

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 Omani 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 Khusb (registered officially in 1999).³⁴

Women's associations in the Sultanate of Oman today hardly differ from their counterparts in the UAE. Their objectives and activities mainly serve the welfare of children and mothers through similar programs. They underline the importance of respecting local traditions, which is why they have not done anything to fight female circumcision, a common practice in Oman, nor have they lobbied for women's rights. Much like the associations in the UAE, they completely coordinate their work with the

Directorate of the Affairs of the Woman and Child (*Mudiriyyat Shu'un al-Mar'a wal Tifl*), which is part of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

Conclusion

The feminist movement in the Gulf still has to overcome several problems, the most important of which is that the authorities control the women's societies to such a degree that they cannot undertake any action without the authorities' consent. Financial aid is dependent on the quality of a society's relationship with the authorities. Associations led by figures close to the regime benefit from financial support from the government as well as from private institutions, while other societies suffer from insufficient financial and human resources.

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. The majority of them still cannot reach women in villages and distant regions. So their activities are concentrated in the capital and restricted to the intellectual elite, which makes them the preserve of the 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.

ENDNOTES

1. Al-Bassam, Khaled, *Niswan Zaman* (Beirut, 2002), p 45 – 46.
2. Al-Bassam, Khaled, *Those Days* (Bahrain, Pnoram Publishers, 1987), p 64.
3. For more information about this movement, see Al-Baker, Abdel Rahman, *From Bahrain to Exile: Saint Helen*, 2nd edition (Beirut, Al-Kounouz Publishers, 2002).
4. Al-Bassam, Aziza, "Al Mar'a al-Bahrayniyya Waqe' wa Tatallu'at Nahwa Mu'tamar Pekin fi al-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya – Al-Wade' al-qanuni wa al-Ijtima'i." Tunis, *Al-Ma'had al-'Arabi li Huquq al-Insan*, p 83.
5. Al-Najar, Sabika, "Al-Isham al-Nisa'i al-Tatawu'i", unpublished paper, AWAL Women's Society, p 3.
6. Al-Sidani, Nuriya, "Al-Haraka al-Nisa'iyya al-'Arabiyya fi al-Qarn al-'Ishrin 1917 – 1982" Kuwait, March 1982, p 35.
7. The Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society and the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society disagree on which one of them was founded first. Leaders of the second organization argue that theirs was established before Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain. After consulting contemporary documents, including publications issued by the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society itself, it became clear that the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society was founded immediately after the Women's Society was dissolved, whereas the Children and Mothers Welfare Society submitted their registration application in 1960.
8. Though the Awal Women's Society tried to downgrade charitable work and concentrate on women's rights, the authorities only allowed it to work on condition that that charity remained its fundamental and explicit objective. This was probably due to their fear of the Society's orientations, deemed revolutionary at the time.
9. Al-Najjar, Sabika, "Al-Haraka al-Nisa'iyya fi al-Bahrayn – Al-Mar'a fi Muwajahat al-'Asr", working paper submitted to a seminar Women Confront the Era, Cairo, November 17 – 20, 1995.
10. Ahmad Abdullah, Fawziya, *Al-Mar'a wa al-Musharaka al-Siyasiyya fi al-Bahrayn fi al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya - Nidal Sha'b al-Bahrayn min ajil al-Dimuqratiyya* (Bahrayn, Dar al-Wihda Al-Wataniyya, 1977 p 95.
11. Nakhleh, Emile, *Al-Tatawur al-Siyasi lil Bahrayn fi Mujtama' Hadith* (London: Lexington Books, 1976), p 53–54.

12. Unpublished papers and documents preserved by the AWS. See also Al-Banay, Fatima, "Dawr al-Jam'iyyat al-Nisa'iyya fi al-Bahrayn fi ta'ziz huquq al-Mar'a munthu 'am 1955," working paper submitted to a seminar entitled "Ru'ya li Waqi' al-Mar'a fi Qadaya al-'Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya," December 5 – 7, 1987.
13. A case in point is fixing the maternity leave for women working in the Bahrain Telecommunication Company. Associations that brought this issue to the courts were instrumental in establishing this right for working women in the private sector.
14. Al-Najjar, Sabika et al., *Jam'iyyat A'wal al-Nisa'iyya - an-Nash'a wal Injazat - A Documentation Study* (Bahrain: Arabic Institution for Printing and Publishing, March 1989), p 46.
15. New associations include: The Future Society, the women's wing of Al-Wifaq al-Islami Society (a Shi'ite political association), the Bahrain Women's Society and Fatat al-Rif, 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-Soufara, 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 (Marxist), but has been independent of the Popular Front since the 1970s, following its own path, and advocating women's rights.
16. Abdullah, Muhammad Hassan, *Al-Haraka al-Adabiyya wa al-Fikriyya Fi al-Kuwayt* (Kuwait: Authors' League, 1973), p 87–93.
17. Quoted by Al-Najjar, Bakr "Al-Jam'iyyat al-Ahliyya Fi Mintaqat al-Khalij al-'Arabi – Al-Tarikh Wa al-Mujtama' ", paper submitted to the Conference on Arab Civil Organizations: Participation, Giving and Development, Cairo, October/November, 1989, p 226.
18. Al-Qatami, Lulwa, "Masirrat al-Jam'iyya al-thaqafiya al-Ijtima'iyya al-Nisa'iyya – Rub' qarn min al-'ta' ,1963 – 1988," Kuwait, p 18.
19. Al-Hajji, Saad Ahmad, "Al-Jam'iyyat al-Nisa'iyya al-Ijtima'iyya bi Duwal al-Majlis al-Ta'awun li Duwal al-Khalij al-'Arabiyya", Kuwait, 2000, p 782.
20. Op.cit., p 783 - 784
21. The Nadi Al-Fatat Society withdrew because it did not conform to membership conditions.
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 fulfill this condition, they cannot hold a cabinet post. See Al-Sidani, Nuriya, "Al-Masira al-Tarikhyya li al-Huquq al-Siyasiyya lil Mar'a al-Kuwaytiyya Fi al-Fatra Ma Bayna 'Amay 1971 – 1982" Kuwait.
23. Op. cit., p17–18.
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 status and juvenile affairs; restricting polygamy and demanding that the second marriage be held 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, "Tarikh al-Mar'a al-Kuwaytiyya - Min Muzakaraty Khilala Sab'at 'Ashara 'Aman wa Nisf' 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.
27. Al-Hajji, op cit. p 331.
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 absence of 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.
29. Al-Mir, Jihane Abdullah (The Supreme Council of Family Affairs), "Al-Majlis al-A'la li Shu'un al-'Usra, Mashru' al-Stratigiya al-Wataniya li Takadom al-Mar'a fi Qatar", paper submitted for the seminar on Women and Politics and their Role in Development, April 12 – 3, 2002, Doha, p 6.
30. Al-Souwaydi, Wadha "Al-Mar'a al-Qatariyya Wa al-Tajriba al-Dimuqratiyya", paper submitted to the seminar on Women and Politics and their Role in Development, Doha, 2002.
31. Al-Najjar, Bakr, *Al-Mar'a fi al-Khalij al-'Arabi Wa Tahawulat al-Hadatha al-Asira*, Beirut: Arab Cultural Center, 2000, p 142.
32. The other associations in the UAE are: Al-Nahda al-Nisakiya Society in Dubai (1973), Al-Ittihad al-Nisakiya Society in Al-Sharja (1973), Umm al-Mukminin Society in Ajman (1974), the Women's Society in Umm al-Kouyouin (1973), Al-Nahda al-Nisakiya Society in Ras Al-Khayma (1979). See the Women's Union, "Masirat al-Mara Fi al-Imarat Fi 12 Aman Min al-Najah", p15, 125 – 144. See also Women in the United Arab Emirates, "Al-Mar'a Fi Dawlat al-Imarat al-'Arabiyya al-Mutahida" a brochure issued by the Women's Union in the United Arab Emirates.
33. Ibid. p 11.
34. Al-Hajji, op. cit. 557 – 558.

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-

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 if 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

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