The growth of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is a worldwide phenomenon and the Middle East is no exception. Many scholars view the proliferation of NGOs in the Middle East as evidence of a vibrant civil society, conflating their presence not only with the “democratizing” features of civil society, but also with social mobilization itself. Yet, the impact of the many NGOs on different social groups in the region has not been adequately evaluated.

Drawing on research in Palestine, this article explores the consequences of the increase in NGOs and the "NGO-ization"1 of Palestinian social movements. I suggest that the rights-based agenda of women’s NGOs has negatively impacted the mobilizing potential of grassroots women’s organizations, resulting in projects and policies that are not reflective of the broad demands and needs of Palestinian women.

PALESTINIAN NGOs: A BRIEF HISTORY

Before the 1993 Oslo Accord and the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, Palestinian society was organized around political parties and grassroots organizations. Palestinian NGOs connected and financially supported these groups under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). While the PLO and its political parties were banned by Israel, their satellite organizations were, to some extent, allowed to operate, since they were seen as providers of services such as clinics, schools, and income-generating projects. Therefore, from the end of the first Intifada2 in 1987 until the 1993 Oslo Accord, the NGO sector was used as the main channel of foreign aid, resulting in services provided at a grassroots level. These NGO actors acquired even more power than their parent parties. The limited life cycle of NGO projects also fragmented the same social movements that the projects were based on, rather than creating “sustainable networking.”

After the 1991 Madrid Conference, which enacted a state-building process, the role of NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza shifted from popular movements and grassroots organizations toward further NGO-ization of areas such as conflict resolution. The dual dynamics of state-building and NGO-ization also led to more fragmentation and the demobilization of social movements, including the Palestinian women’s movement. As a process, NGO-ization therefore shifted power relations, from women in grassroots positions toward a new elite.

THE CREATION OF A NEW PALESTINIAN “CIVIL SOCIETY”

The new NGOs that grew exponentially in the post-Oslo period are distinct from the older forms. Categorized as either charitable societies or popular organizations (uttar jamaheryya), these older forms had entirely different structures, discourses, leaders, projects, and networks. Accessible to all, they aimed to mobilize students, workers, women, and youth. The newer NGOs are...
smaller entities, dependent on foreign funding, active only in cities, and run by an urban middle-class elite.

The decline of popular grassroots organizations began in 1993, due to the decline of institutional politics, meaning politics practiced through institutions such as unions and political parties. During the state-building process, the gender agenda became a pawn between those searching for a new basis of legitimacy after the split of their party, those who wanted to build a new constituency, and those who wanted to forge a new space in the public by claiming the state for citizens’ and women’s rights. Hamas had not yet formulated a coherent gender vision, but by concentrating their aims on discrediting any group that might change the shari’a—or Islamic jurisprudence—they launched an orchestrated campaign to de-legitimize all women’s organizations. Meanwhile, the new NGOs triggered conflicts with the old organizations over legitimacy, resources, and public space.

The move toward adopting the gender agenda as a national agenda was not based on continuing linkages with Palestinian constituencies or national activism. Rather, it was enabled by international NGOs and other international players, who handpicked their Palestinian counterparts to speak on behalf of the national interest. Later, after the second Intifada from 2000-2005, the national agenda was hijacked by international NGOs, foreign states, and donors, and concentrated on peace building, conflict resolution, and related issues.

In conjunction with NGO-ization, the period between 1988 and 1994 witnessed a proliferation of feminist women’s organizations. Women’s activists wanted specialists (motakhassissin) on boards or in NGO administrations to push their work forward, introduce different interests, and provide an alternate vision. The growing number of women’s organizations therefore propagated a new discourse on the status of women in Palestinian society, but only within the context of a steady decline in women’s mobilization efforts. The dichotomy between “professional” and “political” was one of the factors that undermined the kinds of initiatives found previously among women’s organizations in Palestine. Professionalization refers to the preference for modern communication mediums, English, and technical writing. The phenomenon produces upward rather than downward accountability and exclusion rather than inclusion, and “scaling up” brings bureaucratization. As Friedman (1992) notes, “power tends to drift upward, [and] professionalisation (which is almost always dis-empowering) takes over.” This form of professionalization replaced activist women in grassroots organizations.

Simultaneously, there was an increased demand by international women’s and human rights organizations to include Palestinian women’s voices in their activities. This led to what Palestinians call the “militant with a suitcase” (monadel bel hakiba). If the first Intifada witnessed the removal of many women’s leaders from the popular organizations in favor of the international community (through participation in activities and conferences), the second Intifada witnessed a shift to NGO leaders representing the voice of Palestinian civil society. Analyzing this shift, Tabar and Hanafi (2002) refer to what they call the emergence of a Palestinian “globalized elite,” tied more to global actors (i.e., international NGOs) than local constituencies. They were informed by a global agenda, urban and professional, and supported the peace process. The “globalized elite” overturned the old elite (charitable societies and women’s grassroots organizations) through competition over resources, vying to safeguard the continuity of their organizations.
Grassroots women’s rights activists were heavily involved in the Palestinian national movement from the outset. They sought to mobilize public opinion in support of their national right to independence and self-determination. This effort was taken on by the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), mainly outside the occupied territories. As the Palestinian struggle moved toward the occupied areas, women’s movements in these areas were better equipped to express the hardships of living under the Israeli occupation forces.

From the 1990s onward, however, NGO-ization started to affect the formulation of the national agenda. In order to gain legitimacy distinct from that of the grassroots women’s movement leaders, the new activists (NGO leaders) made excessive use of their links with international donors, frequently citing their meetings with important state representatives and news agencies or the international prizes they were awarded for efforts in the “peace process” and women’s advancement. From the perspective of grassroots leaders, this language was not convincing and was instead met with derision. As one of the grassroots leaders told me: “When we organize demonstrations, they stop their cars in front of the demonstrations, get their banners out, and stand in the first row to be photographed. They can sell this to the outside, but nobody buys this internally.”

This behavior stemmed from the transformation of this social cause into a project with a plan, a timetable, and a limited budget. It created a “magic bullet syndrome,” in which NGO staff members believed they needed to demonstrate success by “owning” a project in order to maintain funding. This also created a tendency to gloss over mistakes and present projects as unqualified success stories. These dynamics are seen most visibly through projects associated with “peace” in the region.

The beginning of the “peace process”—visualized in the handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn in 1993—was accompanied by an abundance of internationally funded projects. Written in highly technical English, the project plans marginalized local grassroots organizers who often speak minimal English. The projects usually involved Palestinian women’s activists meeting Israelis at conferences in Europe or the U.S. to dismantle supposed psychological barriers between Palestinians and Israelis, push women into decision-making positions, and enhance female-centered negotiations. In most cases, the international actors choose their local NGO representatives.

International conferences were held on issues including the plight of Palestinian refugees, the status of Jerusalem, forms of resistance, and the formation of a future state, but often without consultation from any Palestinian civilians. Palestinian NGO activists are not backed by any legitimate political actors in the PA or in civil society, as they do not belong to one constituency or political party. Instead, feminist credentials and professionalism are the main criteria to participate in these forums. Some of the NGO elites lack training as activist leaders, which limits their legitimacy among politicized Palestinians constituencies. Further, the prevalence of these projects is usually linked to the power of the donor community to influence local NGO agendas and therefore does not necessarily reflect a well-orchestrated or representative policy. Lastly, the involvement of many NGO elites in the “peace process,” aside from the goal of obtaining funding, may be incentivized by their desire to acquire more power and legitimacy. In other words, “peace process” activism may serve as a means for an NGO elite to reach a decision-making position, whether in the PA or in the leadership of Palestinian women’s movements and other social movements.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the above analysis, I argue that professionalization, as part of an NGO-ization process, has not led to more participation for an NGO’s target group, which is grassroots mobilizers. “Project logic,” which is integral to the NGO-ization process, entails a less participatory approach in dealing with issues of public concern. It also entails an exclusive focus on the successful aspects of the project, minimizing its pitfalls and lacunae, which leaves the door open for mistakes to repeat themselves.

Professionalism and project logic also provided a new power base for NGO elites that determine the choice of which women’s issues should be brought to public attention. These phenomena push NGOs toward vertical participation and can lead to a further concentration of power in the hands of administrators. The concentration of power can impede the growth of social movements that are better able to articulate the demands and daily needs of Palestinian women. In the changing Palestinian landscape, as noted above, professionalism and project logic have empowered NGO elites to determine which women’s issues should be brought to public attention. Yet these elites may be out of touch with the broad constituency that makes up Palestinian civil society. This lack of legitimacy and connection risks weakening calls for more equitable gender relations and may even empower more conservative actors in civil society, such as Islamist groups.

Analysis of the “Donor-NGOs” in Palestine shows the extent to which NGO representatives can use funds earmarked for peace to further their own agendas, through events such as meetings, workshops, conferences, and rallies. The NGOs’ global ties created the NGO-ization of the national agenda in Palestine, transforming it from a struggle to realize self-determination and sovereign statehood into projects for donor funding, in which donors play a vital role in choosing their local representatives.

The rise of the term “NGO” as a development buzzword results in the tendency to mistake any and all of the organizations who adopt this language as progressive and democratic. In the case of Palestine, the discourse of NGOs was used to forge a space in the public arena at the expense of existing grassroots organizations. It spoke less to the overall social, economic, and political context than to the desires of the donors and elites who propelled the organizations’ rapid growth. Against this background, Palestinian women’s NGOs might have, however inadvertently, disempowered, delegitimized, and fragmented secular actors and their movements. The Palestinian case is a vivid reminder of the need to look beyond NGOs and their agenda in order to view the reality on the ground.

ENDNOTES

1. NGO-ization refers to the process through which collective social issues are transformed into projects by NGOs, without taking due consideration of the economic, social, and political factors affecting the issues.

2. The first Intifada was a popular peaceful uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem that began in December 1987 and ended in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

3. Hamas is the Islamic Resistance Movement that started to play a major role in the Palestinian politics since its launching in December 1987 after which it became a strong rival to the leading Palestinian movement of Fateh.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE SERIES

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