

Women in Egyptian Civil Society:

A Critical Review

By **Amani Kandil**

An understanding of women's participation in civil society in Egypt is important in light of several developing trends. Egypt is currently witnessing some movement in the direction of democratic transformation. Since women constitute half of the population, it is essential to understand the extent of their participation in the organizations of civil society. This is especially true since indicators on women's political participation in Egypt over the last two decades (both as voters and candidates) indicate a decrease in female candidates and voters. In fact the rates for women's turnout at the poll is now half that of men. At the same time, there is a noticeable increase in the official public discourse placing more importance on the participation of women in public life. This was manifested in recent years in the speeches of the President of the Republic, the First Lady who heads the National Council of women as well as the speeches of ministers and parliamentarians. To this end there has been established a National Women Council (presidential decree 90/2000) which is bestowed with 11 broad areas of concern and expertise. These aim at improving the situation of Egyptian women and strengthening their political, social and economic participation. The Egyptian government has been keen in the past few years, on improving the situation of women and their socio-economic conditions. It has also striven at creating a complementary relationship between the efforts of civil society organizations and public institutions so as to reach gender equality. In this paper, I will identify and explore the ways in which women are interacting with the emerging civil society organizations.

Defining the Framework of Civil Society is a "group of free voluntary organizations which occupy the public space between the household and the state so as to achieve the interests of its constituency whilst complying with values and criteria reflecting respect, consensus, forgiveness, and good management of difference and diversity." Civil society has been given various definitions in the Arabic and Western literature. All these definitions share the following principles:

- The voluntary or free nature of the action: This differentiates civil society organizations from kinship groupings such as the family, clan or tribe where individuals do not freely choose their memberships or affiliations, which comes by virtue of birth or inheritance.
- Civil society is an organized community: As such, it is different from society at large. Civil society is created through organizations and associations which work according to a set of logical rules where individuals willingly choose to adhere as members, while respecting and accepting sets of agreed rules and regulations.
- Ethical and behavioral component: This entails the acceptance of difference and diversity and the right of individuals to have within civil society, organizations that defend their material and moral interests. Individuals commit themselves to managing conflict within their organization and between them and the state through peaceful means, while adhering to values of mutual respect, forgiveness, collaboration, and peaceful competition.

The three above mentioned principles, especially the third, represent the essence of democracy. Indeed, it is impossible to build a sound civil society without the existence of a peaceful mechanism for managing conflict, competition and tension according to rules, which are agreed to by all parties involved. It is also impossible to build a civil society without acknowledging the basic human rights especially the freedom of belief, the freedom of opinion and expression and the freedom to organize. As such, building a developed civil society is concomitant with the development of a civil culture, which respects and upholds the core principles of democracy as described above.

The overwhelming majority of literature agree that tribes and households are not included in the definition of civil society organizations. However, a number of American studies focused again on the tribe and the household in an attempt to revive values whilst reiterating the important role of the family. In addition, the role of the profit-seeking private sector is excluded because it would tend to prioritize its motivation for gain over general public interest. Although there was an overall agreement over the role of political parties as important actors and elements in civil society, there was no agreement over the inclusion of ruling political parties in the definition of civil society. This is because ruling political parties are often keen on retaining power, a matter that may override the interest of civil society. A similar debate was also carried out in relation to the "free press." Whereas many tended to include it in the definition of civil society, some argued that the definition of "free" remains too subjective. In addition, the "free" press is often an essential support to the culture of civil society. (footnote)

The components of civil society that are of concern in this study are: non-governmental organizations (NGOs); grassroots organizations; political parties; professional organizations and business people associations and trade unions. Before proceeding with this study, it is essential to point out the following observations: First, civil society is not a neutral concept. Indeed, certain civil society organizations adhere to different values than those described earlier. Some develop racist objectives against certain religious groups or civilizations as we had witnessed following the events of September 11th and as revealed in the Durban conference of racism (August 2001). Secondly, there are strong and healthy civil societies where social

interactions are built on respect for others, respect for diversity as well as on transparency. Thirdly, the development of civil society requires an essential societal base and a body of values and traditions based on acceptance and respect for others and on diversity which is reflected in a culture, and an enabling environment which provides the legal framework accepted by all parties.

What are the characteristics of the civil society to which we aspire? A number of characteristics can be related to the "essential model" of the civil society we aspire to, namely:

1. A civil society, which includes a group of associations that play an effective role in the process of social, political and cultural change. The further they develop, the more their role as change agents develops along with their ability to respond to their social environment.
2. A civil society, which is based on voluntarism and initiative within a participatory framework.
3. The ability to be aware of and critical of the societal construct and the sources of political, economic, and social strengths and weaknesses.
4. The adoption of advocacy in support of excluded or vulnerable groups advocating for civil rights, or cultural, social, and economic rights.
5. A civil society we aspire to is one that upholds the issue of empowerment.
6. Such civil society strives to strengthen its role in disseminating pilot models of democratic practices as well as transparency and accountability.
7. A civil society which institutions transcend ideological, political and cultural differences, accept diversity and difference, and adopt dialogue as a way of resolving conflict.

The question we raise within this context is whether the presence of women and the effectiveness of their role within civil society may be used as a criterion to evaluate civil society and may therefore be included amongst the principles and criteria listed above. I believe that it is essential to take into consideration the gender perspective in civil society organizations particularly in developing countries, which are witnessing democratic transformation processes. This subject is almost absent from the agenda of researches concerned with civil society that has focused for years on women's political participation as voters and candidates in parliamentary elections. This is but one aspect of women's overall political participation.

*Women's
membership in
executive boards
is an important
indicator of
women's presence
in decision-making
positions*

It is also essential to focus on women in decision making positions in civil society organizations as their presence on a board of trustees and administrative boards represents another indicator to evaluate the presence and role of women in civil society organizations.

In what follows, we will present an analysis of the condition of Egyptian women in civil society organizations from the point of view of membership as well as involvement in leadership and decision-making.

NGOs first started in Egypt in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (1831). The last fifteen years of the nineteenth century witnessed a renaissance in "women's consciousness" which was reflected in a number of feminine literary works, journals and cultural salons. By the end of the nineteenth century, charitable women's NGOs were set up. These were women NGOs that flourished outside the capital in the provinces (Alexandria, Tanta, Fayoum, etc). During the first quarter of the twentieth century, the developments within the NGOs sector affected the position of women in women oriented NGOs as the increase in the number of women NGOs were being newly formed. These were mostly involved in charitable work and the care of mothers and their children. Some focused on civil rights issues (such as the New Woman Association) as well as the traditional women issues related to education, employment, health and the personal status code, culminating in the formation of the Egyptian Women's Union on 16 March 1923.

The development of women NGOs during the first half of the twentieth century was concomitant with the overall national struggle, women's struggle in particular and the demands put forward by women for the improvement of their status and conditions. The fifties and the sixties witnessed a noticeable drawback in the size and effectiveness of NGOs in general and women NGOs, in particular. During the one party rule and the predominance of socialism, the agenda of women organizations was integrated into that of the state overall. As a result, voluntarism decreased and apathy increased.

During the seventies, and despite the advent of a pluralistic political system and the politics of economic glasnost, the situation of women in NGOs in general and women NGOs in particular did not record any significant development whether qualitatively or quanti-

tatively (in terms of the areas of activities). The 1980's and the 1990's have witnessed an increase in the public space for freedom and freedom of speech, which allows civil society organizations, including women organizations, to develop and prosper. We point here to some documented data and statistics, which indicate that by the end of the 1970's, the total number of NGOs reached 8,402 and has increased to 16,000 in the nineties.

In addition, there is a general recognition on the part of the state of the important role played by civil society organizations, and thus considering them the state's partners in social and economic development. This was reflected in President Mubarak's discourse as well as the official discourse of ministers and high-ranking government officials. This was also evident in the government's five-year plans particularly in the nineties where NGOs were designated as partners of the state in the implementation of many major programs in the fields of social care and women.

Further, it is evident that the motivating and supporting role played by the First Lady in Egypt within the NGOs sector has given real support for the new political discourse that emphasizes the importance of participation and voluntary work as well as the role that can be played by women.

It is certain that the supporters of the politics of economic glasnost and the commitment of the state to economic reforms, has constituted another new change factor and has pushed many NGOs, whether novel or those that maintain traditional activities, to adopt projects and goals aiming at ensuring employment and training opportunities as well as small loans

for marginal groups particularly poor women.

Political discourse and enabling environmental and economic policies have all concurred to support the role of NGOs and highlight the importance of investing in human resources and emphasizing the role of the state. Global changes have also provided support for such trends particularly in the nineties where NGOs global forums (within the framework of UN international conferences) have played an important role particularly the ICPD, which was held in 1994, and the UN IV conference on women, which was held in Beijing in 1996. Prior international conferences have participated in highlighting the third (NGO) partner along with the state and the private sector. These conferences emphasized the developmental role that

*Women have
been involved in
politics and
political work
since the dawn
of the twentieth
century*

civil society organizations can play as well as the importance of voluntarism. In addition, these conferences contributed to the drafting of the “agenda of concerns” of the world communities with women at the heart of this agenda. Such conferences were also critical in deepening the awareness of NGOs in relation to the importance and value of their role within the process of social transformation.

Increasing Role of Women in NGOs

Before analyzing the development of the role of women in NGOs during the eighties and the nineties, it is important to make the following observations:

1. There are no comprehensive statistics on NGOs in Egypt. As such, there are no official records (for the reports of the central bureau of statistics or the ministry of social affairs), which describe the level of membership in NGOs during a certain chronological period so as to analyze trends or the sex profile of membership. Therefore we must resort to partial indicators for a study.

2. There is no classification for the distribution of women amongst the areas of activities of the ministry of social affairs. In fact, there are 17 different areas of activities such as social affairs, childhood, health, etc. but no distinction for women activities. As such, this study will rely on research estimates by the author.

What is the weight of women NGOs within the overall NGOs sector? There are two ways to identify women NGOs. First, we can use the identity of the NGOs as determined by its name, which clearly denotes that it is a women’s NGO. Second, we can consider the central objective of an NGO and whether it relates to promoting the role of women in the development process.

Statistics indicate that there were 119 women NGOs according to the statistics of the year 1990. This number almost doubled by the year 2000 particularly after the UN Fourth Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). This was partly due to international and national changes and to supporting women in setting up their own organizations. By the end of the nineties, these organizations had spread to most Egyptian provinces. This stands in stark contrast to the eighties when some provinces, such as the border provinces, were almost devoid of women NGOs.

The focus on women NGOs should not overshadow the important role that developmental NGOs play, par-

ticularly those which prioritize the development of women and their integration into the development process amongst their chief objective. The author conducted a study in 1998, which covered a wide sample of development NGOs. The study showed that approximately 26% of the sampled NGOs herald women’s issues as chief amongst their concerns.

What is the nature of women oriented NGOs? Most of these organizations have a closed membership. In other words, the board of trustees and the membership are constituted of women only. However, 10% of these organizations have a mixed (male and female) membership particularly in the capital and the main urban centers.

Although this study focuses on NGOs, which are primarily concerned with women, it is important to highlight the situations where women are at the level of decision making within the overall NGOs sector. According to the data of the central bureau of statistics

for the year 1997 and field studies undertaken by the author, it appears that the membership of women in the general assemblies of NGOs varies between 22% and 26%.

However, these results do not show the discrepancies caused by the organization’s activities or geographical areas of operations. As such, female membership tends to increase for NGOs concerned with the environment (60% of members are women) and for those concerned with maternal and child care (55% of members are women). The rate of female membership in other areas of activities tends to diminish.

Women’s membership in executive boards is an important indicator of women’s presence in decision-making positions which is only 18.8%. However, this rate tends to increase in the case of disability NGOs and those concerned with mother and child welfare where the rate increases to about 50%. Here too, the geographical spread of NGOs is an important factor in increasing or decreasing the representation of women in decision-making positions as it is related to cultural and social variables. Indeed, in certain provinces of tribal nature, women’s representation decreases greatly.

As a result of the social, economic and political changes that have taken place during the past two decades, a set of new activities have emerged challenging traditional ones which are still on-going. Most prominent activities of NGOs concerned with women

*The law
granted women
their full
political rights
in 1956 ...
reality shows a
poor practice
of these
legal rights*

were in the realm of charitable work and social welfare services. The new activities focused on political and social issues namely political and legal awareness in order to promote women's participation in public and political life (voting and candidacy). This awareness was linked to activities related to issuing of voters cards or birth certificates for women in rural Egypt. Some of the newer activities also involved training women candidates to run for local and municipal councils.

New initiatives related to NGOs concerned with women involved economic activities where NGOs train women in crafts and skills and prepare them to face the job market as well assist them in securing loans for small projects. The above also includes cultural and educational activities in the fields of literacy and education.

In the health sector, there was a transformation of thinking in reproductive health and family planning. Within this framework, much importance was placed on working with young women, which in itself constitutes a positive change.

In summary, the last two decades have generated tens of new NGOs specialized in women's issues in addition to a newfound interest in women's issues on the part of existing NGOs. The conclusions we draw from women in NGOs during the past two decades shows that there has been both qualitative and quantitative developments. The founding of the National Women Council in the year 2000 has undoubtedly given impetus to the NGOs concerned with women's issues as it made these an essential partner in the execution of national development projects aiming at improving the conditions of women.

Women in Political Parties

An historical overview of women in political work reveals that women have been involved in politics and political work since the dawn of the twentieth century through channels which are parallel to political parties rather than within these parties. This represents a global trend in the women's political movement and not only in Egypt.

The second observation relates to the fact that the state had a critical role in directing women toward political involvement. This is possible through the legal frame-

work and through the official political discourse as well as the states political organizations.

The third observation relates to the fact that society through its norms and traditions, sometimes provided an enabling environment for women's political activity. However, the cultural and social environment was also a barrier to women's political activism particularly with the rise of the Salafi Islamist political movements.

As for the position of women's issues within the agendas of political parties, women are often absent. Within some political parties (Watani, Wafd, Taggamo, Naserite), there is some mention of the conditions of women and the desire to strengthen women's roles; however, these lack any real emphasis or focus.

With regard to the makeup of hierarchical structures of political parties (i.e. the political bureau), it is safe to say that most political parties suffer from weak relations with the grassroots, whether

male or female. However, the matter is more problematic at the level of women's membership. Despite the lack of gender desegregated statistics on the overall membership of political parties (particularly in relation to the four political parties mentioned above), indicators point out to a limited women membership.

Women appear to be quasi-absent from the executive boards of professional syndicates

This trend is very much reflected in the presence of women in parliament. In 1957, women's representation in the first legislative council was 0.57%. This ratio gradually increased in 1979 with the issuance of a new law (number 21/1979), which allocated 30 seats for women. As such, the ratio varied between 7.8 to 8.9%. Later on the quota system was abolished within the framework

of the system that adopted political lists. The presence of women in parliament dropped to 3.9 in 1990 and decreased to less than 2% upon the adoption of the lists system whereby women become totally dependent on the willingness of political parties to include them on their lists.

Political parties do not tend to include women on their electoral lists. For instance, during the elections of 2000, the Watani party presented the candidacy of 11 women out of a list of 444 candidates. The Wafd party presented seven women out of 272 candidates. As for the Taggamo's party, which has its own

women's union, it presented 3 women candidates only. Local councils showed similar trends. The law 43/1979 had stipulated a 10-20% quota for women. As such, political parties presented the candidacy of 5-10% women in the local elections of 1983 whereas the phasing out of the quota system led to a drop reaching 1.52% in 1988 and 1.3% in 1992 to 1997.

The reasons put forward for the poor presentation of women by political parties are varied. Meetings between political party leaders and the media point out to the poor chances of electing women and the limited number of women cadres within political parties and the fact that the fierce nature of election is not suitable for women. All of these reasons reflect the crisis of Egyptian women within political parties.

Within the framework of our discussion of the position of women in political parties, it is important to note that the general secretariat of most political parties includes a limited number of women, but their political bureaus are almost void of women. Very few parties have a special secretariat for women (such as the Watan party) and very few have women committees. When these women committees do exist, most of them are within small political parties and work as charity organizations.

Some of these women committees (particularly the four parties mentioned above) are striving for women to have an effective political role and are thus seeking to create a general platform that supports the participation of women, the inclusion of women on electoral rosters and the preparation of women political cadres. Despite these efforts, there is still a gap between Egyptian political parties and the public - especially concerning women. The law granted women their full political rights in 1956 within an equality framework; however, reality shows a poor practice of these legal rights. Despite the fact that women have 38% of the total electoral votes, women fail to use this as a pressure to choose the best women cadres, those who would adopt women's issues. Other reasons pertain to the poor political participation of women as a result of the traditions and customs of society, the control of men over electoral voting (men tend to use women's voices for the benefit of local sensitivities in rural areas), as well as the traditional view of women's roles as mothers, wives and housewives who have nothing to do with politics.

*The predominance
of traditions
and cultures do
not value the
participation
of women in
public life*

Women in Workers' Unions

There are no accurate statistics on the size of women membership in the workers' unions; however, it is important to monitor the membership of the organization of the workers' unions. The unions have a pyramidal structure. The base of the pyramid is composed of the union committees. The middle of the pyramid is composed of the general unions and the summit consists of the general federations of the workers' unions of Egypt.

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of elected women in the workers organizations at various levels. This is due to a higher degree of workers' awareness in general and to the activities of the secretariat for working women and working children within the general federation of workers' union of Egypt.

In the 1996-2001 mandates, women's representation in the unions increased to 800 women in leadership position up from the 1987-1991 period when the number of elected female women union members was 118. The 1996-2001 period also witnessed advances for women in unions reflected by the following indicators:

- Increasing representation of women in general unions by 150%
- Integration of new women members by 60%
- 40% increase of young members.

The presence of a secretariat for women headed by a female union member and its involvement in training and capacity building activities for women members and the support it provides for women candidates has played an important role. Statistics indicate that 1,000 union women benefited during the past five years from skills development programs. Nine-hundred union women benefited from cultural and educational programs on laws, standards and ways of work. In addition, a huge number of union women were trained on conflict resolution and group negotiations, all of which contribute to the development of women cadres within the union. In addition, much attention was given to training women workers in starting their own projects and in starting development projects for investing pension funds in case of early retirement (when public sector companies are sold and privatized). More than 150 women benefited from such training.

Despite this progress for women in unions, a strategic review of the secretariat for working women (2001-

2006) shows no relation between women gaining positions vis a vis the new labor law. This is a contentious issue for all parties concerned as the labor law appears to erode some of the rights of working women particularly in relation to maternity leave and childcare. In addition, the labor law strategy is void of any clear directives related to the impact of economic restructuring on marginalizing women.

The interesting point here is the status of working women in the workers' organizations. Indeed, despite the increase in the number of unionized working women particularly at the level of union committees, very few have climbed the higher echelons of general unions. In the nineties, only four women reached leadership positions. This is hardly significant in representing the interests and demands of women in 23 workers' unions.

Women in Professional Syndicates (associations)

There are thirty-four professional syndicates (or professional groupings) in Egypt. For some, membership is compulsory for one to be able to practice in a given profession. This is the case of the teachers' syndicate that is the largest union (around a quarter of a million member) the press syndicate (600,000 members) the doctors' syndicate (250,000 members) as well as engineers and pharmacists. Though membership may be compulsory for many syndicates, it cannot be used as an indicator in relation to our discussion of the role of women in civil society. It is important to note within this context the increased number of educated women and their involvement in important professional activities. This, however, does not reflect an increase in women in leadership positions within professional syndicates. In other words, the membership of women in some syndicates reaches 43.1% (the teachers' syndicate for instance); however, this does not materialize at the level of women's presence in leadership positions.

A review of the presence of women in leadership positions within the executive boards of professional syndicates shows an important gap, which deserves to be analyzed. With the exception of three syndicates where women have been present in decision-making positions (the social workers' syndicates, the press syndicates and the bar association) women appear to be quasi-absent from the executive boards of professional syndicates.

In analyzing the formation of the management board of the press syndicate since 1995, we notice that during the consecutive electoral rounds, only eight women won, the first being Amina Said. The same can be said about the social workers' syndicate and to a lesser extent about the bar association. As for the doctors' syndicate, which is the most effective and active syndicate concerned with public issues, only one woman

doctor won in the elections of the executive board in the mid nineties when the Islamists list won in full. While interviewing a leading Islamist on the executive board about the reasons for the absence of women, the board member replied that "membership of the executive board is not appropriate for women's nature."

This is important in understanding the reason for the weak presence of women within the most important civil society organizations in Egypt, namely professional syndicates that include 3.5 million members of whom women constitute some 53%. The overwhelming presence of the Islamists movements within the professional syndicates (doctors, engineers, lawyers, scientists) in the nineties may partially explain the absence of women from decision-making positions within these syndicates. For instance, in the elections of the bar association which was formed in 1911, only a few number of women won (no more than 3).

This can be attributed to the fact that women are reluctant to participate in the elections of the management boards of professional syndicates particularly at the national level (given that there are partial regional branches for the syndicates). Since such responsibilities need full time commitment in most cases, they create additional burden on women in addition to the fierce nature of electoral battles and the predominance in the nineties of conservative political forces on management boards of some professional syndicates.

Women in Business Groups

Within the framework of the economic policies in Egypt in the mid seventies, which included opening up the markets followed by economic restructuring and privatization in the late eighties, a number of business groupings were formed. The first of such groupings was the Egyptian American council set up in 1975 followed by the Egyptian businessmen association in 1978 and the Egyptian American Chamber of Commerce in 1973. Following that, many business groupings were formed in the new cities and Mohafazat (governorates) reaching a total of 18 businessmen associations.

In the end of the nineties, a new trend started with the support of the USAID in order to start the business-women associations. Five such associations were formed early in 2002.

The first associations of "businessmen" included some prominent businesswomen even in their early inception years. The representation of women within these formations has always been high either at the level of membership or involvement in leadership positions (membership in elected management boards, membership of committees, etc...)

In business women associations, membership is limited to women and as such, it is difficult to evaluate them from a gender perspective. However, it is evident that these associations are quite active as more women NGOs are being registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs. More so, they are involved in small micro credits as well as in small industries related to the business sector. As such, its membership is mixed, including doctors and engineers as well as public and private sector employees. Businessmen associations (which also include business women) for their part, tend to limit their membership to business people. This lack of selective membership is a main weakness of businesswomen associations.

Women in Human Rights Organizations

In the eighties, only one human rights NGO was registered. Presently in 2002, there are twenty-two organizations. Some of these NGOs are concerned with political and civil rights. Others are concerned with economic and social rights, while others work for the rights of a specific group such as workers or peasants.

The important aspect is that the common denomination amongst these organizations is their focus on advocacy. In a study conducted by the author on human rights and other similar organizations involved in women and children's rights, women's membership in such organizations is 27.4%, while women constitute 30% of executive boards. If we exclude women organizations, then the rate drops to 13%.

The field study indicates that if we focus on human rights organizations only, most of them do not include women on the general assemblies and executive boards. This is an interesting finding as there is weak representation of women as members in human rights organizations and a quasi absence of women in decision-making positions.

Final Discussion

The above study reflects a high degree of importance and concern. The first finding is the poor representation of women in civil society organizations (especially if we exclude professional groupings where membership is compulsory to be able to practice the profession). The second result reveals the weak presence of women in decision-making positions in civil society organizations. The third result, which is related to the previous one is the predominance of males in leadership positions even in old organizations where women's historical presence goes back to the nineteenth century.

The fourth result is the relation between the participation of women in constitutional councils and the participation of women in civil society organizations.

These results indicate the need to conduct a wide field study to identify the reasons for the decrease of women participation in civil society organizations. Studies on this issue point out to a number of underlying factors. First there is a high illiteracy rate amongst women and the predominance of traditions and cultures which do not value the participation of women in public life. In addition, there are economic reasons that keep women occupied in trying to make a daily livelihood. The second factor relates to women themselves. This is about women's own awareness of the importance of their role and their view of the distribution of roles as a result of social upbringing and their belief that public and political roles are "male concerns"

The matter is therefore complicated and requires a strategy, which reforms concepts and beliefs through mechanisms of social upbringing particularly through education and the media. In order to implement this strategy, legal reforms are needed to correct the situation of Egyptian women and ensure a high level of awareness raising for both men and women.

Some Final Observations/Recommendations:

1. It is important to have a national capacity building program for NGOs concerned with women's issues. This is a tri-pronged program that includes training, development of a database and research aimed at improving the current situation of women.
2. The law that regulates the work and activities of NGOs is of critical importance. Law 23 (dated 1964) for NGOs and private institutions is still the law which regulates the work of NGOs despite the fact that its origin was in the era of one party rule and the socialist social and economic orientation. As such it is important to pursue the collective effort started in 1998 for developing a new law for NGOs.*
3. It is important to encourage and mobilize women to take part in public life through NGOs, support and help them to reach decision-making positions especially since the representation of women in such positions is still less than a fourth of that of men.
4. There is a need to set up a center to support volunteers, both male and female, in order to guide them and coordinate their general volunteer efforts with specific focus on women's issues.

End Notes

* Since the submission of this article to *Al-Raida*, a new NGO law #84 has been promulgated in Egypt. NGOs are now waiting for the executive regulations to be published that will complement the law and provide guidance for its implementation. In general, the new law is not favorable to the continued independence of NGOs. [This editorial opinion does not necessarily reflect the opinion of this article's author.]