

# PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

## *Global Cooption and Local Contradiction*

EILEEN KUTTAB

Institute of Women's Studies, Birzeit University, Palestine



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### ABSTRACT

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This article is a critical reflection on gender politics in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza over the last 30 years. It traces the increasing professionalization of the women's movement from the 1970s through the Oslo year to the contemporary period. The article explores the problematic impact of both professionalization and internationalization on the possibilities of Palestinian women's and social movements for change.

*Key Words* ◇ women's movement ◇ NGO ◇ Palestine

### *Introduction*

For the last two decades, it has become more difficult or even unrealistic to detach the global setting from the political, economic and social conditions of the Middle East in general and the occupied Palestinian Territories in particular. The recent changes and challenges that face the Middle East can only be viewed in the context of globalization, or what some call the Empire. It is evident that the multifaceted link between global, regional and local contexts is deeply complex as it not only impacts the economy, but also all other dimensions of people's livelihoods. As Petras states, the concept of Empire is 'the process that encapsulates the world of multinationals, the global military apparatus and international financial institutions linked structurally to the "imperial state"' (Petras, 1993). Given the political and economic changes over the past decades, one can safely say that the Empire's hegemony over regional or local contexts cannot happen in a vacuum or without the support of internal local or national tools, as has been observed

in different areas of the Middle East. Petras explains that ‘the link between the “global” or imperial power and its control of national economies, natural and financial resources, markets and treasuries is through the ascendancy of national political-economic configurations of power’. Without a national ‘link’, the imperial powers cannot expand or ‘globalize’ the world. Unable to do so, they choose to intervene directly, that is, to shift the balance militarily in the national class struggle via invasions, coups and colonization (Petras, 2001). The cases of Iraq, Lebanon and Occupied Palestinian territories can exemplify the inhuman hegemonic power that operates where the military apparatus and global economic structures become a tool for domination and control of resources, similar to the traditional occupations of the past century.

At the same time, Hardt and Negri emphasize the hegemonic nature of the Empire, but characterize it as borderless and eternal, which gives the impression that it is permanent, and suggests that coping is necessary and resistance is meaningless. Hardt and Negri describe the Empire as:

. . . fundamentally lacking boundaries, where its rule has no limits and where it posits a regime that effectively encompasses the spatial totality, or really that rules over the entire ‘civilized’ world. According to them, no territorial boundaries limit its reign, and it presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity. From the perspective of Empire, this is the way things will always be and the way they were always meant to be. In other words, Empire presents its rule not as a transitory moment in the movement of history, but as a regime with no temporal boundaries and in this sense outside of history or at the end of history. It operates on all registers of the social order extending down to the depths of the social world. Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits. (Hardt and Negri, 2001)

It is difficult to ignore the effects of such a political paradigm, which, based on its military supremacy and economic power, creates a culture of submission and fear that national and local regimes cannot compete with or challenge. Hence these regimes choose to cooperate and be coopted as the only way to cope with and share the economic benefits of Empire.

However, on another level, such a hegemonic position can create a kind of challenge that prompts the oppressed and activists to realize the national necessity of developing new modes of coping and resistance. The kind of resistance that has developed—if any—is not the subject of this article, but it would be an inspiring refutation of Empire’s seeming eternity.

### *Non-Military Tools: Peace Initiatives and Aid*

Adopting this definition and analysis of the Empire, this section will apply this political paradigm to Palestinian political, economic and social reality, reflecting upon the new conditions that emerged at the beginning of the 1990s

when peace negotiations started between Israelis and Palestinians, allowing the domination of neoliberal paradigms over local and regional political and economic frameworks. These shifts were manifested through the Israeli colonial occupation's use of 'peace' initiatives or negotiations as a tool for subjugation. They were also prompted by multinational corporations, which regulate the future economies of the Middle East and particularly the Palestinian Territories, as evidenced when the World Bank conducted their first overall study on Palestinian economy, education, private sector and more in order to develop a finance plan for the 'peace' initiative. This in itself initiated the process of structurally linking global markets with local markets in an uneven, incompatible and exploitive relationship.

Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, these global political and economic schemes cannot sustain themselves or succeed without the help and support of the internal forces of the national regimes, and/or the local elite being an integral part of, or an extension of, the new liberal ideological frameworks. Similar to its Arab counterpart, the Palestinian local elite represents the interests of small groups of nationals who have employed political space to develop personal agendas and portfolios that do not in any way include or reflect people's aspirations, or work toward the achievement of people's democratic and national rights. These conditions were created in the early 1990s, after the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles of 1993,<sup>1</sup> or the Oslo Agreement, an 'Israelization of the global model' which became the framework for all political and economic negotiations and practices. Only after a few years of translating these agreements into practice have they become exposed for what they are, and their consequences felt. These practices became more tangible when further restrictions were placed on the mobility of people and goods, and the Palestinian Territories were again invaded by the Israeli army, which in turn impacted the economic life of citizens, increased the levels of unemployment and poverty, and deepened the fragmentation of people and regions, in addition to exposing the Palestinian Authority for its inability to enact any sovereignty or control over the territories.

### *A New Style of Dependency and Hegemony*

Currently, the different partners<sup>2</sup> in this new 'Empire' have come together to effect democratic reform and economic prosperity in the Middle East, choosing wars and devastation as their main mechanisms for change. These physical wars have not only invaded the economies, markets and territories or lands in this region, but have also raided and assaulted homes, families, schools, national libraries and museums, destroying civilization, heritage, culture, memory and hope. The wars in Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon illustrate a real expression of this Empire and its hegemony in the region, where a

'New Middle East'<sup>3</sup> is being reshaped. It is a Middle East that is subjugated through space oppression, humiliation and alienation, with the support and coverage of the national political regimes. A region where the global economies substitute genuine local development, where resistance against colonial occupation is delegitimized and where state terrorism becomes justifiable and praised by the international community as a legitimate tool for security and democracy.

The Empire has promised these nations that it will end poverty, unemployment, famine and gender inequality, through economic and political reform and structural adjustment policies, empowering women and the poor, and enhancing human and sustainable development. But they have failed to do so as their promises have not been genuine. Their real agendas rest on further deprivation, dependency and added control over resources. The neoliberals have not invaded the Middle East to bring democracy but to cause chaos, destruction, fragmentation, cantonization and despair. They have limited the capacity of social democratic movements to challenge their model, they have subverted and diffused their efforts, creating and cushioning the NGOs to substitute and promote a community with a human face (Petras, 1993), transforming class politics into community development, depoliticizing active sectors of the population and undermining commitment to public good through the creation of technocrats and the cooptation of potential leaders. They have developed programmes that provide limited services to narrow groups of communities, programmes that have become accountable to overseas donors instead of to their own people. They have transformed internal solidarity and unity through collaboration and subordination into the macro-economy of neoliberalism through exploitation of local human and material resources.

It is difficult to detach the current situation in the Palestinian Territories from all of these merging issues, as well as the global and regional scene. This collapse has accelerated due to different internal factors, including the political vacuum created by the weakening of the democratic parties and mass-based organizations after Oslo. It is also due to partisan politics and the short-sighted and dogmatic culture which existed in both the weak 'left' political parties and the fragmented and self-centred 'right' parties that mobilized people to establish popular hegemony within deteriorating economic conditions and poverty. All of these have generated a new style of organization that has drifted from the genuine development of a women's agenda, a goal that has become harder to attain within the new context.

### *Transformation of Palestinian Women's Organizations*

The Palestinian women's movement in general and women's organizations in particular have evolved within the different historical stages of the national

struggle to express people's aspirations and respond to national needs. Since the beginning of the last century, Palestinian women's activism has been influenced by its relation to and identification with the national resistance struggle. For the purpose of this article, I will focus briefly on the 1970s and 1980s in order to put the current changes in perspective.

Characterizing the contemporary women's movement, one can talk about two distinct periods. The first was a pre-Oslo period of revolutionary style in the 1970s and 1980s that featured a genuine democratic movement, emerging in its decentralized structures, to respond to the needs of the national struggle and to promote women's consciousness around national and women's issues.

In the mid-1970s, the Palestinian national leadership initiated a process of democratization of the national movement in order to mobilize and organize people of different social categories including the youth, women, workers and peasants, to face the Israeli occupation policies. They believed that resistance should take a new form—decentralized, mass-based structures that enabled the national movement to challenge the series of economic and political measures implemented by the Israeli occupation that sought to destroy the cultural and socioeconomic infrastructure of the Palestinian society (Kuttab, 1996a). It is in this context that the 'new' women's movement, represented by women's decentralized outreach committees rather than urban women's societies, was created and a new platform was put forward.

Social movements, and particularly the women's movement, accumulated this democratic culture and perpetuated their national and social function because they sustained a responsive agenda and programme, and maintained their relevance through a decentralized framework of women's activism which supported and mobilized grass-roots organizations and acted as a legitimate representative to Palestinian women in general (Jad, 2000; Kuttab, 1993; Taraki, 1991). The buildup of such democratic activism prepared the grounds for a democratic *Intifada* that has been characterized as one of the major popular uprisings in the recent Palestinian history.

### *The First Intifada, Uprising 1987*

After a decade of mobilization and democratization through its continuous work with women in villages and refugee camps, the women's movement provided the backbone of the resistance in 1987 during the first *Intifada*, when, together with other mass-based organizations, they acted as the local authority and offered their support to sustain the community's steadfastness in crisis.

A new platform was formed that combined different dimensions, most importantly the national, social, cultural and economic, including women's issues. They adopted a comprehensive development paradigm that not only

addressed national issues, but also all other issues of the community. Although gender discourse had not yet been adopted, the committees focused on women's rights and defined them specifically as the right to struggle, to work, to be educated and to be represented equally in political decision-making. These rights have been and are still legitimate rights that remain part of the women's agenda today. Yet, the content of these rights, their definitions and their meanings, differed from how they are defined today due to the changing political context and the hampering of the donor community and international organizations, which have replaced the original discourse with a more modern liberal discourse targeting individual women rather than the collective. The women's committees played a major role in the first *Intifada*. They raised political consciousness of women through mobilization, organization, and participation in the struggle. They have boycotted Israeli products in an effort to enhance national identity. They have created an alternative space for popular education to replace regular schools, which were closed by the occupation forces for long periods of time during the *Intifada*. They have provided community services in order to sustain the *Intifada* and support the role of women in public life. All of these activities were crucial for the continuity of the *Intifada* and the empowerment of women (Kuttab, 1996a).

#### *Post-Oslo, 1991– 2000*

On one hand, the signing of the Oslo agreement created a political environment of euphoria and optimism among the Palestinians and a new mode of thinking that assumed liberation and independence. Yet, on the other hand, it caused a deep split within the national movement which had been unified against the occupation. This new mindset, in which people felt less pressured by the daily presence of the occupiers, created more space to focus on internal affairs. In this context, the women's movement was also urged to look strategically at women's issues and to overlook the national issues. Consequently, the mass-based organizations became confused and their roles weakened, resulting in their gradual erosion. The erosion of these organizations during the transitional period left an elite leadership that was not accountable to any constituency, but which sought legitimacy from 'the people' through its symbolic and historic role as guardian and representative of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, the fragile left opposition parties have not been able to maintain their activity and viability, incapacitated by their own internal conflicts and structural weaknesses, the absence of internal democracy and the growing hegemony of the Palestinian Authority. Only the Islamist opposition has succeeded in maintaining a popular base

(Johnson and Kuttab, 2001) through the last elections of 2003, which resulted in the victory of Hamas.

The nascent 'state' has thus transformed the terrain of politics and resistance, diminishing the avenues of popular participation and particularly women's participation, as informal grass-roots network resistance collapsed and was replaced by formal politics, while the 'inside leadership' of the West Bank and Gaza was marginalized by 'outside' leadership from Tunis. This produced a duality between strong formal political activity versus weak informal activity as a first step in alienating the civil society and limiting the participation of women (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001). This has resulted in a monopoly on public space at the hands of the Authority and particularly of its security forces, despite the occasional emergence of 'counter-publics' (Marshall, 1994: 144) where political and social issues were contested.

Consequently, a more fragmented, liberal feminist movement has been led to compromise on national issues, coopting neoliberal paradigms, using global frameworks as reference to formulate their own agendas, and losing their organic structural ties with the national movement and the grass roots. In so doing, the movement has lost its original national and class identity, internal homogeneity and genuine dynamism. In other words, it has become a movement that is keener to reproduce an alienating international agenda rather than a responsive relevant local agenda.

### *Alaqa Intifada, from 2000 onward*

In every stage of the struggle, women and the women's movement have faced new challenges, some directly related to the national conflict and the prolonged occupation, others a result of the patriarchal authority and culture of both the national movement and the Palestinian society. As the second *Intifada* was of a more militant nature and women did not play an important role in it, the women's movement has lost its connection with the grass roots as a result of the closure policy enforced by the occupation, which limited their mobility. The women's movement has also lost grass-roots connections because of its agenda, which was irrelevant in the dire conditions that emerged as a result of the *Intifada*. We have witnessed separation between the regions (Gaza and the West Bank) and in forms of commitment to national issues. The government was inserted between the majority of the population and the occupation, and a corrupt system that is accountable to itself and not to the population at large has become the rule (Hammami and Kuttab, 1999). There is now a gap between women's leadership and the grass roots.

All this new political terrain has presented the women's movement and other social movements with difficult dilemmas for the development of a strategy that addressed both gender issues in the emerging state, linked to the very real conditions of Israeli colonial oppression, and women's real needs for independence. These demanded a post-independence strategy dominated by initiatives for legal reform, anti-discrimination policy in government regulations and practices, democracy workshops, policy initiatives on domestic violence and the integration of women into ministries (Johnson and Kuttab, 2001).

### *New Challenges for the Social Movements*

Hence what distinguishes the current situation is the existence of a conflict from within, caused by the patriarchal hegemony of the right in its different forms (including the Islamic and mainstream Fateh Party), fostering misrepresentation of people—and especially women—in the decision-making process, and limiting access to space and equal (gender) opportunity in the labour market. However, the most serious internal challenge of all those which have faced the women's movement over the past fifteen years has been the movement's transformation from a grass-roots struggle to an elite movement (Kuttab, 2006), and the mushrooming of women-oriented NGOs that undermined the work of mass-based women's organizations. One factor that impacted popular choice during the 2003 legislative council election was the widening gap between the Palestinian authority and the people on one hand, and the social movements and their grass-roots base on the other. The outcome of the Palestinian elections and the victory of the Islamic movement Hamas is one indicator of this gap which has caused deeper divisions and additional challenges to the Palestinian national movement, and the women's movement.

The victory of Hamas in the 2003 elections indicated popular will to continue the struggle and harden the ceiling for diplomatic negotiations, in addition to popular assumptions that Hamas was able to reform itself and prevent further corruption. Because Hamas needed to maintain its legitimacy and popular support, especially during the first period of their rule, it did not seriously reform its positions or meddle in social issues like the veiling of women, or the prohibition of certain social practices. However, if Hamas had continued their rule, this might have changed. Furthermore, the recent division between Fateh and Hamas, as well as the geopolitical split between Gaza and West Bank, has also deeply divided the people and further impacted the women's movement itself. As the political programmes have become fragmented and conflictual, it is difficult to mend relations with the different political factions.



*Professionalization of Women Activism*

The emerging phenomenon of feminist NGOs during the early 1990s played a prominent and highly controversial role in sustaining feminist organizations as a women's movement. These NGOs have come to denote particular kinds of groups with orientations and practices distinct from those of the historic women's groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Growing numbers of specialized and professional feminist NGOs have dedicated themselves to intervening in national and international policy processes.

The expansion of women's NGOs and their advocacy of women's rights has become a dominant trend in the evolution of the Arab as well as Palestinian women's movements. Such an increase indicated the failure of Arab regimes to promote women's rights (Jad, 2006), and the failure of civil society to sustain its activity and protect its achievements, due to the inability of both regimes and civil society organizations to strike a balance between national and gender rights even though they promoted equality and social justice as two principles and slogans within the ideological framework of the national programme (Sabbagh, 1996). In addition, although the Palestinian Authority supported women's rights to a certain extent, it did not in any way overrule the conditions of Islamic *sharia* laws. This compromise undermined the Women's Bill of Rights of 1993, which declared gender equality to be one of its main principles. Thus these organizations emerged in a context of absent democracy and indifference within the national movement regarding gender issues, as well as regarding the political process and peace agreements that had created a suitable political environment.

During the early 1990s, as women's NGOs grew and proliferated, they started to play a prominent role in transforming the local women's agenda. Growing numbers of specialized and professional feminist NGOs dedicated themselves to intervening in national and international policy processes. It is now obvious that the movement's leadership sought to use this opportunity to impact new national policies through specialized and professional work. Consequently, they became more noticeable on the national map because they received funds from bilateral and multilateral agencies. They adopted a new agenda, more oriented to policy and advocacy, which provided expertise to international and national organizations for the preparation of official documents and assessment reports.

This structural transformation of women's activism further detached women's issues from broader national issues, depoliticizing women's rights (Hammami and Kuttab, 1996). This was rationalized through an argument for the decrease of control by political factions over women's agendas. This shift undermined the role, credibility and legitimacy of the women's movement, through the erosion of mass movements and the weakening of

mass mobilization in favour of formal political power and peace brokering. The emergence of political polarization within the women's movement, which separated the public and private domains due to the depoliticization of gender, isolated the public (i.e. 'national and political') from the private ('gender'), which effectively depoliticized women's activism. Even now, these challenges have not been resolved, and they continue to deepen the structural imbalance between women's rights (vis-à-vis women's practical and strategic needs) and the requirements for the national liberation struggle.

### *Global versus Local Agendas*

In discussing how the professionalization of women's activism has impacted the Palestinian women's movement and the relation between global and local agendas and specifically women's agendas, I argue that there is a mechanical relation between the global arena and local NGO agendas which explains the transformation taking place in women's organizations in developing countries as well as in the Palestinian Territories.

Following a review of the programmes and themes of women's NGOs in other countries in South America, South Africa and the Arab region, I realized that a large degree of similarity exists between them and the Palestinian women's agenda in spite of the differences between their social and political conditions and those unique to colonial rule in Palestine. My hypothesis is that United Nations organizations like UNDP, UNIFEM and their set of women's programmes, in addition to UN resolutions and international conferences (like the Beijing conference in 1995), established agendas that were set to become unified or consistent globally and locally. I argue that there is a trickle-down approach with a dialectic relationship existing between the neoliberal paradigms headed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and international institutions like UN organizations and donor organizations which have unified and generalized programmes at all levels, either through international conferences and workshops, or through their financial philosophy and conditions. Although some of the women's NGOs were created to respond to society's local needs, the competition over funding and the necessity of sustaining the organization have imposed on these organizations a new agenda. This agenda integrated them into the global processes that promoted gender planning frameworks to suit the global culture, and led them to participate in the preparation of international and regional reports and documents of future strategies. In addition, it is worth noting that the World Bank has officially adopted policies that promote NGOs as a replacement for state services targeting poor and marginalized groups in order to deepen democracy (Ewig, 1999). This policy was adopted in the

1980s in developing countries and in the 1990s in Palestine, thus encouraging further the expansion of NGOs, especially within the limited capacity and weak performance of the Palestinian Authority. In this way, the conditions were suitable for promotion of new style of organization run by paid professionals, offering services and advocacy as opposed to membership-based organizations or grass-roots community or neighbourhood committees.

Furthermore, donor institutions' support and implementation of the international conferences' 'Plan of Action' has worked to promote similar agendas consistent with the global gender agendas that were generalized across different countries. From the Nairobi conference of 1975 to the Beijing conference of 1995, these actions have gradually but mechanically formed the feminist agenda and discourse of the developing regions. The donor community's dissemination of this generalizing agenda through funding and international conferences has impacted local organizations with no sensitivity or relevance to the particular local contexts in most instances.

Yet, with all that has been said, it is evident that, while international conferences in the 1970s were more sensitive to local contexts and more politicized around issues like Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the refugee situation, the Beijing platform has bypassed regional and local issues and dealt with more comprehensive and global ones (Young, 1994). 'Women's rights as human rights' became the slogan of UN organizations, where a consensus platform has been created that sticks only to the lowest common denominator in that it does not relate to any local context and, in this case, the needs of Palestinian women under colonial occupation. Although the Beijing Platform of Action is a positive affirmation of women's human rights in many areas because it demands economic and political empowerment, women's rights have been framed throughout the Platform as indivisible, universal and inalienable human rights (Bunch and Fried, 1996). The term 'universal' has promoted major debate, especially in the Arab context, as debate centred on the use of religion and culture to limit women's human rights. Religious ideologues have attempted to limit the extent of the universal application of women's human rights, but they used the debate to indict these rights as a feminist imperialism that disrespects religion and culture (*ibid.*, 1996). In the UN conferences of recent years, the international debate concerning women's rights has concentrated on their cultural relativism at the hands of authoritarian states and religious fundamentalists. While several UN conferences have nearly collapsed as a result, the international women's rights movement has had to grapple with the question of whether human rights are culturally definable, and therefore able to be restricted, or whether they have a general validity. This question has opened a broad field of action between universal levelling and cultural relativism (Wichterich, 2002).

Such an argument can have a negative impact on Arab women's movements in general and Palestinian ones in particular because the concept of the universal can also refer to the imperial or the international, and therefore be rejected by the people at large as a defence mechanism for cultural protection. Here, I am inclined to say that, although universal rights can provide a powerful framework for action, their irrelevance to the authentic culture can cause enough justification to be rejected. On another note, it is highly important that local NGOs choose their own discourse and concepts according to their cultural relevance, and that they be able to establish an alternative discourse that is authentic, supplanting existing patriarchal, traditional discourses of women's rights while maintaining local legitimacy and viability.

The conclusion that local NGOs have become global appendages has critical implications for the future fate of the Palestinian women's movement as it suggests two positions. The first is that Palestinian women's agendas do not reflect women's strategic needs; rather, they are more in agreement with the requirements of the global agenda. Second, this global agenda is a depoliticized agenda that decouples the women's program from the overall national programme, thus marginalizing strategic issues like refugees, prisoners, settlements, borders, unemployment, poverty and so on, which might constitute a responsive agenda that includes both gender and national issues. Current agendas within the women's movement are relatively removed from the practical situations which delegitimize women's organizations, isolate them from the public and promote an elite class of intellectuals and technocrats that accommodate and coopt the global agenda.

Although it is difficult to generalize this conclusion with regard to all the women's organizations, I refer here to the NGOs that are specialized, professional women's organizations, including some other women's committees whose identities are situated between quasi-professional and quasi-grass-roots. These organizations have become more powerful than the others due to their funding capacity and international backing, while the few that continue an independent agenda that does not yield to the international organizations are left powerless, and their impact is weak.

### *The Cultural and Political: Global Office*

Another realization that has affected the work of social movements and the women's movement, detaching it from its historical political culture, is the co-opting of qualified political and women's cadres from the social movements by women's NGOs, leaving political factions, social movements and public institutions deprived of qualified and experienced cadres. Although these cadres were young middle-aged women, they have left their original institutions without transferring their expertise to younger generations, while they

themselves have been transformed into technocrats who are accountable to donors and global agendas instead of the people and local agendas. Furthermore, these cadres who have left political parties and movements have also shifted and changed their style of living, work and expertise, relinquishing their historical appreciation for resistance, steadfastness and tolerance, developing instead new norms and values, new styles of dress, new skills specially tailored for writing proposals, reports, documents for workshops, international conferences or assessment reports. These skills are not only produced in a random and expedient way that cannot capture the reality of women's situations; they also promote a set format that does not permit any creativity or reflection, which in turn results in the loss of local heritage and expressions of reality. In addition, as most of these organizations focus on projects rather than programmes, cadres lose their strategic vision, their analytical abilities and become technical instruments for the international and donor community.

It is worth noting that certain skills that were useful, necessary and historically relevant for grass-roots work like organization and mobilization (Jad, 2006) have lost their functional value, while technical skills directly linked to the new style's emphasis on presentation and formats (or 'form' and not 'content') have been promoted. All these skills have become important traits for competition among the elite, and at the same time, they have enlarged the gap between the elite women's leadership and the grass roots, further isolating these elite women from the masses.

In addition, through professional work, women's NGOs have divided and fragmented the women's sector into different professional groups according to the agenda of the organizations and the nature of the services they make available. Providing partial and scattered services compartmentalizes women's struggle and experience, limiting their ability to see the big picture. Exaggerated professionalization prevents a comprehensive understanding of women's issues, separating practical and strategic gender needs from one another. The unification and mobilization of women against the occupation and patriarchy in general can become a powerful means to transform society and exert drastic changes in women's conditions. The partitioning of the issues they confront weakens women and their efforts to achieve unity and attain more rights.

### *New Areas of Mobilization: The New Agenda*

The people, not the donors, constitute the only source for legitimacy and accountability for the women's movement as well as for other social movements. These organizations are faced with a sceptical public who, at this stage, are questioning their transparency, maturity, seriousness and degree

of responsibility. This scepticism has created considerable tension between the minority of women's groups labelled as traditional activists (i.e. the old leadership), who maintained their national identity and agenda but were unable to keep their constituency due to their limited capacity and lack of funds, and a new elite leadership with no base or representative power, which survives by accommodating and coopting the global and international programmes. This elite group has more power to represent women's issues and rights in a new liberal context that emphasizes individual and human rights as women's rights, but in a narrow and depoliticized manner.

A close look at the categories of funded women's projects in the Palestinian Territories shows that most of them deal with women's issues that are not organically connected to the general national struggle. For example, most programmes use core concepts like 'equity' (gaining and protecting women's rights) and 'empowerment' in a framework of reform and not transformation, 'violence against women' and 'domestic violence' (terms detached from general forms of political violence) and 'poverty alleviation', which does not tackle the root causes of poverty which the occupation has created and the Authority policies have maintained. These issues have become the major themes that have guided all the different programmes of the women's groups. These activities have focused mainly on advocacy, awareness-building campaigns using mechanisms such as workshops, training courses, or legal reform and legal education. They also focus on mainstreaming gender; training women candidates for elections; promoting income-generating projects that have stretched women's hours of work within the household but not integrated them into the formal labour market, and programmes targeting women subjected to domestic violence, either through the creation of hotlines or advocacy and (more recently) the creation of shelters. One such project is women's micro-financing, where small loans are granted for poor women to promote some additional income for the family. The World Bank and other UN organizations have started to promote these kinds of schemes to alleviate poverty, but not to eliminate it, as poverty is structural and cannot be solved without the ending of the occupation. These loans were given to women without any kind of training, and the conditions were very harsh, with interest rates sometimes exceeding those of the banks. These projects ended in failure, as women were not empowered but burdened with new worries, and their products could not have been competitive in the local markets, which placed an additional burden on women. The problem with these projects, as Abdo (1995) discusses, is with the application of the projects within the WID paradigm. This paradigm is based on liberal feminism, conceives women as the sole agents of their destiny and considers gender as an individual rather than a relational concept (Abdo, 1995: 40). Another example lies in advocacy programmes, based on advocating women's rights using workshops but

limiting women's rights in the context of political participation and economic participation following the WID approach. None of these programmes have addressed access to resources like inheritance, land ownership or housing as aspects of women's rights. They have only adopted the Beijing platform of action, which focused mainly on poverty alleviation, political participation and legal reform. One wonders how the women's movement can acquire legitimacy when the agenda excludes issues surrounding unemployment, refugees, prisoners, martyrs' families, children traumatized by the reinvasions of their villages and camps.

All of the existing programmes have targeted the individual woman and not the collective of women's groups who have played a historical role in democratic transformation here and elsewhere. In addition, the class dimension has never been incorporated into the analysis. Women were addressed as a class and not as members of different social classes. Of course, one does not want to undermine the value of these programmes, especially since there is evidence of concrete achievements mentioned in the different local and international reports on women being empowered through all these programmes and projects. But the crucial question that remains unanswered is: how can these activities change the situation of the majority of women and bring about significant developments in their daily lives, or solve their urgent problems?

Looking at the situation of women in general, we find that their conditions have deteriorated, especially in the aftermath of the second *Intifada*, and their pressing problems like poverty due to unemployment, or imprisonment, or death of their family breadwinners have not been resolved. Their participation in the labour market remains minimal, their words on the political process go unnoticed and their equal rights at different levels have not been achieved. In my view, this is due to two factors: first, the occupation and its destructive economic, political and social consequences; and second, the transformation of social movements including women's movements into specialized organizations that cater to the global agendas which do not prioritize the concerns of the majority of ordinary women.

### *Rethinking Women's Movement: Concluding Remarks*

Currently, Palestinian society continues to suffer not only from a colonial occupation, but also from a fragmented political system, an erosion of civil life, a profound disintegration of social networks and increased class polarization.

Indeed, the growing demand and competition between NGOs—and especially women's NGOs—over funding to sustain their continuity deepens their dependency relation upon the donor community and imposes a global

agenda that conforms with the funding agenda of the donor community. In addition, the task of fulfilling the requirements of the donor organizations in terms of conditions, deadlines (which are not realistic) and set issues prohibits organizations from finding the space and time to rethink or readjust their agendas to include some of the priorities of the masses, which are issues that don't find any funding. Moreover, due to the political vacuum within which these organizations operate, and due to the weakness of the political parties, there is no pressure exerted upon them to re-evaluate their work, or to make structural adjustments. Finally, due to the structural and cultural changes that occur as women's organizations adapt to the new model of global organization and its new style of work, it is very difficult to return to the genuine culture of women's experiences in the mobilization and organization of masses.

It is worth noting that, while most of the women's organizations have integrated empowerment as a theme in their programmes, it is important to remind them that women's empowerment may only be achieved in a context of sovereignty and freedom, where human rights and the rule of law are observed within a sovereign state and not under colonial occupation. This means that as long as Palestinian society remains under a colonial occupation which targets the land and the people, violates the human rights of men and women, and deprives the people of self-determination and the right to build a state, it will be impossible to talk about real empowerment of women. However, the community and women's efforts in the political struggle which feed into continuous resistance, steadfastness and coping should provide the new framework with which to measure Palestinian women's empowerment. When national liberation is linked to social liberation, it will undoubtedly contribute to the empowerment process.

As Palestinian women are involved in a national struggle for liberation and self-determination, they are also engaged in a democratic struggle against patriarchy and undemocratic governance, and practices that prohibit the realization of social justice and gender equality. Moreover, it is difficult to separate individual and structural equality because both can play a role in the empowerment of women and the democratization of the system of governance, which can ensure gender equality. A balance between structural and individual equality is necessary to ensure democratic transformation. In this respect, empowerment would also include individual self-determination, where individual rights meet with collective women's rights to result in a democratic system that can treat all women and men equally.

Furthermore, it should be noted that empowerment can never be reached when patriarchy is still the ideological and practical framework in which gender relations are defined, allowing women's subordination and exploitation to prevail at both private and public levels. Thus a women's movement that can



confront the system through an organized programme and mobilize women against patriarchy is a precondition to the self-liberation of women.

In this context, the empowerment of women must be translated into political power that is geared to produce effective changes in gendered power relations, rather than struggling within their current limitations and frameworks. Empowerment must not be confined to the empowerment of the individual; rather, it must make individual aspirations compatible with and integral to collective aspirations.

Effecting real changes capable of transforming gendered power relations in society requires the combinations of efforts within a frame of social movements which would, on one hand, put pressure on national policies and, on the other, invite men to play an effective role in the empowerment process. Such an approach would not only activate men and avoid isolating women. It would also transform the issue of women's empowerment from a 'women-specific' concern to a gender-specific concern.

### *The Way Out*

Until the women's movement and other social movements are awake to take the banner again and to safeguard their democratic achievements, we will not have the democratic Palestine that we have all dreamed of and lived for. This period is a challenge to all democratic forces and social movements. As it stands, the women's movement will help prepare conditions for an even deeper setback, or circumstances that may be irreversible. The movement must build some kind of public opinion that perceives pluralism and individual liberties as advantageous in democratic states; it must focus on creating a decentralized structure that can integrate women at the grass-roots level (similar to the outreach policies of the 1980s, but perhaps more developed); and it must encourage women to reclaim their role as the backbone of the popular *Intifada* in order to create truly democratic organizations that represent people's needs. Serving and regaining people's confidence, maintaining their interest, and fulfilling their needs are the real assets that lend legitimacy and credibility.

Finally, if women's organizations frame the local agenda as critical but continue to speak of equality and empowerment in the abstract and in isolation from national liberation issues, these organizations will ultimately remain removed from the masses and their needs. To make women's issues society's issues, the women's movement and women's organizations should go back to their original agenda of balancing the national and the social in a workable formula that can bridge the gap between the requirements and needs of the elite and the masses.

## NOTES

1. Signed by the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, this peace agreement committed both parties to a series of actions and interim measures including partial Israeli territorial withdrawal and limited Palestinian self-government.
2. Neoliberal regimes, multinational corporations and national regimes have all come together to form a coalition to confront people's will.
3. The concept of the 'New Middle East' has been used by Condoleezza Rice to describe the American plan for the region.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

EILEEN KUTTAB is assistant professor of Sociology and director of Institute of Women's Studies, Birzeit University. Address: PO Box 19, Birzeit, Palestine. [email: [ekuttab@birzeit.edu](mailto:ekuttab@birzeit.edu)]