

**THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH
AFRICA: RESPONDING TO RESTRUCTURING AND FUNDAMENTALISM***

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Like other regions in the world-economy, the Middle East is undergoing a restructuring of its political economy. During the oil boom era of the 1960s and 1970s, "petrodollars" were put to use in the oil-producing nations of the region toward a state-directed and largely inward-looking strategy of economic development in which the government was the largest owner and employer. Foreign investments were limited but imports of Western technology and especially weaponry were massive. Many oil-rich Arab countries imported labor from the non-oil Arab states, creating what some have termed a regional oil economy. In Middle Eastern countries, the social and economic infrastructure was largely owned by the state, and government agencies administered subsidies, price controls, and trade regulations.

Today the region is shifting to a more market- and export-oriented system of growth in which investment, prices, and trade are liberalized. This shift is a response to the imperatives of globalization, the current stage of international capitalism. In its economic manifestation, globalization is characterized by new forms of competition, technological progress in transportation and communications, flexibilization of labor markets, and international production by transnational corporations (TNCs). Outside of North America, Europe and Japan, where the bulk of foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, TNCs are especially active in Latin America and in East and Southeast Asia, and China has been receiving a very large share of total investments in developing countries. But FDI flows and TNC investments are much smaller in the Middle East and in Africa. This is partly a legacy of the oil wealth of the past, in the case of the oil-producing countries, and partly the result of political instabilities. In the post-oil boom era, Middle Eastern states are actively trying to attract foreign investment.

As many feminist social scientists have argued (e.g., Sparr and contributors, 1995), economic restructuring is not a gender-neutral process; gender definitions influence the shaping of policy, and policy choices and outcomes affect men and women differently. The

impact of restructuring on women as a group is mediated by such factors as class and ethnicity, while individual women are affected according to their educational attainment, work experience, and sectoral or occupational location. For the region of the Middle East, an additional factor needs to be taken into account, namely that economic restructuring has been occurring against the backdrop of Islamic fundamentalism. In the Middle East, as elsewhere, state policies are to a great extent shaped by conservative cultural concepts, including religiously-derived notions of women's place and men's prerogatives. Moreover, many governments seek to placate Islamist movements by acceding to them control over religious, educational, and family matters, issues which affect women and gender relations in profound ways. Meanwhile, governments are free to implement the new economic policies, which by all accounts are creating hardships for working people and exacerbating the condition of the urban poor.

This is the regional and global context in which women's movements have expanded in countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Whereas much has been written about the political economy of the region, and more and more is being produced on "civil society" and democratization, the scholarship on women's organizations remains parsimonious. And yet there is a strong relationship between development and democratization, on the one hand, and women's mobilization on the other. The current turmoil in Algeria provides a relevant case study.

Let's begin by considering the specific factors behind the rise of women's organizations in the Middle East and North Africa, and the different types of women's organizations that have emerged. (I am referring to non-governmental women's organizations, that is, those that are not part of governmental structures or auxiliaries of ruling parties.)

Organizing Women

In early November 1994 Amman, Jordan was the venue of a regional conference of Arab women's non-governmental organizations. The two-week deliberations resulted in a document entitled "Work Program for the Non-Government Organizations in the Arab Region". This document expresses the priority issues of Arab women's NGOs, and these included political, legal, and economic issues. At the final preparatory conference in New York in March 1995, the following priorities were delineated:

To strengthen the basis of the democratic process in both the political and social realms; to ensure the sanctity of human rights and the amendments of legislation that target the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women, in particular, family laws.

To condemn fundamentalism and cultural extremism, which can lead to terrorism and violence against women.

To promote social development to counteract the negative impact of applied structural adjustment programs and to ensure the basic human needs of women.

What explains the mobilization of women's organizations and the articulation of such demands in the Middle East and North Africa?

In recent years there has been a veritable explosion of NGOs and PVOs (private voluntary organizations) in the region. The expansion of NGOs in general is partly a function of a global trend that gained momentum in the 1980s, when donor governments and multilateral funding agencies embraced non-governmental organizations as partners in development, and began to urge attention to the environment, human rights, good governance, and women in development. There are now many development-oriented NGOs in the region, some of which deal specifically with women. At the same time, the worldwide discourse of human rights and women's rights has emboldened local groups, who have formed human rights and women's rights organizations.

The expansion of women's rights organizations may be explained in terms of four major factors.

Demographic factors include the growth of an educated female population in urban areas and the entry of women into paid labor. Increasingly large populations are now concentrated in cities, and this creates pressures for social services as well as opportunities for action. The age of first marriage for women is rising, and family size is decreasing for educated and employed women. Such demographic changes are giving these "modernizing women" more time for other public activities, and allowing them to make demands on governments for equality, autonomy, and empowerment.

Economic factors include the reduction of public spending in the areas of health, education, and social welfare, and state failures in areas such as female illiteracy, reproductive health, and legal reforms. These changes and failures have spurred non-governmental organizations into action and focused women's attentions on the links between the development agenda and the status and welfare of women. Structural adjustment policies usually call for the liberalization of prices and the introduction of "user fees" in education and healthcare, creating hardships for working people and the poor. The neoliberal policy agenda thus necessitates non-governmental public action. NGOs provide health, educational, and social services and are catering to the basic needs of local communities, thereby filling the gaps created by economic restructuring. Like women's groups in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, Middle Eastern women's groups have been very critical of structural adjustment.

Political factors. The proliferation of non-governmental organizations in the region, and especially those focused on issues of human rights and women's advancement, reflects two parallel political developments: the rise and spread of Islamic fundamentalism, and the growth of a movement for democratization. Women's NGOs are especially significant because of the historic exclusion of women from public forms of power, and because of the challenges they represent to Islamist political movements and to the cultural conservatism of the state.

International factors include opportunities afforded by the UN Decade for Women (1976-85) and the Nairobi Conference (1985); and the international conferences of the 1990s under the auspices of the United Nations — the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the International Conference on Human Rights, and especially

the Women's Tribunal (Vienna, 1994), the World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen, March 1995), and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). What may be called "global feminism" has created a much-needed space for the nurturing of women's organizations.

I define global feminism as "the discourse and movement of women aimed at advancing the status of women (through greater access to resources, through legal measures to effect gender equality, and through the self-empowerment of women) within national boundaries but through transnational forms of organizing and mobilizing". Global feminism is predicated upon the notion that notwithstanding cultural, class, and ideological differences among the women of the world, there is a certain commonality in the forms of women's disadvantage and in the forms of women's organizations worldwide. These organizations are increasingly networking and coordinating their activities, engaging in dialogue and forms of cooperation and mutual support, sending representatives to meetings in other countries and regions, and utilizing a similar vocabulary to describe women's disadvantage and the desired alternatives. A vivid demonstration of "global feminism on the ground" was the myriad preparatory activities around the world for the Fourth World Conference on Women, and of course the participation of numerous women's non-governmental organizations at the conference itself. Indeed, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action may be regarded as the manifesto of global feminism.

These four sets of factors have encouraged the rise and expansion of women's organizations in the Middle East and North Africa. Adapting, with some modifications, the typology discussed first by Sen and Grown and then by Moser, I have analyzed the many organizations that have emerged and classified them according to their orientations and strategies. My analysis suggests a seven-fold typology. (1) service organizations are the oldest type; they include charitable organizations and they have a largely "welfare" approach; (2) professional associations seek equity for their members within the profession and the society; some also promote women-owned businesses and prepare women for jobs in the private sector; (3) development research centers and women's studies institutes are usually national-based but are increasingly conducting transnational research activities, especially in North Africa; they may or may not engage in feminist activism; (4) human rights/women's rights organizations are the ones with the most transformative potential and the ones most likely to experience state harassment; (5) development and women-in-development NGOs provide technical assistance and expertise on issues related to sustainable development, and implement projects on income-generation and micro-enterprises for poverty-alleviation, literacy and education, health, family planning, and community development; (6) women's organizations affiliated to political parties are the women's affiliates of non-ruling political parties, whether left-wing, Islamist, or other; (7) worker-based and grassroots women's organizations are concerned with the welfare and equity of women workers. Currently the smallest in number of the women's organizations, this last type may in fact expand as economic liberalization and further capitalist development draw more women into the workforce.

Institutionalization, Opportunities for Growth, and Constraints

In most countries, the women's organizations receive funding from government sources and from international bodies, including UN agencies and the Dutch, Canadian, Danish, German, Swedish, and American development agencies. In Egypt, USAID is one of the principal funding sources, funding many community development and family planning projects, as well as certain women's groups. UNICEF, UNESCO, UNFPA, and UNIFEM all have links to women's organizations in the region, as does the World Bank's relatively new NGO unit.

Some of these UN agencies supported efforts on the part of women's organizations to prepare for and attend the Fourth World Conference on Women. UNIFEM set up a regional office for Western Asia, based in Amman, and assisted the two Arab Regional Focal Points — the Alliance for Arab Women and the General Federation of Jordanian Women — in preparations for the Beijing Conference. As a result of this and other UN and donor assistance, 52 delegates from Arab NGOs registered to participate in the Commission on the Status of Women Meeting in New York in March 1995. The largest delegation consisted of 26 members from Egypt representing 15 NGOs.

Women's organizations appear to be most institutionalized and "indigenized" in Turkey, where they have become an important part of the political landscape and where they are credited with having made significant contributions to the process of democratization during the 1980s. According to Yesim Arat, "In the 1991 General Election, women's issues became a visible item on the campaigns and party programs of all the major parties. This development was unprecedented in Turkish politics". Arat also believes that the NGOs dealing with women's rights and human rights questions can be especially effective in promoting equality.

In Arab countries, feminist groups and women's organizations are quite vibrant in Egypt but especially in North Africa — where the women activists of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia are in close contact with each other, and where Algerian feminists in particular are quite courageous. Among the Palestinians there is a group of staunch feminists who have been criticizing the creeping conservatism of the Palestine Authority, but their efforts are stymied by the patriarchal onslaught of the Islamist Hamas. A regional organization, the Center for Arab Women's Training and Research (CAWTAR), was established in Tunis in the early 1990s to provide advocacy, training, documentation, and policy interventions, but its work has been adversely affected by interference from national governments and donors, especially the Tunisian and Saudi governments. These and other women's organizations are nonetheless engaging in international networking, including collaborative projects and travel to other regions for conferences and workshops. The links they forge with groups outside the region, as well as among themselves, will prove effective in the future.

Do the developments described above translate into a firm footing for the women's NGOs? Although external funding has facilitated NGO growth and participation in international events, it is of a limited nature, it shows signs of decreasing, and it highlights the absence of "sustainability". Dependence on external aid raises the question of self-reliance and the extent to which women's organizations could become self-financing or obtain financing at

the community, national, or regional levels. Where Arab funding is available, there is often a heavy-handedness that undermines the organization's ability to act effectively, as CAWTAR has experienced. The women's organizations are not mass movements, have a fairly limited constituency, and do not include the participation of urban poor, working class, and rural women as they do in, for example, India and some Latin American countries. Organizational and managerial problems also exist.

The women's NGOs also face legal constraints and restrictions on their activities in some countries. In Egypt, Law 32 of 1964 provides a comprehensive regulatory scheme for NGOs (called PVOs) in which the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) is empowered to do the following: prescribe the charter and the bylaws; review and approve board membership, and appoint up to 50% of the board members; dissolve an association without court order, or decree that two or more NGOs should be amalgamated; restrict association activities to one category of a prescribed list of eight activities (expanded to 12 in 1986). MOSA may also strike down any decision of an NGO board of directors that it considers in violation of Law 32.

As if the state were not a serious enough obstacle to independent organizing, feminists face the very real threat of Islamist movements and fundamentalist violence, especially in Algeria.

Case Study: The Algerian Women's Movement

The growth of independent women's organizations in Algeria illustrates the framework for analysis presented in this paper. Algeria has experienced economic restructuring, democratization, and the growth of Islamism. The demographic, economic, political, and international factors stressed above are all present in the Algerian case; the Algerian women's movement falls within the human rights/women's rights type of women's non-governmental organization; the Algerian case exemplifies the constraints that women's organizations face in their mobilization and political activities.

Following the death of the Colonel Houari Boumedienne in later 1978, the new government of Chedli Bendjedid initiated the process of profound economic and political change. This was a conservative move at women's expense. The introduction of a draft Family Code in 1981 alarmed many Algerian women, who saw it as an attempt to placate a growing Islamist tendency by institutionalizing second-class citizenship for women. The Algerian feminist movement has its origins in this period of protest against the draft Family Code, organized largely by educated women employed at the University of Algiers who went on to form organizations known by their short names Triomphe, Egalite, Emancipation, and Defense et Promotion. Feminists point out that the Family Code, which was hurriedly adopted in 1984 before the women's organizations could remount their mobilization, contravenes the equality clauses of the Constitution, the Labor Code, and international conventions to which Algeria is a signatory. Among other things, the Family Code requires a husband's permission as a condition for a wife's employment.

The Bendjedid government went on to slowly institute changes to the system of agricultural production and to the status of state-owned industrial enterprises, ostensibly as

a way of tackling rising unemployment and debt servicing in the context of the falling price of oil. But these measures only exacerbated the economic crisis by raising prices, and resulted in the riots of October 1988. Bendjedid's response was to usher in a brief period of political liberalization, but this was disrupted by the rise of the Islamist movement *Front Islamique du Salut* in 1990 and their victory in the first round of the 1991 elections. The proscription of the FIS ushered in a period of violent civil conflict. At the height of the political turmoil in the early 1990s pitting the government and military against Islamist extremists, Algeria's economic and political transition appeared uncertain, and the state seemed vulnerable to collapse. Algeria's feminists were caught between the devil of statism and the deep blue sea of Islamism, but they focused their political energies against patriarchal and violent *integrism*, especially as the Islamists were hunting down activist and unveiled women. During 1994 protests and demonstrations were held by a number of new women's organizations. After one public protest in the spring of 1994, the independent *Al Watan* wrote: "Tens of thousands of women were out to give an authoritative lesson on bravery and spirit to men paralyzed by fear, reduced to silence. ... The so-called weaker sex ... refused to be intimidated by the threats advanced by 'the sect of assassins'".

The Algerian feminist movement has received widespread support and solidarity from French women's groups, international NGOs, and transnational feminist networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (based in France but with branches throughout the Muslim world) and Isis International (based in Manila, the Philippines and in Santiago, Chile). But the constraints women face – in the form of GIA terrorism and FIS intimidation – are considerable. Khalida Messaoudi is a former math teacher, a feminist leader and a democrat who helped to form Triomphe and who backed the Algerian Government's decision to stop the FIS from winning the 1991 parliamentary elections. For that, as well as for her criticisms of FIS policies toward women, the FIS officially condemned her to death, and she was forced to go into hiding abroad. Nabila Diahnine, an architect and president of a feminist group, was 35 years old when she was assassinated in February 1996 while on her way to work in the northern city of Tizi Ouzou.

The outcome of elections in 1995 and 1997 showed that the government retained popular support, and this came as a relief to many who feared that Islamists had a wide social base. For its turn, the government of President Zeroual now had to acknowledge and accommodate Islamist and secular opposition forces. Nevertheless, the Islamist underground has continued to carry out terrorist actions.

As disruptive and violent as the political crisis has been, that and the economic crisis have paradoxically given new life to Algeria's civil society. The Algerian political scientist Azzadine Layachi has describes how interaction between the state and elements of the nascent civil society intensified after 1993, naming a number of religious, human rights, and professional associations. But missing from his list is the array of women's organizations that emerged in Algeria during the early 1980s and grew during the 1990s. According to one account, there were 20 women's associations in the first national meeting of the women in late 1989 and in 1993 perhaps as many as 24. Ever since the struggle around the Family Code, the growth of feminist activism has become a defining feature of Algeria in transition.

Women's organizations are now an integral part of the democratic movement that gained momentum in the 1990s, and they constitute a central part of civil society. Indeed, perhaps the most significant aspect of the 1997 political scene was the election to parliament of several well-known women's rights activists.

Democratization and Women's Organizations

That many women's organizations in the Middle East and North Africa are elite, professional, and middle-class bodies does not mean that they do not have a wider impact. Given that the public sphere has historically been the province of men, given that male-female gaps are still huge, where economic decision-making is entirely male, and considering also that women's participation in formal political structures and in elections — whether as candidates or as voters — is still low, the very existence of women's organizations challenges the patriarchal order in rather profound ways.

To the extent that women's organizations contribute to the democratization process, the creation of a democratic civil society and a civic culture, and to the extent that they seek to participate in the development process and in politics, the women's organizations are important in and of themselves. The opening up of political space and the diffusion of once centralized economic power and resources will allow for the articulation of more feminist demands, as well as women's perspectives on economic policy and planning. Those who study civil society and democratization in countries the Middle East and North Africa should no longer ignore the gender factor, and especially the significance of women's organizations.

Note

* Much of this article is based on chapters 8 and 9 of my book, *Women, Work, and Economic Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998). Full references are available there.