through NGOs and specialist foundations, but with the ascription of the label ‘democracy promotion’, USAID is becoming increasingly involved in such initiatives. This has given rise to concern that too many US organizations are said to have ‘lost their way’, 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 subject 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, 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 also argued that the notion in the ‘Third World’ as opposed to the ‘advanced’ countries, struggles take place between two clearly demarcated camps, i.e. the ruling class and the people, obscures the multiplicity of antagonisms and identities existing in any country. ‘Third World’ or not (Lallad and Mufue 1988:166). Such struggles over resources and identities are fought along lines of class, religion, and gender. The ‘people’ do not represent a homogeneous coalition; since it is not only exerted by the state but also by elements of ‘civil society’ that are economically and socially powerful. Among social scientists, studies of political domination and exploitation in Arab societies such as Egypt are urban margins, for instance peasants, Islamists, moderate NGOs, political parties, and NGOs - co-opting, as an example legislatures, political parties, or NGOs - can undermine the independence of these institutions, and weaken their capacity to create the grass-roots support needed to sustain these rising ‘initials’ 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 reports, the current US administration views the many 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 grassroots 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 democratic governance 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 Islamist 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 call for dialogue and discourse and 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.al- Jazeera.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 the youth 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 2%, was lower than anywhere else in the world except for sub-Saharan Africa. At this rate, the report says, 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 unemployed. Middle and lower class trends the number could rise to 25 million by 2010.

From the mid-70s, with viable 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, affecting mainly youth and women, 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’, i.e., a minimal response to problems that reconfigure the social relations of production 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 ‘refusal of violence’. 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 re-conceptualized 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 take: i) better access to the formal economic system, including property rights (e.g., 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 NGOs, underformed groups, to work through the local intermediaries. Intermediary institutions may then provide the link through which articulation at the grassroots level affects decision-making at the level of the state. (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, but they do not form 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’s area? One of the most vocal accusations against women’s organizations is that they ignore Western agendas, 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 Tabor 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” (Qassim 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 colonial encounter and its aftermath threw up through ‘colonial feminism’ (Ahmed 1994:175-179). Like Lazreg, Ahmed is particularly disturbed by the resemblance she finds between the local, pre-modern and the global, and the latter’s discourses of 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 1999:16).

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 Zeba Nabawi were more successful and uncompromising in their fight against colonialism than men of their class. She also shows how, in spite of meeting with European feminists, and development officials, and despite the rise of other nationalist 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 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 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 that women activists could 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