

Globalization and Feminism

The Rise of Women's Organizations in the Middle

by *Valentine M. Moghadam*

Cet article explore la montée et l'étendue des organisations féminines non-gouvernementales et des réseaux féministes

au Moyen-Orient et en Afrique du Nord.

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I wish to discuss one aspect of the globalization process, namely the rise and expansion of women's organizations in the Middle East and North Africa. But before I do that I need to link the expansion of Middle Eastern women's organizations to what may be called "global feminism"—itself an interesting and paradoxical outgrowth of globalization. Global feminism is predicated upon the notion that notwithstanding cultural, class, and ideological differences among the women of the world, there is a 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 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, and of course the participation of numerous women's organizations at the NGO Forum.

The internationalization of discourses of equality, empowerment, autonomy, democratization, participation, and human rights, has been

captured and indeed extended by women's organizations around the world. Moreover, global feminism is responding vigorously to the downside of globalization, including problems associated with structural adjustment, attacks on women's security, and the emergence of reactive political-cultural movements, including various forms of fundamentalism. The strategies and tactics of global feminism constitute a logical and indeed necessary response to globalization: transnational networking. Feminist networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Women in Development Europe (WIDE), the Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI), Women, Law, and Development International (WLDI), the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFE), the Asia-Pacific Research and Resource Organization for Women (ARROW), and many others combine local and national mobilizations with transnational and global partnerships in ways that could prove transformative in the future.

Women's NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa

There are four specific factors behind the rise of women's organizations and feminist networks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). I am referring to women's non-governmental organizations that are not part of governmental structures or auxiliaries of ruling parties—even though some of the discussion below could apply to government-sponsored women's groups in some countries.

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, including 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?

It should be noted that in recent years, the MENA region has seen the rise of many NGOs and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) dealing with development-related issues, provision of social services human rights, and women's concerns. The expansion of NGOs in the region 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. But there are also inter-

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nal or regional factors behind the rise of women's NGOs.

Demographic factors include the growth of an educated female population in urban areas and the entry of women into paid labour. 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" (see Moghadam 1993) more time for other public activities, and allowing them to make demands on governments for equality, autonomy, and empowerment.

Internationalization of discourses of equality has been extended by women's organizations around the world.

Economic factors, including the reduction of public spending in the areas of health, education, and social welfare, as well as state failures in areas such as female illiteracy, reproductive health, and legal reforms, have spurred NGOs into action and focused women's attentions on the links between development and status-of-women issues. Structural adjustment policies usually call for the introduction of "user fees" in education and health care, and this development along with rising prices due to liberalization, necessitates non-governmental public action. Structural adjustment policies (SAPs), which have been adopted by most MENA states, have contributed to unemployment, social inequalities, and added burdens on the poor. NGOs provide health, educational and social services, and are catering to the basic needs of local communities, thereby filling the gaps created by recent state economic policies.

Political factors include the attention given to women's issues and concerns by NGOs. In addition to channeling resources, NGOs contribute to the formation of a civil society, inasmuch as they convey the promises of development, human rights, and participation. The proliferation of NGOs in the MENA region, especially those focused on issues of human rights and women's advancement, also reflects two parallel political developments in the MENA region: the rise and spread of 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 (1975-85) and the Nairobi Conference (1985); the increasing recognition of the importance of a grassroots, participatory, and bottom-up approach to development through non-governmental organizations; 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). The spread of global feminism (exemplified in the transnational feminist networks mentioned above) has created a much needed space for the nurturing of women's organizations.

These four sets of factors have encouraged the rise and expansion of women's NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa. An analysis of the

many organizations that have emerged reveals that they have varying orientations and strategies and 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 centres and women's studies institutes are usually nationally-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 perhaps 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

Economic factors have focused women's attentions on the links between development and women's issues.

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 wom-

en's NGOs, this last type may in fact expand as economic liberalization and further capitalist development draw more women into the work force (Moghadam 1997).

Institutionalization, opportunities for growth, and constraints

In most MENA countries, NGOs, including the women's NGOs, receive funding from government sources and from international NGOs, UN bodies, or the Dutch, Canadian, Danish, German, Swedish, and American development agencies. In Egypt, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is one of the principal funding sources, funding many community development and family planning projects, as well as certain women's groups. United Nations agencies are increasingly establishing relations with NGOs in the MENA region. Until recently, cooperation between the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Arab countries was channeled through governmental machinery. Today, the UNDP cooperates directly with NGOs. Other UN agencies with strong ties to MENA women's NGOs, are UNICEF, UNESCO, UNFPA, and UNIFEM.

Some of these UN agencies supported efforts on the part of MENA women's NGOs to prepare for and attend the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, September 1995). 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 all 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 1994a). Arat also believes that the NGOs dealing with women's rights and human rights questions can be especially effective in promoting equality (Arat 1994b).

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. Women's NGOs are perennially plagued by funding constraints, and it is not clear that Arab sources will substitute for international ones. Where Arab funding is available, there is often a heavy-handedness that undermines the NGO's ability to act effectively, as in the case of CAWTAR described above. Discussions I have held with feminists in various MENA countries reveal the concern that many NGOs, including women's NGOs, are too donor-driven and lack a clear sense of their own objectives or *raison d'être*; that they are too dependent upon external funding and do not define their own priorities; that the most visible and prominent NGOs are not necessarily the ones with grassroots connections and activities; and that there are simply too many NGOs competing for funding and wasting resources. The women's organizations are not mass movements 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. Their constituency is limited and it is possible that in the case of some women's NGOs, their *raison d'être* is rather self-interested. Organizational and managerial problems also exist, and these include insufficient coordination and cooperation between NGOs, poor volunteer recruitment, and inadequate technical abilities, especially in the fields of documentation, information retrieval, and computerization.

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 per cent 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.

These constraints and limitations on the women's organizations in the Middle East and North Africa today are considerable, but they should not be perceived as sources of debilitation or delegitimation. That many women's NGOs are elite, professional, and middle-class bodies does not mean that they do not have a wider impact. In Middle Eastern societies, where the public sphere has historically been the province of men, where male-female gaps are still huge, where economic decision-making is entirely male, and where women's participation in formal political structures and in elections—whether as candidates or as voters—is still low and in some cases declining, the very existence of women's NGOs 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 women's perspectives on economic policy and planning. Certainly the changing political economy in the Middle East and North Africa challenges the women's NGOs to forge alliances and articulate the interests and needs of women workers in the evolving new economic order (Moghadam 1997).

Democratization and women's organizations

It is still early days in the women's movement in the MENA region, and

there is every indication that the organizations can work to reach consensus on the issues, clarify their priorities, improve management and organizational structures, and expand their social base and constituency. Although NGOs dealing with women's rights or women-in-development issues are still relatively few in number, their existence is especially significant in that they accord a recognized role for women in the development process and they represent changing state-society relations and definitions of citizenship. The latter is of particular importance and should be underscored: women's organizations are indispensable to the democratization of the region. They are not only a reflection of the emergence of civil society, but are themselves major contributors to it.

To conclude, the women's organizations are, in sociological terms, a function of both structure and agency: they are the inevitable outgrowth of larger socio-economic processes, and they are deliberate interventions in the political and economic process on the part of women activists. The very existence of the women's organizations in the Middle East and North Africa is a sign of global feminism's reach and of the contradictory effects of the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of globalization.

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