

Women's Work in Civil

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Have Arab women been able to be more effective and empowered through their work in civil society organizations?

The answer to this question is both in the negative and positive i.e. women have made great achievements yet there are still serious obstacles to be overcome in addition to the setbacks that have occurred. This issue of *Al-Raida* will address this question through the articles within its pages.

Arab civil society is composed of non-governmental organizations and some advocacy organizations that represent different interests in society to promote a civil society that is engaged in democratic political reform. These organizations have encountered many difficulties over the last few years owing to more restrictive laws (in Egypt's case) that limit their scope and activities, and to a general apathy on the part of the citizens themselves: "The state in most countries in the region, whether monarchial or 'socialist', had maintained firm control over politics, the economy and society, leaving little space for autonomous social or economic power." (Zubaida, 2001: 232) However, despite those difficulties there are active organizations that are promoting civil society and its important role as an advocate for participation, respect, tolerance and all the other attributes of a democratic society. The apathy on the part of the citizens is the more difficult aspect to overcome. Within a closed political sphere that prevails in the Arab world, it is difficult for a secular civil society to work in an environment that is increasingly becoming more religious and returning to fundamentalist conservative notions.

Within this context, one has to

address the issue of democracy and the role of women in civil society since women who are perceived as the engines for reform, are still suffering from discrimination and bias. Saad El-Din Ibrahim, one of the earliest advocates of civil society as a basis for democracy in the region, defines civil society in terms of "volitional, organized, collective participation in public space between individuals and the state." (Ibrahim, 1995: 28) He goes on to list political parties, trade unions, community development associations and other interest groups. Owing to the different situation in the region, women's work in the civil society sector has to be considered as an engine for quiet rather than dramatic change. (Ibrahim 1995:28)

There have been arguments that in the Arab world there is not much of a civil society that faces the predominant but weak centralized state system. However, there is much in the history of the Arab world that point to examples of civil society, from professional guilds and syndicates to religious communities that have often played the role of arbiter between the state and the people and as advisor to the state. Civil society is not a purely Western concept — it is a concept of citizens interacting to achieve a goal through a civilian manner.

A December 1999 article in *The Economist* attributes the rapid growth of the citizen sector to the exponential rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs): "One conservative yardstick of international NGOs (that is, groups with operations in more than one country) is the Yearbook of International Organizations. This puts the number

of international NGOs at more than 26,000 today, up from 6,000 in 1990. Far more groups exist within national borders." Based upon a recent article by *World Watch*, the bimonthly magazine of *World Watch Institute* (itself an NGO), the *Economist* maintains that "the United States alone has about 2 million NGOs, 70 percent of which are less than 30 years old. India has about 1 million grass-roots groups, while another conservative estimate suggests that more than 100,000 sprang up in Eastern Europe between 1988 and 1995."

So where does the Arab world stand in relation to the growth of civil society organizations (CSOs) and participation of women in civil society and in its CSOs? There are hundreds of CSOs that work in the field of education, literacy, environment, health, youth, sports and even in politics. Within this framework, the question that arises is whether these organizations with their skill base will spill over into the real political realm and pave the way for more participation by citizens in the way they are governed? The answer is yes, yet it will take more time than we have anticipated in the Arab world, and the leadership role of women will be crucial.

Today there are organizations, many of which are managed and led by women, that engage in dialogue, participation and learning that are working in different fields notably in political activities. The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) in Egypt is engaged in training women to run for political office in addition to other empowerment types of activities. The Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM) is

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working through a coalition to change the personal status laws in Morocco and to promote the concept of a quota of seats designated for women in the Moroccan Parliament. The SOS for the Disappeared in Algeria is an organization that facilitates the staging of peaceful demonstrations by ordinary mothers to pressure the government to find their sons and daughters who have “disappeared for political reasons”. In Yemen, the women who were elected as members of the municipal councils in Yemen (composed of 0.05% of the members of all the councils in Yemen) are trying to make a difference for all citizens in the municipalities. The Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI) - Jordan dared to bring to the forefront the heinous honor crimes in Jordan and elsewhere. The AWAL women’s organization in Bahrain took the bold move to educate women on their political rights in the municipal elections held in May 2002. The Palestinian Women’s Affairs Technical Committee (WATC) challenged the newly formed Palestinian Authority when it required women to secure their male guardian’s permission for a passport.

These are examples of women in civil society organizations that are trying to make a difference in women’s lives as well as in all citizens’ lives. They are trying to promote good governance and reforms in political life in their respective countries.

In July 2002, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) presented the Arab Human Development Report 2002. It is the first regional report of its kind for the Arab states and will be published

annually from now on. This is a report that has been prepared in its entirety by a team of Arab scholars - independent from the UNDP and supported by regional policymakers. The report focuses on the progress made by the members of the League of Arab States in political freedom, economy and human development defined as “the process of enlarging economic, social, political and cultural choices”.

As a whole, the report affirms that substantial progress in human development has been achieved in the Arab countries. It particularly singles out the fact that the fastest improvement in women’s education in the world - starting in the 70s - has been attained in this region. On the other hand, the report focuses on the 3 deficits: the freedom deficit, the women’s empowerment deficit and the human capabilities/knowledge deficit. These deficits hinder further human development and also have a negative impact on the region’s economies.

Referring to women’s empowerment, the following is stated in the UNDP report’s executive summary: “Utilization of Arab women’s capabilities through political and economic participation remain the lowest in the world in quantitative terms. Women occupy only 3.5 % of all seats in parliaments of Arab countries compared to 11% in sub-Saharan Africa and 12.9% in Latin America and Caribbean countries. In many countries of the region, women suffer from unequal citizenship and legal entitlements. In some countries with elected national assemblies, women are still denied the right to vote or hold office. And one in every two Arab women can

neither read nor write. Society as a whole suffers when half of its productive potential is stifled. These deficits must be addressed in every field: economic, political, and social.”

It is a matter of time and hard work when women will be the most vocal voice advocating for change, participation and tolerance — some of the vital ingredients needed in any democratic society. There is still much that needs to be accomplished in terms of the legal context and skills acquisition. Despite the obstacles, there are Arab women leaders who are already forging the way. The outlook is hopeful yet much strategizing and coalition-building needs to take place amongst Arab women and affiliated civil society organizations.

References

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