

The 'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements

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Introduction

One of the dominant trends in the evolution of the Arab women's movements is the ongoing increase in the number of women's NGOs dealing with aspects of women's lives such as health, education, legal literacy, income generation, advocacy of rights, research, and so on. This steady increase in Arab women's NGOs can be seen as a sign of decentralization of power and politics after the failure of the centralized Arab states to bring about social change and development. It is also widely viewed as a development of Arab 'civil society' to contain the authoritarian state, and as a healthy sign of real democracy in the region based on a 'bottom-up' approach. The increase in Arab NGOs in general, and of women's NGOs in particular, has unleashed a heated debate on their ties to their donors, their ideology, the utility of their roles in development and social change, and their links to their national states. In brief, they have been viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on the West, and as a tool for it to expand its hegemony. This debate is currently taking a new edge with signs that the current American administration is giving greater attention to

'democratization' and 'modernization' of Arab societies and Arab regimes, through increased funding for 'civil society' organizations. The US administration sees women's role as vital in this respect.

This article will try to trace the development of the Arab women's movements in the last two decades with special attention to what I call their 'NGOization'. To shed some lights on this trend, I shall examine the changing structures and discourses of Arab women's movements, in the context of a development discourse based in binaries such as: West/East, state/civil society, democracy/good governance, and NGOs/social movements. The growing number of Arab NGOs in general, and women's NGOs in particular, should be seen as part of a world wide trend, encouraged by many donor countries, international NGOs and many UN agencies, that views NGOs as a vital vehicle for social change and democratization through decentralization. I will argue, however, that because of the fragmentation of issues they deal with, the temporality of these issues and their resources, and with their weak social networks, NGOs cannot constitute continuous and sustained social movements, and that 'civil society' is a complex construction that cannot be reduced to a number of NGOs. Seeing this difference may be useful in revealing the limitation of the role of NGOs in facing national crises, as in Palestine or Algeria, or in introducing genuine, comprehensive and sustainable social change. This is not to say that the role of NGOs should be explained in terms of 'conspiracy theo-

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ry' but rather that they should be subjected to a more historical and empirical approach that does not take for granted their equivalence with 'healthy' socio-political development. My argument is based on my own research, as well as my experience as an academic and activist in the Palestinian women's movement, my readings, and my own interactions with other Arab women's movements and NGOs.

Historical Background

The current debate on NGO proliferation is linked to global schemes for development, which in turn have their roots in the structural adjustment program implemented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in many Third world countries (including some of the Arab countries), from the late '70s through the '80s, typically involving a variety of reforms in monetary, fiscal, trade, regulatory policies, and public sector management. These reform programs were based on the assumption that if sufficient economic incentives are provided to producers they will expand existing production and invest in new productive activities, thus providing the engine for sustained economic growth. These economic policies were in line with a pluralist definition of democracy in which the emphasis was on 'civil society' as a neutral terrain, where organized interests try to influence the state and its policy choices.

One can map out two main approaches to the concept 'civil society'. One sees civil society as a pluralistic complex, largely independent of any single economic force, with many competing interests (stemming from cultural institutions as well as from ethnic, racial and other social concerns) that challenge power-seeking states. The other line of thinking focuses on the emergence of capitalism as the dominant, formative force in history (Markovitz 1998: 27). The difficulty with the first, conventional application of the concept 'civil society' to Third World countries is that it causes us consistently to misread and understate the impact of capitalism on contemporary Third World politics. One such misreading is to see state and civil society as separate entities. The second approach contends that state and society intertwine in complex ways that do not follow any easy formula, and that are not easily predictable. According to Markovitz, "State and society do not stand apart in Africa — or anywhere else. Neither do they exist in precarious balance... Elements of the state are connected to civil society, and elements of civil society are not merely affected by the state, but are seated in the state" (Markovitz 1998:27). The many private companies directed by relatives of presidents or ministers in the Arab world show how the demarcation lines between public and private are blurred. Another illustration is the way the wives or

relatives of presidents and ministers establish their own NGOs to provide services relinquished by the state (Beydoun 2002: 101).

After all, all interests, whether of women or other social groups, seek the support of the state because it is the strongest organizational form. Sooner or later every interest seeks its aid. Markovitz notes that "the state does not suffer from 'incapacity' or 'deterioration' like a TB-infected patient or a forlorn lover. 'Constituents' do not 'relinquish' the state and 'find' new frameworks like sheep looking for greener pastures or Ph.D students seeking new models of analysis. 'Constituents' always engage in conflict with the state. They do not 'withdraw'. They suffer losses. They seek ways to recoup. Their involvement remains, although their strategies change". And he concludes, "this helps explain why state and society are never in balance, but interpenetrate" (Markovitz 1998:38). In this respect, it is important to distinguish between those elements in civil society that support the regimes in power, and those that seek to undermine, change, or control those regimes. Women's issues and interests are not suspended in air, disconnected from others groups' interests and needs. This is the vital task of a women's movement, with whom to build alliances, and how. Civil society is full of different groups with different interests; some are driven by ethnicity, religion, political factionalism; some women might like, others they might not. But the important thing for a women's group, organization, or movement, is how to analyse this and put it in context.

This is not to interpret all interests in the context of macro unifying concepts such as class or nation, but rather to note that there is always a class dimension in the development of civil society, and that it is important to see how class interacts with the state apparatus, and how this affects the development of democracy. For example, in Lebanon we need to recognize how this dimension interacts with sectarianism (Beydoun 2002:110-114), and in Algeria with fundamentalism (Lazreg 1994). In Palestine this interaction is visible in the oppression of certain groups claiming their social rights (eg. the teachers's strike in 1996), and the tolerance shown to women claiming equality from the state (Jad 2000). The interaction of women's organizations, the state and their constituencies will be elaborated later in this paper.

The worldwide promotion of the 'democracy and civil society' discourse was closely tied to anti-communism in the Regan years, but was given greater emphasis by George Bush senior, and then Clinton, with the end of the Cold War. Democracy assistance programs are designed to support electoral processes, promote judicial reform, strengthen civic associations, and enhance civic and political education. Much of this is channelled

through NGOs and specialist foundations, but with the increase in official funding for democracy promotion, USAID is becoming increasingly involved in such initiatives. This has given rise to concern that too many US organizations are active in this field, that there is insufficient evidence of the impact of democracy assistance programs, and that programs are poorly conceived, because they fail to take into account the complexities of the democratization process (Robinson 1995:5).

These views were supported on the theoretical level by much writing on the emerging of 'new social movements'. For example, Melucci underlines, "The normal situation of today's movements is a network of small groups submerged in everyday life which require a personal involvement in experiencing and practising cultural innovation" (Melucci 1985: 800). The emphasis on cultural and symbolic aspects of social movements offers, according to Keane, some interesting and valuable insights into the micro-politics of daily life. It also shifts focus from the state as the terrain of class struggle to power as "exercised along a multiplicity of sites of domination and resistance", hence "bringing into public view the oppression embedded in every day life and thus challenging the deep-rooted codes of social interaction within civil society" (Keane 1988: 12). It is also argued that the notion that in the 'Third World' as opposed to the 'advanced' countries, struggles take place between two clearly demarcated camps, ie. the ruling class and the people, obscures the multiplicity of antagonisms and identities existing in any country 'Third World' or not (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 166). Such struggles over resources and identities are fought along lines of class, religion, and gender. The 'people' does not represent a homogenous entity, nor does 'domination', since it is not only exerted by the state but also by elements of 'civil society' that are economically and socially powerful. Among social elements that resist state domination and capitalist exploitation in Arab societies such as Egypt are urban marginals, for instance peasants, Islamists, moderate Muslims, secular-oriented women and men, feminists, Copts and many other groups that do not represent 'pure' or exclusive categories but tend to shift and intersect (Al-Ali 1998: 45).

The emphasis on cultural innovation and struggle for identity by theorists of 'new social movements' has been criticized for neglecting the struggle for survival and over distribution of resources that is so central to social movements; and because assertions of identity are also about economic gains. While traditional Marxist approaches tended to be economically deterministic, the 'new social movement' theorists seem to ignore the material bases for discontent and mobilization (Al-Ali 1998:45). The view of social movements as antithetical to domination,

as broadly democratic and progressive, has been challenged by the argument that a focus on identity is problematic, in that it might result in a 'voluntarist politics' that call for strategies that "work around, but do not challenge, state power" (Mooer and Sears 1992: 67, quoted in Al-Ali 1998: 45).

L. A. Kaufmann is even more sceptical about the progressive nature of 'new social movements', emphasizing that identity politics frequently degenerate into 'anti-politics' which mirrors the ideology of the capitalist market place through emphasis on life-style and lack of collective organization (Kaufmann 1990: 78; quoted in Al-Ali 1998: 45). In other words, 'new social movements' may have a de-politicizing effect in that their foci and praxis may not actually challenge prevailing power structures, leaving forms of domination relatively intact.

With these criticisms of 'social movement' theory in mind it is worth noting that in the Arab world there is conflation between social movements and NGOs. The notion that NGOs are the voice of the oppressed and marginalized became dominant, and led to a rapid spread of NGOs throughout the Arab world.

The spread of NGOs is a worldwide phenomenon in the 'North' as in the 'South'. The number of development NGOs registered in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries of the industrialized 'North' has grown from 1,600 in 1980 to 2,970 in 1993; over the same period the total spending of these NGOs has risen from US\$2.8 billion to US\$5.7 billion at current prices (OECD 1994). The 176 international NGOs of 1909 had blossomed by 1993 into 28,900. Similar figures have been reported in most countries in the 'South' where political conditions have been favourable, with a particularly rapid increase between 1990 and 1995. In the Arab world, it is estimated that NGOs numbered more than 70,000 by the mid-'90s (Bishara 1996). In Palestine the number had reached 926 by 2000, most of which were established after the Oslo agreement (Shalabi 2001: 111). This growing number of NGOs coincided with a weakening of the ideological political parties, and a growing retreat of states from service provision and social entitlements due to structural adjustment policies imposed on most Third World countries by the World Bank and the IMF (Omvedt 1994:35).

From Structural Adjustment to 'Good Governance'

The World Bank first pointed to the importance of 'good governance' in economic development in its 1989 study, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth*. The Bank's concerns about governance arose from one

major source: the failure of its structural adjustment programs, which it attributed to the insufficiency of private investments, and to 'poor governance'. After some groping, the Bank settled on the following definition of 'governance': "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development" (World Bank 1992: 1).

While it is not the purpose of this paper to enter into the full details of the 'good governance' debate, one can quickly summarize the most important points made by critics of this new policy:

- The extension of the Bank's scope of interest to include governance raises the issue of sovereignty. The Bank and other aid donors are intruding ever more deeply into areas that have traditionally remained the sole responsibility of national governments. The Bank's focus on governance is thus part of a much broader trend in which the concept of sovereignty appears to be rapidly changing.

- It is not clear in Bank discussions and documents what sorts of political problems are critical to the success of Bank lending and which are not. Experience in Africa and elsewhere demonstrates that absence of accountability and transparency do not automatically lead to corruption and the absence of the rule of law. South Korean development in the past has been led by authoritarian regimes, lacking both in transparency and accountability to their people and not without a measure of corruption. However these problems of governance did not impede rapid economic growth. Thus we cannot be so certain of the relationship between political systems and governance theory, or political systems and development.

- The US government equates 'good governance' with democracy, and sees it as an end in itself, and not as a means to promoting economic growth. The plight of Iraq and to a certain extent of Palestine are installed under the rubric of 'imposing democracy' and removing corrupt or despotic regimes. It is clear from these instances that political interest directs US foreign aid under the 'good governance' banner.

- The US Administration has continued to provide aid to non-democratic regimes, like those of Ghana and Columbia as long as they continue to implement structural adjustment programs (Lancaster 1995:14).

- Too much aid, poorly timed, can undermine the incentives for governments to liberalize, particularly where internal pressures based on economic discontent are the prime force promoting political reform.

- Too much aid to finance new or civil institutions - for example legislatures, political parties, or NGOs - can undermine the independence of these institutions, and weaken their incentive to create the grass-roots support needed to sustain them, and ensure their sensitivity to those they are supposed to represent.

Keeping this international trend in mind, one can clearly predict the coming aggressive wave to 'democratize' the region, already spelled out by the American Administration by its build-up of forces to bring about 'regime change' in Iraq. According to a recent news item, the current US administration views the many ills in the Arab society as due to the lack of democracy, and the inferior status of Arab women. According to Elizabeth Cheney (the US vice president's daughter, who runs the Arab Reform Program at the State Department), the administration aims to nurture the fledgling program as part of its broader ambitions for opening up the region. US officials have said that a focus on democracy-building projects and a re-direction of aid money to grass-roots efforts can accomplish two things. One is to build the desire and ability to reform authoritarian governments, great and small. The other is to soften the image of the United States on the Arab street.

As part of the US Middle East Partnership Initiative (a \$25 million program to promote democracy in the Middle East announced by President Bush last summer), a complete review of assistance programs in the region is being undertaken, according to Reuters (16 November, 2002). An unnamed US State Department official told the news agency that one of the development agency's objectives is to increase the portion of assistance that supports the promotion of democracy and the rule of law. The source added that this included a range of activities intended to strengthen 'civil society' and responsible debate in Egypt.

The US's obsession with democracy in the region arouses scepticism that it is real, or that measures to implement it will ever be taken. Mustapha Kamel Al Sayyid, director of the Center for Developing Countries Studies at Cairo University, says it would not be in the US's interests to promote true democracy in Egypt, since the only viable alternative to the present government is the Islamist opposition - a group known for its dislike of American policy. "If the result of democratization is that Islamists gain more voice in politics, then no doubt the US government won't in practice do much in the way of the real promotion of democracy." (*Cairo Times*, Nov 21, 2002 circulated by 'News from Democracy Egypt').

With this scepticism in mind, the debate on the role of 'civil society' in the process of democratization, defend-

ing human rights and women's rights is seen in the Arab region with a growing distrust. This discourse adds fuel to an already burning debate in the Arab world on the role envisioned for Arab NGOs, and in particular women's NGOs, in the process of development, democratization and social change. ('Only for Women', 24/6/02, www.aljazeera.com)

Faltering Development, External Pressures, and NGOs

In most African countries and Arab countries, the response of private sectors to economic reforms has been insignificant. Economic growth (if it has occurred at all) has been buoyed up by an increase of existing capacities and foreign aid. Structural adjustment policies have led many 'progressive' Arab countries to an almost complete withdrawal of the state from investment in the public sector and public services. This in turn has led to a severe deterioration of social and economic rights, translated in rising rates of unemployment and declining social welfare support from the state, affecting mainly youth and women (CAWTAR 2001: 15-17). This deterioration has had a strong impact on women's status, indicated by an increase in women's illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, and political marginalization, according to the *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The region has the largest proportion of young people in the world - 38% of Arabs are under 14 - and the report calculates that its population will top 400 million in 20 years' time. One in five Arabs still lives on less than \$2 a day. And, over the past 20 years, growth in income per head, at an annual rate of 0.5%, was lower than anywhere else in the world except for sub-Saharan Africa. At this rate, says the report, it will take the average Arab 140 years to double his/her income. Stagnant growth, together with rapid population rise, means vanishing jobs. Around 12 million people, or 15% of the labour force, are already unemployed, and on present trends the number could rise to 25 million by 2010.

From the mid-'70s, with visible crisis as most Arab states failed to achieve a sustainable level of development, or to absorb the increasing number of young people seeking employment, most adopted 'structural adjustment' policies. This retreat came amid major international changes that resulted from the collapse of the 'socialist/ communist bloc', formerly the main ally of Arab nationalist 'progressive' states such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, while the Israeli threat and unresolved issue of Palestine persisted, and the Iranian revolution put an end to the regime of the Shah, bringing an Islamist religious leadership to power.

While the Arab states were shaken by economic and social crisis during the 1980s, most Arab leaders successfully skirted the challenge of economic reform by using what Brumberg calls 'survival strategies', ie. a minimal response to pressures for economic and political change without engaging in the risky game of power sharing. This limited response to economic crisis was neither a reflection of a cultural proclivity for authoritarianism nor a manifestation of civil society's 'resurgence'. Instead, it mirrored the enduring legacies of 'populist authoritarianism', and the strategies that elites used to re-impose their hegemony without undertaking major economic or political reforms (Brumberg 1995: 230).

These 'survival strategies' are no longer working, and pressures are mounting to effectuate change. Intensifying the role of NGOs is seen by states and international agencies as the panacea. Scholars also have argued that NGOs may be are less constrained in terms of their legal mandates and political considerations, hence better prepared to engage in the mobilization and organization of marginalized groups, and to establish new instruments and channels through which these groups can strengthen their participation in the economic and political sphere. Borner, Brunetti and Weder (1993, quoted in Robinson 1995) have called this an 'entitlement and empowerment' of marginalized groups. By 'entitlement' they mean: i) better access to the formal economic system, including property rights (eg. legal title to land and houses); ii) access to credit, enabling them to appropriate the returns of their investment; iii) access to the legal system; and iv) reducing bureaucratic hurdles in registering their businesses. 'Empowerment' means improving participation in the political system. Empowerment may start with organizing neighbourhood groups in the informal sector. Intermediary institutions may then provide the link through which articulation at the grassroots level affects decision-making at the local, provincial and state level (Nunnenkamp 1995:14-15). In this perspective, NGOs are viewed as better able to empower the people and enhance popular participation, since they are (or should be) more local, democratic, accountable, transparent and accessible than the state apparatus.

Thus many donor countries and UN agencies have turned to supporting NGOs, including women's NGOs. Here we must differentiate between different forms of women's organizations. Some provide services for a limited needy constituency, some are focusing on information production and research, while others advocate democracy and women's rights. The focus of this paper is on the latter category since they are the target both for funding and accusations of being part of the move to promote 'civil society', associated by many in the Arab world with World Bank and United States policies. The funding of

women's advocacy NGOs has renewed old questions, such as why is the West funding us? Why is the West interested in women in our area? One of the most vocal accusations against women's organizations is that they implement a Western agenda, which means that they are less nationalist and less 'authentic'. This is an old and fruitless debate which does not help in building alliances, or in examining the visions and programs of any group of activists in an objective way.

Women's Movements between East and West

Attacks on Arab women's NGOs usually involve the old dichotomy of West versus East: a West seen by fundamentalist groups as a power that desires to impose its cultural values: individual freedom, materialism and secularism; or by Arab nationalists and leftists as colonial and corrupting, buying the loyalties of the new political, social or economic elite ('Only for Women' 24/6/02, *www.al-jazeera.com*), returning to the foreground what Leila Ahmed calls 'colonial feminism' (Ahmed 1994:175-179). Others set the proliferation of NGOs in a context of ongoing expansion of neo-liberalism, and the formation of a 'globalized elite' (Hanafi and Tabar 2002:32-36), and as "mitigating class conflict, diluting class identities and culture, blurring the class borders and blunting class struggle within nations and between them" (Qassoum 2002: 44-56). A quick overview of the history of the Arab women's movements from the last century will shed light on new trends in these movements.

The East/West binary is an old one that has been articulated by some Arab feminists who believed that what the colonists sought was to undermine the local culture through 'colonial feminism' (Ahmed 1994:175-179). Like Lazreg, Ahmed is particularly disturbed by the resemblance she perceives between colonial discourse around Arab women and the discourse of some contemporary Western feminists, who "devalue local cultures by presuming that there is only one path for emancipating women - adopting Western models" (quoted in Abu-Lughod 1996:14).

Badran rejects such formulations, arguing that "attempts to discredit or to legitimize feminism on cultural grounds ... are political projects". For her, the origins of feminism cannot be found in any culturally 'pure' location: "External elements - external to class, region, country - are appropriated and woven into the fabric of the 'indigenous' or local. Egypt, for example, has historically appropriated and absorbed 'alien elements' into a highly vital indigenous culture" (Badran 1995:24-25). She implies that Egyptian feminism is part of such an indigenous (fluid and always in process) culture, underlining how women

such as Hoda Sharawi and Ceza Nabarawi were more nationalist and uncompromising regarding British colonialism than men of their class. She also shows how, in spite of meeting with European feminists, and developing their ideas in relationship to European feminist organizations, Egyptian feminists were politically independent, expressing criticism of European support for Zionism. Further, their deepest concern was for the conditions of Egyptian and Arab women. Thus Egyptian feminists were very much part of, and concerned with, their own societies and cannot be dismissed as Western (hence somehow inauthentic) agents (Badran 1995:13-15, 22-25).

In the same vein, Lila Abu-Lughod warns that "we all write in contexts, and when we come to write the history of 'the woman question' in the Middle East, we find ourselves caught: between the contemporary Egyptian or Iranian or Turkish context where Islamists denounce things Western, a label they, like many nationalist men before them, attach to feminism, and a Euroamerican context where the presumption is that only Western women could really be feminist. How to get beyond this?" Abu-Lughod further notes that "such notions of separate cultures have themselves been produced by the colonial encounter. This leads to different possibilities for analysing the politics of East and West in the debates about women, ones that do not take the form of narratives of cultural domination versus resistance, cultural loyalty versus betrayal, or cultural loss versus preservation. It also opens up the possibility of exploring, in all their specificities, the actual cultural dynamics of the colonial encounter and its aftermath" (Abu-Lughod 1998:16).

Based on her empirical study of secular Egyptian women's organizations, Al-Ali underlines, "Egyptian women activists, as varied as they might have been in their ideological inclinations, were active agents in their specific cultural, social and political contexts". She adds, "It never fails to astonish me how women activists continue to be discredited on the basis of their class affiliation and links to European culture and education, while male political activists, especially communists, do not seem to be exposed to the same degree of scrutiny concerning their class or educational background" (Al-Ali 1998:121).

What can be concluded is that, in order to avoid falling into these cultural dichotomies, it is important to study - preferably empirically - the context in which organizations are working, what are their strategies, their structure, their links to other social and political groups, to external agencies and to the state.

Based on empirical studies conducted on women NGOs

in Egypt, Palestine and also on other Third World countries in Africa and Latin America, one can observe a process of NGOization.

The 'NGOization' of the Arab Women's Movements

What 'NGOization' means is the spread of a different form of structure for women's activism, one which limits the participation of women at the local level to 'their' organisation. 'NGOization' also limits the struggle for national causes to 'projects' geared to priorities set by an international discourse without diversity, and fragments the accumulation of forces for social change. The formation of women's NGOs with particular social aims marks a very different form and structure for Arab women's activism from those that predominated in earlier periods. The first half of the twentieth century was characterized by the spread of women's literary salons mainly for highly cultured and educated upper middle class women. Urban middle and upper class women also ran charitable societies and, later, women's unions based on open membership for women. In Palestine for example, charitable societies recruited hundreds of women in their administrative bodies and general assemblies, while women's unions had large memberships extending to women in villages, and after 1948 to refugee camps.

If we compare the size of the older societies and unions with that of the constituencies of contemporary NGOs, one easily notes a decline in numbers. The prevailing structure of NGOs is formed of a board of between seven to 20 members, and a highly qualified professional and administrative staff whose number is generally small, and depends on the number and character of projects being dealt with. The power of decision is not, as it is supposed to be, in the hands of the board but usually in those of the director. The power of the latter stems from his or her ability to fund-raise, be convincing, presentable and able to deliver the well-written reports that donors require. In order to achieve these requirements, communication and English language skills become vital, besides modern communication equipment (fax, computer, mobile phones, etc). In some NGOs the director has the power to change board members, sometimes even without their knowledge.

As for the internal 'governance' of NGOs, a survey of more than 60 Palestinian NGOs found that most of their employees do not participate in decision-making due to "their passivity or their lack of competence" (Shalabi 2001:152). The 'target' groups do not participate in decision- or policy-making either. When the administrations were asked why this was so, they answered that

they were part of this society, they knew it, and could decide about its needs. (Shalabi 2001:152). In many women's NGOs, the staff has nothing to do with the general budget of their organization, and do not know how it is distributed. According to Shalabi, the internal governance of the surveyed NGOs was "a mirror reflection of the Palestinian political system based on individual decision-making, patronage and clientalism", and the lack of rules organizing internal relations in the organization. In some cases a union dispute erupted, and was settled in a "way very far away from the rule of law" (Shalabi 2001: 154).

The highly professional qualities required of administrative staff for better communications with donors may not directly affect the links between an NGO and local constituencies, but most of the time they do. Referring here to the Palestinian experience, the qualities of cadres in what were known as 'grass roots organizations' - the women's committees that were branches of political formations that sustained the first Palestinian Intifada - differed considerably from those required in NGO staff. The success of the cadres lay in organizing and mobilizing the masses, and was based in their skills in building relations with people. They succeeded in this because they had cause to defend, a mission to implement, and because they had a strong belief in the political formations they belonged to. It was important for the cadre to be known and trusted by people, to have easy access to them, to care about them, and help them when needed. The task needed daily, tiring, time-consuming effort in networking and organizing. These cadres knew their constituency on a personal level, and communication depended on face-to-face human contact. But NGOs depend mainly on modern communication methods such as media, workshops, conferences, globalized rather than local tools. These methods may not be bad in themselves but they are mainly used to 'advocate' or 'educate' a 'target group', usually defined for the period needed to implement the 'project'. Here the constituency is not a natural social group, rather it is abstract, receptive rather than interactive, and the 'targeting' is limited by the time frame of the project. This temporality of the project and the constituency makes it difficult to measure the impact of the intervention, and also jeopardizes the continuity of the issue defended.

With NGOs, the targeting policy is always limited, localized and implemented by professionals hired by the organizations to do the 'job' which makes it different from the 'mission' based on the conviction and voluntarism of cadres in the grass-roots organizations. Their structure and methods do not help NGOs to act as a mobilizing, organizing formation when working for claims to rights or change; most NGOs do not in any case set organiza-

tion or mobilization as a goal. Assessing Algerian women's defeat in changing the retrogressive family law of 1984, Lazreg attributed it to the fact that women hung by the thread of the state's moral obligation to them as fighters for Algerian independence, and added that women lacked "organization, numbers and money" (Lazreg 1994: 155).

It is important to notice these differences to help clarify the prevailing confusion between social movements and NGOs, because in order to have weight or, in political terms, power, a social movement has to have a large popular base. According to Tarrow, what constitutes social movements is that "at their base are the social networks and cultural symbols through which social relations are organized. The denser the former and the more familiar the latter, the more likely movements are to spread and be sustained" (Tarrow 1994: 2). He adds, "contentious collective action is the basis of social movements; not because movements are always violent or extreme, but because it is the main, and often the only recourse that most people possess against better-equipped opponents. Collective action is not an abstract category that can stand outside of history and apart from politics for every kind of collective endeavor - from market relations, to interest associations, to protest movements, to peasant rebellions and revolutions" (Tarrow 1994:3). The same can be said of women's movements. To put " 'women's movement[s]' into context, we have to ask first, what a 'women's movement' is and how can we distinguish it from 'women in movement'" (Rowbotham 1992, quoted in Jackson and Pearson, 1998).

To start with, there are different views as to what a women's movement is. It could be a mobilizing engine to demand female suffrage, with a leadership, a membership, and diffuse forms of political activity that qualify it as a movement, as distinct from forms of solidarity based on networks, clubs or groups. And according to Molyneux, it implies a social or political phenomenon of some significance, due both to its numerical strength and to its capacity to effect change, whether in legal, cultural, social or political terms. A women's movement does not have to have a single organizational expression and may be characterized by diversity of interests, forms of expression, and spatial location. Also, it comprises a substantial majority of women, where it is not exclusively made up of women (Molyneux in Jackson and Pearson 1998: 226).

Thus, it seems preferable to reserve the term 'movement' for something larger and more effective than small-scale associations. The long quotations presented here are intended to highlight the elements that must be present in a movement if it is to achieve change. As I argued ear-

lier, the typical structure of NGOs debars them from serving as mobilizing or organizing agents, so that however much they proliferate they cannot sustain and expand a constituency, nor tackle issues related to social, political or economic rights on a macro- or national level. Were they to undertake these aims, they would have to stop being NGOs.¹

NGO reliance on the use of media communication for advocating national issues (eg. fraud in elections, corruption) can cross the red lines drawn by political authorities, leading to the punishment of individual leaders, and pointing to the weakening effects of lack of a broad constituency. The cases of Sa'ad el-Dine Ibrahim, an outstanding defender of Egyptian 'civil society', and Eyad Sarraj, a prominent defender of Palestinian human rights, both jailed by their governments, need to be analysed for the light they shed on the efficacy of NGO as opposed to 'movement' action. Issues related to political and civil rights are usually seen as more 'political' than issues related to women's rights. But even some social rights such as salary raises or education rights have met with violent oppression by the political authorities. Big issues need an organized constituency to carry them; otherwise raising them is like playing with fire.

Empirical observation and research have shown that it is not easy, and perhaps not feasible, to assemble a number of women's NGOs to work towards a common goal (the minimum requirement for the definition of 'women in movement'). It appears that the NGO structure creates actors with parallel powers based in their recognition at the international level, and easy access to important national and international figures. But this international recognition is not translated into recognition or legitimacy on the local and national levels. This creates a competitive dynamic between NGO directors that makes it hard to compromise or agree on common goals, since the one who compromises may be seen as the weaker among power equals. Coordination is more possible between NGOs with similar aims, but it is difficult to achieve with women's organizations as different as charitable societies and 'grass roots' organizations. NGO leaders, empowered by high levels of education, professional qualifications, and the international development 'lingo' tend to patronize the others.

These observations are supported by NGO studies in other Third World countries. As cited earlier, the proponents of a 'bottom-up' approach argue that the organization of popular pressure and participation from below is a necessary pre-requisite for political change and economic progress. They are also extremely sceptical about the ability and willingness of any regime truly to reform itself. Under such conditions, the 'top-down' approach may sim-

ply be ineffective, as official donors have to work mainly through the governments of recipient countries. However, under such conditions, the 'bottom-up' approach is also likely to fail, though for different reasons.

The potential of NGOs to foster participatory developments beyond the 'grassroots' level is fairly small; even at this level, since projects are transitory, their capacity to bring about change is dubious. The activities of NGOs are typically focused on specific projects; coordination between NGOs pursuing different aims is weak; and benefits beyond narrowly defined target groups are uncertain at best. In any case, empowering the powerless from below is a time-consuming process. Most importantly, though, it is naive to assume that participatory development at the 'grassroots' level can be significantly promoted in developing countries whose governments are notoriously unwilling to reform political and economic systems. If governments are not reform-minded, they will suppress participatory developments wherever they emerge as soon as such developments threaten to undermine the power base of the ruling elites. The experience of NGOs in various countries offer ample evidence of this. As concerns entitlement as defined above, the 'bottom-up' approach obviously relies on supportive measures by government authorities (Nunnenkamp 1995:14-15).

Here one should raise the question: are Arab governments willing to introduce reforms? Do they act to reform themselves? The evidence from Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries suggest that they are not, and do not. The appearance of the wives of presidents and rulers, princesses, and prominent women in certain women's NGOs cannot be translated as a willingness to reform, but means rather that women's rights and claims are seen as a-political and politically unthreatening, since they do not touch the political, economic and social foundations of the Arab regimes.

In this article I have tried to argue that the role attributed by UN agencies and international development organizations to Arab women's NGOs as a vehicle for democratization and participatory-based development needs to be re-assessed through empirical studies, and not pursued on a cultural basis that brings back the old dichotomies of West versus East, or vernacular versus Westernised. The Arab women's NGOs in their actual forms and structures might be able to play a role in advocating Arab rights in the international arena, provide services for certain needy groups, propose new policies and visions, generate and disseminate needed information. But, in order to achieve comprehensive, sustainable development and democratization, a different form of organization is needed with a different, locally grounded vision.



Caricature credit: Jalal Al-Rifai

ENDNOTES

In the middle of a recent debate in Egypt on *khula'* (women's right to ask for divorce), a prominent feminist activist was asked if her Centre was taking part in the debate. She replied, "We don't deal with such 'projects'".

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