

Women's Organizations in the Arab World

By Laila Al-Hamad

In late 1996, a women's organization working in the shantytowns of Cairo unexpectedly discovered that approximately 10% of its target group, or 16,000 women, officially did not exist; these women held neither a birth certificate (BC) nor an identity card (ID). Consequently, they were deprived of many basic services, such as schooling and access to credit, as well as of the rights and duties of citizenship such as voting. They encountered serious problems in claiming their personal rights, such as the pension of a deceased spouse or assets bestowed through inheritance. Moreover, their needs were not taken into account in national policy planning and budgeting.

In the months following this discovery, and after ascertaining that this was not an isolated phenomenon but a common occurrence beyond the streets of Cairo, this organization embarked on a campaign to – or at least attempt to – redress this situation. This entailed identifying the roots of non-registration, unraveling the bureaucratic web of registration procedures, and training hundreds of civil society groups on how to assist women in obtaining their official documents. With assistance from an international donor, a campaign was launched to raise the issue at the national and policy levels. To date, approximately 55,000 Egyptian women in 6 governorates in and around Cairo have obtained identity cards and birth certificates, and roughly 300,000 more have been identified in those areas as needing such documents.¹

As illustrated in the above example, in a region where the formal political sphere has been confined to men – and even then only some – civil society has provided many Arab women with the space through which to confront and address their political, social and economic marginalization². From Morocco to Palestine, the emergence of organizations dedicated to women's empowerment has given voice to the needs that have gone unnoticed over the years, and the calls that have gone unheeded by government officials. Furthermore, while civil society is not necessarily a female arena, at least in the Arab world, it has embraced and catapulted women's activism and citizenship, nurtured their sense of leadership, and given them space and recognition for their contributions, whether for issues related to women or not. Ironically, campaigns calling for identity cards, equal rights to nationality, and the right to obtain a passport without male permission have all been launched by civil society and not parliament.

In fact, Arab parliaments are perceived by many as institutions that are weak, unresponsive, and resistant to change. Additionally, they are viewed by many Arab women as having not only failed to articulate their needs, but also excluded them. Women's participation in national parliaments in the Arab world, both in upper or lower houses, is the lowest worldwide. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the average female participation in Arab states stands at 4.6% compared to 12.7% in sub-Saharan Africa or 14.8% in Asia. In terms of world classification, Arab countries

trail at the bottom of the list with Tunisia in the lead in 61st place. In addition, several countries in the region either do not have parliaments or do not grant women suffrage. In terms of local government, only 14.2% of council members are women, the second lowest percentage worldwide. Even on those few occasions where women are voted into parliament, they do not always put forward women's issues. The issue of Egypt's nationality law is one case in point, where one of the female MPs argued against granting women the right to transfer their nationality to their offspring.³ Rare are the women not only in elected but also in decision-making posts, particularly in key ministries such as finance. In Egypt, for example, women held less than 6% of overall decision-making posts in 1986, and 7% of those in the Ministry of the Economy.⁴ Women are also absent from trade unions and with the exception of Lebanon, remain marginal in professional associations.

Though it varies from country to country, women's limited participation in formal politics in the Arab world can be attributed to several reasons, including socio-cultural obstacles, such as social divisions between men and women, prevailing cultural norms and traditions, and the dominant perception of politics as the preserve of men. Other reasons include women's negligible political experience and training, and the lack of awareness among the public, decision-makers of women's potential role, and the lack of media coverage of women's role as active citizens in the governance of their countries. Moreover, although women are an important electoral force, voter-registration and education campaigns seldom target them. This reality is compounded by the existence of election laws that contain measures which devalue women's participation. In Algeria for instance, the election law entitles male family members to vote on behalf of women.

Yet the realities that face Arab women today must somehow be addressed, particularly as the challenges they face continue to grow. Among these is the fact that increasingly more Arab women today play not only the role of caretaker, but also that of breadwinner. Indeed the number of women-headed households is on the increase in the whole region. This is a reality that is usually absent from censuses or surveys, and is neither reflected in laws nor attitudes, which recognize the man as the head of household. While statistics are rare, it is estimated that in a country like Egypt women-headed households account for 15-25%

of all households. The reasons behind this phenomenon include the high rate of male-migration, either internal (from the rural to the urban areas) or external (particularly Yemen, Morocco, and Egypt); wars and conflicts leading to male disability or death; high male unemployment; and divorce and abandonment. Female-headed households are also more likely to be poorer. In Algiers for instance, while overall household poverty was put at 5.9%, poverty among women-headed households was put at 13%.⁵

Moreover, as in other parts of the world, Arab women are among the first to be affected by economic changes and adjustment measures, which countries like Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and Morocco have undergone.⁶ Such measures can contribute to a decrease in the delivery of social services from the state, particularly in the areas of health, education, and social protection, and a drop in real income, which in turn affects consumption and living standards. This is exacerbated by already quite low human development indicators in many Arab countries. In Yemen, the infant mortality rate is 109 per 1000 for the poorest quintile. In Morocco and Algeria respectively, 64% and 43% of adult women 15 years of age and older are illiterate compared with 38% and 24% of adult men.⁷ These figures are alarming, particularly as studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between the level of education and poverty.⁸

While many working women are absorbed by the public sector, an important number of them, particularly poor ones, are found in the informal sector, working in jobs and for employers that provide limited benefits and legal safeguards, leaving women in very vulnerable and precarious conditions.⁹ As for the private sector, female entry is made difficult in many Arab countries. Among other things, this is due to the existence of labor laws, which stipulate certain provisions concerning hazardous and night work, travel, and maternity leave, among others that deter employers from hiring women and reduce their comparative advantage and competitiveness in the labor market.¹⁰ Legal discrimination is also prevalent in other areas affecting women, such as social security (benefits, allowances, pensions, and safety nets), inheritance, freedom of movement, equality before the law, marriage and nationality. Unfortunately, given the high rate of illiteracy among women, many if not most women are unaware or ignorant of the legal rights that they do possess.

*Women's
organizations cannot
be expected
to be the panacea
for resolving women's
issues in the
Arab world*

The Emergence of Women's Organizations¹¹

The emergence of women's organizations in the Arab world has been affected by each country's respective political experience and evolution. Egypt, for example, developed a women's movement earlier than many of the surrounding countries, partly due to its cosmopolitanism and its prominent position in the Arab world. The woman question in Egypt was debated as early as the late 19th century, and women's organizations were established in the early 1920's. In countries like Morocco and Algeria women's activism was born out of the anti-colonial struggle, and women's groups were created before or around the time of independence. Many of them, such as the women's section of Morocco's Istiqlal party, were appendices of political parties or, in the case of Algeria's Union Nationale des Femmes Algeriennes, official bodies created to promote women's emancipation. In Jordan, activism surrounding the woman question was very much tied to political activism and the Palestinian problem.

In general, the influence that these groups have been able to exert has very much depended on the political environment of each of these countries, which has wavered from periods of political opening to periods of restrictions on any civil society. Periods of political turmoil have to a large degree compromised the ability of women's groups to bring women's issues to center stage, as was the case during the anti-colonial struggle. Moreover, the association of women's organizations with political movements has in many cases been to the detriment of the women's movement, because they were undermined by party politics. This trend began to diminish in the 1980's when groups like the Moroccan Association Democratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), born out of the Parti Populaire Socialiste (PPS), broke away from political parties and towards independence. At the same time, however, women's issues continue to be used by both the state and conservative elements of society, who transform women into symbols of tradition and culture to counterbalance the turbulence caused by rapid modernization and change. Among other things, this is reflected in inheritance laws, social pressures to reproduce males, and the weight ascribed to women in preserving a family's honor.

The 1980's and 90's saw the proliferation of women's groups. This phenomenon surfaced partly as a result of the window of political opening experienced in

several Arab countries during that period. The third wave of democratization, the movement that started in Portugal in the mid-1970's and spread on to Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and the states of the Former Soviet Union, also affected – albeit to a lesser extent – some of the Arab countries. From Algeria's transition from a one party to a multi-party system to the freeing of political prisoners in Morocco, some Arab countries were beginning to feel the light breeze of liberalization. While tentative, this opening was taking place amidst important political transitions in the region – namely the re-unification of Yemen in 1990, the end of Lebanon's 15-year civil war, the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1993.

At the heart of this third wave was the reemergence of the paramount role ascribed to civil society in the deepening and consolidation of the democratization process.¹² Throughout the world, but particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America, civil society organizations were seen as heralding voices of change and democracy that were challenging the status quo.

While less numerous, many civil society groups saw more opportunity in a few Arab countries, namely Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and to a certain extent Algeria, Kuwait, and Yemen.

Prominent and at the vanguard of the movement for greater liberalization and change in the Arab world were many women activists. Underlying many of their efforts was the concept of women and citizenship. Some advocated for women's legal rights, as was the case of the Palestine-based Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC),¹³ a

coalition of women's NGOs and committees which organized the first ever protest against the PNA to contest a new regulation requiring women to obtain written consent from male guardians in order to get passports. Some, like the Morocco-based Espace Point de Depart (ESPOD), worked to enhance poor women's access to micro credit and promote women's entrepreneurship. Others, like the Cairo-based Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR), worked to politically empower women by launching voter registration campaigns. Still others, like the ADFM's Centre de Leadership Feminin, aimed to enhance women's decision-making skills and encourage them to run for political office.

With the goal of building alliances of support, networks were created to ensure greater interaction and exchange of experiences with other women from the region. The Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalite was established in 1993 by Tunisian, Moroccan, and Algerian women to create a joint platform of action in preparation for the 1995 Beijing Conference. The Tunisia-based Center for Arab Research and Training (CAWTAR) was created in 1993 to carry out research on issues affecting women in the Arab world that would help inform the policies and measures undertaken by policy and decision-makers. The Machrik/Maghreb Gender Linking Information Project (MACMAG GLIP) was recently created “as a forum for debate, learning, and exchange on women, gender, and development amongst interested groups in the Middle East and the Maghreb region.”¹⁴

These networking efforts have to a certain extent federated women's issues at the regional level. For example, the nationality law, which in most Arab countries does not grant a woman the right to pass on her nationality to her offspring, has now been raised by many women's groups at the regional level and is becoming the subject of numerous campaigns and conferences. Formal and informal inter-regional networks useful in disseminating the realities of Arab women and in speaking out in their favor, have also been established. These include Women Living Under Muslim Law as well as organizations of migrants from North Africa living in Europe.

The media and information technology have also played a role in vocalizing and lobbying for women's issues.¹⁵ In fact, the Internet has been tapped by many women's organizations as a vehicle of information gathering, dissemination, and outreach. Recently established out of Jordan, AMAN consists of a bilingual website that provides resources on violence against Arab women, and houses a wealth of women-related legal information. Some of this information is being downloaded by women's groups in Jordanian cities to carry out awareness-raising sessions on the issue of violence against women. A “women's” media has also flourished in many Arab countries to provide in print form many of the developments in the area of women's empowerment. Morocco's Femmes du Maroc and Citadines are two such examples. The “Women and Work” and “Women and Civil Society” series launched by the Casablanca-based Editions le Fennec have also helped spread women's issues through the news kiosks of Morocco.

From engaging in advocacy and lobbying activities with the aim of influencing laws and policies concerning women, to providing shelter to women victims of violence, these organizations are helping bring about

the social change which has often been stifled by the patriarchal system. By virtue of their awareness-raising and grassroots efforts, these organizations have been able to mainstream and break walls of silence surrounding such touchy issues as violence against women, prostitution, and AIDS. In this sense, they are contributing to the erosion of the sacred division between the private and public space. In Jordan, for instance, years of advocacy by women's organizations have helped raise the issue of honor crimes, creating a stirring debate within Jordanian society and leading to attempts to amend the penal code in favor of stricter punishment for such crimes. In Egypt, the 1994 UN Conference on Population set the stage for dozens of women's organizations to form a task force to combat Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a highly sensitive and contentious topic in that country, particularly with the conservatives.¹⁶

Though on a small scale, these efforts are also helping contribute to the development of Arab countries, be it in areas of maternal health, female education, or basic literacy. Appreciation for such efforts as contributing to development has also come about as a result of the evolution in international development practice from the “woman in development” paradigm, where women were seen as a target or beneficiary group, to the “gender in development” one, where gender concerns are integral to the overall development process. Underlying this shift is the broadening of the definition of poverty and development from one based on growth and income, to one that encompasses opportunity, empowerment, and security. This new approach rests on a more shared responsibility for development. Within countries, it entails ownership by the population and partnerships between government, civil society and the private sector. To this end, women's groups in the Arab world and elsewhere have been solicited in helping to contribute to donor cooperation strategies, which increasingly highlight gender priorities and recognize the spillover effects that these have on the country's overall development.

Several reasons have facilitated the emergence of Arab women's organizations. This is partly due to the rise in the number of educated Arab women, particularly university graduates who are increasingly aware of the obstacles that many of the laws and customs pose to their integration into the development process, including their entry into the labor market. It is also due to the fact that women's issues are more mainstream and have become much more a part of the development dialogue at the national and regional levels than in the past. Furthermore, women's groups are increasingly, though not entirely, more independent of political parties, and thus in turn more inclusive of diverse groups of women.

Women's participation in national parliaments in the Arab world, both in upper or lower house, is the lowest worldwide

The international arena has also accommodated the issue of women's empowerment. The UN decade for women in 1975-85, the 1995 Beijing conference, the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), among others, have been instrumental in putting forward a global enabling environment to tackle women's issues. The Beijing Women's conference was a watershed for women activists and particularly women's organizations that were given a voice to balance the traditional government rhetoric through the parallel platforms of action. Beijing also offered an opportunity for women's groups in some Arab countries to work, or coordinate to a certain extent, with their governments on preparatory activities.

The interest by international donors and civil society groups in gender issues also played a role in facilitating the mobilization of women's organizations. Both have found an immediate partner in Arab women's organizations, which are considered effective, innovative, and at the vanguard of civil society in most countries undergoing a certain level of political liberalization. Additionally, both international donors and civil society groups have been keen to work with women's groups given their work at the grassroots level, and their awareness and responsiveness to the needs of the poor and marginalized.

Constraints and Challenges

Many constraints and challenges confront women's organizations in the Arab world. At the head of this list is the political environment, which makes it possible for these groups to emerge and be effective only in times of political stability or openness. For example, the perseverance of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is one of the main problems confronting women's groups in Palestine. Until that issue is resolved, women's issues will not be given the necessary attention, and women's organizations will continue to be tested in terms of their loyalty to the national cause. The fledgling women's organizations which sprouted in Algeria in the early 1990's in the midst of a liberalization process have very much been shaken by, and fallen prey to the violence that has plagued the country following the cancellation of the 1991 elections. Because of their opposition to Islamic extremists, many women's organizations in Algeria have become associated with the state and are seen by many Algerians as having been co-opted by it.

The legal environment is another source of concern for many of these organizations. The emergence of civil

society groups is contingent on an enabling environment, which hinges on a permissive political atmosphere and non-intrusive or lenient association laws. While it differs from country to country, many Arab countries have association laws, which impose restrictions on civil society groups, varying from constraints on accepting foreign funding to raising political issues. With some important exceptions, civil society organizations, particularly women's groups, in the Arab world have been able to maneuver within this controlled environment but are often stifled by these restrictions as well as by the existence of official women's organizations that have greater access to resources.

Organized conservative elements of society also remain a challenge to women's organizations, particularly, as the latter are taking up some of the space that conservative groups have claimed all along in the delivery of services and the empowerment of the disenfranchised. These conservative forces accuse

women's groups of being westernized, elitists, and disconnected from the concerns of most of the female population. One such example arose in Morocco in 2000 on the occasion of women's day, when a counter-march was organized by conservative elements of society to protest the one organized by women's groups supportive of the country's new Gender Plan of action for the integration of women in the development process.

Many constraints exist within the women's movement itself. For instance, many women's groups suffer from a lack of coordination and resources, an overlap in activities and efforts, weak evaluation and institutional capacities, and insufficient outreach to women in the rural areas, among other things. Additionally, while these groups have gained expertise in a number of fields, they remain weak on tackling economic issues affecting women, including budgets and economic policies. Moreover, since most of these efforts are carried out on a volunteer basis, members of these organizations find themselves overstretched, juggling between work devoted to women's empowerment and hectic professional and family lives.

Although they have become much more mainstream than in the past, women's groups are still viewed with a certain degree of skepticism by many traditional Arab women, who are much more accustomed to the informal women's networks that have been their main source of influence. Many of these organizations have

also failed to nurture the new generation of Arab women, particularly to fill leadership positions. As a result, many young women remain uninvolved and disinterested in women's issues. In many cases, these groups have also been fragmented by their own differences, particularly when they are politically affiliated, and have been unsuccessful in reaching consensus amongst themselves. While improvements have been made in some countries, consensus building among male constituencies also remains an area of insufficient focus.

Conclusion

Despite their fragility and the tremendous challenges facing them, Arab women's organizations are helping to compensate for women's absence from the political sphere and guaranteeing their presence in the public sphere. Through their increasingly public presence,

their efforts at advocacy, awareness-raising, networking, and grassroots activism, these organizations are helping to mainstream women's issues, formalize vehicles for change, create transnational alliances, and contribute to a limited extent to their countries' overall development

At the same time, however, women's organizations cannot be expected to be the panacea for resolving women's issues in the Arab world. They must be seen as part of a process that must involve governments, institutions, and above all Arab citizens, male and female, who themselves must become aware and acknowledge the need for such change. Meanwhile, however, these organizations have forged for themselves a much-needed niche within Arab civil societies through which they are slowly but surely influencing the status quo.

END NOTES

1. For more information, see progress reports for "Access to Basic Services Through Registration" project, www.developmentmarketplace.org/report944.html.
2. This paper does not provide a discussion of civil society, its history, weaknesses and strengths, or legitimacy in the region. The paper assumes that a civil society, with all its weaknesses and constraints, currently exists in certain Arab countries, in some more prominently than in others. The countries in question consist of Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Palestine, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, and Algeria. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of civil society is that used by the World Bank and defined as "the space between family, market, state, it consists of non-profit organizations and special interest groups, either formal or informal, working to improve the lives of their constituencies. Civil society encompasses formal groups such as charitable organizations, human rights groups, trade unions, religious institutions, professional associations, friendship societies, development associations, community-based organizations, cultural and research centers, the media and political parties as well as informal associations."
3. See "Egyptian Mothers Fight for Foreign Offspring's Rights," in the New York Times, May 14, 2001, where MP Azza al-Kashef denounced changes to nationality law enabling women to give their children citizenship.
4. FAO fact sheet for Egypt.
5. Global Urban Indicators (reference year 1998), UN-Habitat.
6. See for example Heba El-Laithy's study on "The Gender Dimension of Poverty in Egypt," in which she purports that "the status of women is often more critically affected than men by any economic changes. Poor women are triply disadvantaged: as poor people, they live under the same harsh conditions as poor men; they suffer from culture and policy biases which undervalue their contribution to development; and as heads of households, they face the

- same problems as men while having the primary responsibility for the care of children, elderly and housework," page 2, Economic Research Forum, Egypt.
7. World Development Indicators 2002, the World Bank.
8. See Heba El-Laithy, "The Gender Dimension of Poverty."
9. The public sector itself is not free of gender discrimination. For example in Morocco, certain positions in the Ministries of the interior, defense and national security are not open to women.
10. Nadia Hijab's unpublished study for the World Bank on laws that prevent women's entry into the labor market in MENA.
11. By women's organizations, I am referring to women's groups that are interested in enhancing women's status, as opposed to organizations made up of women whose purpose is of a religious, charitable or cultural nature.
12. Some political theorists like Larry Diamond and Robert Putnam have put forward the idea that civil society is necessary for the consolidation of any democratic process and improving the quality of democracy.
13. The Committee was established in 1991 following the Oslo accords, and alongside other technical committees seeking to help the Palestinian negotiating team.
14. See www.macmag-glip.org
15. Nevertheless, access to IT remains extremely limited in the region. Statistics put forward by the IFC's Samia Melhem in her "Women and ICT" presentation show that there are 2.4m Internet users in MENA, 1.7m of which live in Israel. Moreover, women only make up 4% of those.
16. It is important to note that this taskforce benefited from the fact that the issue of FGM had been discussed at the conference despite much worry by the government, and had been raised at the international level by the international media. Still, for the first time, FGM was acknowledged and discussed publicly, in turn allowing it to be legally addressed.