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 organization 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 earlier, 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 naïve 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'".

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila (1998) Remaking Women – Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Ahmad, Leila (1994) Women and Gender in Islam. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Al-Ali, Nadje Sadig (1998) "Standing On Shifting Ground: Women's Activism in Contemporary Egypt", PhD Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, School of Oriental and African studies, University of London.
- Badran, Margot (1995) Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Baydoun, Azza Sharara (2002) Nisa' wa jami'yat: Lubnaniyyat beyn Insaf al-dhati wa khidmat al-gheyr, Dar An-Nahar, Beirut.
- Bishara, A (1996) Musahama fi Naqd al-Mujtama' al-Madani (A Contribution to the Critique of Civil Society), Muwatin – The Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, Ramallah, West Bank.
- Al-Bizri, Dalal (1998) "Manhaj al-Muqarabet wa Asalibiha" fi al-Bizri wa Baydoun (muharirat), Al-'Amal al-Ijtima'i wa al-Mar'a: Qira'at fi al-Dirasat al-'Arabiyya wa al-Lubnaniyya, al-Jiz' al-'Awal, Tajamu' al-Bahithat al-Lubnaniyyat, Dar al-Jadid.
- Borner, S. Brunetti, A. and Weden, B (1993) "Political credibility and economic growth", mimeo, Basel, December.
- Brumberg, D (1995) "Authoritarian legacies and reform strategies in the Arab World", in (eds.) Brynen, R.and Korany, B. and Noble, P. Political Liberalisation and Democratisation in the Arab World, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- CAWTAR (2001) Arab Women's Development Report: Globalisation and Gender: Economic Participation of Arab Women, Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), UNDP, AGFUND, Tunis.
- Hanafi,Sari and Linda Tabar "NGOs, Elite Formation and the Second Intifada" in Between the Lines, October 2002 vol.II no.18, Jerusalem www.between-lines.org
Jackson, Cecile and Pearson R (eds.)(1998). Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy, Routledge. London and New York.
- Jad, Islah (2000) al-Mar'a al-Falastiniyya - al-Wad' al-Rahin: al-Mar'a wa al-Siyasa, Ma'had Dirasat al-Mar'a - Jami'at Birzayt. Ramallah, Falastin.
- Keane, J. (1988), Democracy and Civil Society, London & New York, Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (1985) Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, towards a radical democratic politics, London, Verso.
- Lancaster, Carol (1995), IDS bulletin vol.25 no.2, 1995.
- Lazreg, Marnia (1994) The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question, New York, Routledge.
- Markovitz, Irving (1998) "Uncivil Society, Capitalism and the State in Africa", The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Policies, 21 (2).
- Melucci, A (1985) "The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Social Movements", Social Research 52 (4):789-816.
- Molyneux, Maxine (1991) "The Law, the State and Socialist Policies with Regard to Women; the Case of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen 1967-1990" in Kandyioti, D. (ed.) Women, Islam and the State, Macmillan Press.
- Molyneux, M. (1996) "Women's Rights ad the International Context in the Post-Communist States", in M. Threlfall (ed.), Mapping the Women's Movement: Feminist Politics and Social Transformation in the North London: Verso.
- Molyneux, Maxine (1998) "Analyzing women's movements", in (eds) Jackson, Cecile and Pearson, R. Feminist Visions of Development: Gender analysis and policy, Routledge: London/New York.
- News from Democracy Egypt: Aid to trade to democracy? Cairo Times, Nov 21, 2002
- News from Democracy Egypt: US, EU and Democracy Promotion in the Arab World, Fri, Nov 22, 2002
- Nunnenkamp, Peter, IDS bulletin vol. 26 no 2 1995: pp 14-15
- Omvedt, G (1994) "Peasant, Dalits and Women: Democracy and India's New Social Movements" In Journal of Contemporary Asia, 24 (1):35-48.
- Qassoum, Mufid (2002) "Imperial Agendas, 'Civil Society'and Global Manipulation Intifada" Between the Lines, December 2002 vol.III no.19, Jerusalem www.between-lines.org
- Robinson, Mark (1995) IDS bulletin vol. 26 no. 2.
- Rowbotham, Sheila (1992) Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action. Routledge, New York and London.
- Al-Shalabi, Yasir (2001) Al-Ta'sirat al-Duwaliyya wa al-Mahaliyya ala Tahdid Ru'a al-Munazamat ghayr al-Huqumiyya al-Falastiniyya wa Adwaraha, Risalat Majister Ghayr Manshura, Jami'at Birzayt, Ramalah, Falastin.
- Slevin, Peter (2002) "Preparing for Democracy: State Dept. Connects Arab Women, Political Consultants" Washington Post Staff Writer, washingtonpost.com, Monday, November 4, page A03.
- Tarrow, Sidney (1994) Power in Movement-Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics, Cambridge University Press.
- World Bank (1992) Governance and Development, Washington, DC.
- Zuaiter, Akram (1980) Al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Falastiniyya 1935 - 1939, Mu'asasat al-Dirasat al--Falastiniyya, Beirut.