Social Inclusion and (2) Gender and Intersectional Violence.



ISA President Margaret Abraham with Professor Sabrina Joseph, Dean of CHSS

Later, she met with members of the University Standing Committee for Research, including the Assistant Deans of Research and several faculty members from both campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. They discussed mutual concerns related to the hierarchies of knowledge production, the need for more participation in the ISA, as well as in ISA projects such as global mapping of sociologists, strategies for collaboration and partaking in the XIX World Congress of Sociology with its *theme of Power, Violence and Justice: Reflections, Responses and Responsibilities* to be held in Toronto, July 15-21, 2018, (<http://www.isa-sociology.org/en/conferences/world-congress/toronto-2018/>). ZU faculty members expressed high interest in participating in GMSSI and the next ISA World Congress in Toronto 2018 and encouraged them to submit abstracts online. In the evening, Dr. Margaret had a business dinner with CHSS Dean Dr. Sabrina Joseph, Acting Associate Dean Dr. Afaf Bataineh, Assistant Dean of Research Dr. Rima Sabban and HSS Co Chair Dr. Mohammad Masad. They discussed the rising uncertainties affecting the world and the future of academia, especially social sciences across the globe. They shared concerns over the lack of rights and the erosion of rights and liberties in various parts of the world, and including those that consider themselves the most advanced

societies. Also discussed was the role of social media, its limitations and possibilities in addressing social change.



The following day, Dr. Abraham gave her lecture to a large group of women students at ZU, faculty and staff from across all Colleges. The Vice President of the University Professor Reyadh Almehaideb attended the lecture and also some of the College Deans. Professor Abraham thanked the University organizers, especially Professor Rima Sabban, and Alia AlFalasi. Her presentation addressed ways sociologists, social scientists, researchers, teachers, policy makers and practitioners engage within and across contexts in building more tolerant and inclusive societies that help enable a fuller appreciation of humanity, its nuances and differences. She drew upon various definitions and perspectives on tolerance and inclusion. One of the basic definitions of tolerance provided, she noted was the willingness of ‘a person or a group to accept ideas, beliefs and practices that are different from their own’. She also drew attention to the importance of considering power relations in such a context and the importance of questioning “who accepts who”. She queried as to what does it mean to be tolerant? How do we empower the marginalized in different context? What does that mean in terms of opportunities and also, what ways does it impact our lives? She discussed the power dynamics in notions of social inclusion and also drew upon the work of sociologist, Hilary Silver. Abraham further elaborated, that it is important not only to be included, but also to have access to participation in all spheres of life. An important part, when we inclusion, is to also understand the context of each reality, experience, geography and culture. Abraham emphasized the risk of assumptions of commonality and that our understanding of inclusion is

also contingent on the framework and the paradigm we use and that when thinking of inclusion, it is as important to think of the ways it relates to notion of exclusion. Later she mentioned the increasing right-wing group who are talking about the closing of borders and the rising anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant feeling that is fragmenting our societies. What do we do as academics to address the rising xenophobia, islamophobia, and racist discourse in the context of inclusion and exclusion? She emphasized that the role of sociologists and social scientists is not solely to problematize but also to consider interventions and solutions and make it accessible to publics. She gave few blueprints to student scholars on some ways that this is possible. She emphasized the need to ask critical questions and make voices heard in addressing injustices and to expand information networks and exchange.

She highlighted the significance of scholar's social research that can bridge the gap theory and action as well as ways to engage both private stakeholders as well as government entities. She referred to ways in which this can be achieved, including by seeking appropriate avenues of funding, influencing public policy, speaking at public venues, teaching and through social networks”.



The presentation also discussed the International Sociological Association's presidential project, “Global Mapping of Sociologists for Social Inclusion” (GMSSI), and demonstrated its goals in developing sociological networks that encouraged greater collaboration and diversity across the globe.

She concluded her talk by saying that it is important for us to not be silent bystanders to injustices but to identify concerns, cooperate, connect, and collaborate in building a more just world.



The lecture was followed by a Q&A session moderated by two of ZU students' council members. Students' questions took the major share of the session in which interesting issues were raised touching such as the correlation between religion and the increase of violence, the leadership influence (faculty and teachers, government leaders, community and or other leaders) on the public audience and the role of students in promoting tolerance in the society. Professor Abraham was also asked as to how she was able to manage all her multiple portfolios, academic writings and leadership, presence and travels around the world, and what she advise would she like to share with women students of the UAE to get to similar position. The talk was engaging and the students felt comfortable asking her a spectrum of questions and sharing their perspectives. At the end of the session, ZU Vice President, Professor Reyadh Almehaideb, thanked Professor Abraham and presented her with a souvenir on behalf of Zayed University. Students came up to Professor Abraham after the lecture and followed up with questions and further discussion.



ISA President with the Vice President of Zayed University Professor Reyadh Al Mehaideb and other ZU students and administrators

Professor Abraham's visit stimulated CHSS faculty to participate in the World Congress of Sociology taking place in Toronto, Canada 2018. They started developing panel discussions covering themes related to the Gulf Region and the UAE current social issues.