Many in the Sultanate still remember her efforts. After Sultan Kabous came to power and the Popular Front was dissolved, the Sultanate evolved at a great pace and girls' schools sprang up. In modernizing its political and educational system, the Sultanate resorted to educated Omanis citizens who returned to their homeland and held leadership positions. Among them were women with university degrees from Cairo, Beirut, Kuwait, Bahrain and Zanzibar.

With the establishment of a modern state in the Sultanate appeared the need to create an institution capable of communicating with women in distant, rural areas. For this purpose 25 women's societies joined hands under the banner of the Omani Women's Society, which covered most of Oman's provinces. The first one was formed on September 23, 1970, in the capital Muscat officially registered in 1972), and the last one was founded in 1994 in Khub (registered officially in 1999).14

Women's associations in the Sultanate of Oman today hardly differ from their counterparts in their UAE. The objectives and activities mainly serve the welfare of children and mothers through similar programs. They underlie the importance of respecting local traditions, which is why they have not done anything to fight female circumcision and polygamy, both of which are privileged. Most Omani women's societies have failed to attract younger women as members; in consequence their leaderships have not changed (as in most Arab countries) in almost 30 years. Should this situation remain, there is fear that these societies might become extinct.

The other dilemma these societies face is lack of volunteers and human resources, and weak technical capacities, which makes them unable to set up modern strategies and programs. Women's associations, which exist in most of the Arab countries, are considered important Latin American Woman's Organization which was instrumental in establishing this right for working women in the private sector.


13. A case in point is fixing the yearly leave for women working in the Bahrain Telecommunication Company. Associations that brought this issue to the courts were instrumental in establishing this right working for women in the private sector.


New associations include: The women's wing of Al-Witra al-Islami Society (a Shi'ite political association), the Bahrain Women's Society and Fatat al-Ri, both the women's wing of the National Democratic Tribune Society (formerly known as The National Liberation Front with communist orientations); also the Bahrain Women's Society, affiliated to al-Sourafa, a religious group. Sunni political organizations and charities created branches for women's action independent of the parent association. Note that the AWAL Women's Society was founded in 1970 as the women's wing of the Popular Front (Mar'at) but has been independent of the Popular Front since the 1970s, following its own path, and advocating women's rights.


20. Taqati, Al-Mar'a al-Arabiyya al-Mutahida” a brochure issued by the Women's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.


22. Article 1 of the Kuwaiti election law stipulates: “Every 21-year-old Kuwaiti male is entitled to vote.” Article 125 of the Constitution stipulates: “He who holds a cabinet seat must be eligible to vote.” Since women do not fulfil this condition, they cannot hold a cabinet post. See Al-Sidani, Nuriya, “Al-Mar'a al-Arabiyya fil-Kuwait al-Maqviyya al-Fata al-Fatah al-Ma Bayna `Amay 1971 – 1982”.


24. The demands can be summarized as follows: Women's unconditional right to vote; equality between men and women in all work fields, and the necessity to give women the opportunity to advance and hold higher administrative positions; equality between working women and men employed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the necessity to allow women to join the diplomatic corps; granting female civil servants all bonuses, including child support; requesting that Kuwaiti lawyers be also women, particularly in personal and juvenile fields, restricting polygamy and the demand of the second wife to sign the marriage papers before the court; depriving the husband of his second wife's child support in case the first spouse has born children. See Al-Sidani, Nuriya, “Birsh al-Mar'a al-Kuwaytiya: Min Muzakiyat Khilala Sahat’ as Ashara `Aman wa Nisat” 1963 – 1980 part II, page 94

25. Al-Sidani, op. cit., p. 99-100

26. In a meeting between this writer and an influential figure in the Kuwaiti National Assembly, the latter justified his opposition to women's political rights by the power of religious currents in Kuwaiti politics. The same man also argued that should women be granted suffrage they would vote with clerics and against progressives, which would mean that the liberals would lose their seats in the Assembly in favor of backward-thinking movements.


28. On November 6, 1990, 47 women, most of them highly qualified and working in the education sector, drove through the streets of Riyadh to ask for their right to drive, both to reduce the expense of hiring a foreign driver, and to face the possibility of war and the evacuation of the foreign men. But they were treated harshly, with some being dismissed and others defamed. See the Committee for Supporting Women in the Arabian Peninsula, “Women in the Peninsula: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”, Al-Jamal Publications, 1991, p. 9-13.


The ‘NGOization’

of the Arab Women’s Movements

Islah Jad*

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 role and the kind of democracy it gives rise to. 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 cleavages) that challenge and power-seeking states. The other line of thinking focuses on the emergence of capitalism as the dominant, formative force in history (Markovitz 1998). This line of thought diverges from the first, particularly in its analysis of the concept ‘civil society’ to Third World countries. It is that it causes us consistently to misread and understate the real power of ‘capitalism’, and its policy choices. One such misreading is to see state and civil society as separate entities. The second approach contends that state and society interweave 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 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 fever 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’ 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, 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 teacher’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...