Women and NGOs:
Lebanese Women between Doing Justice to Themselves and Serving Others

Nisa' wa jami'yat:
Lubnaniyat beyn Insaf al-dhati wa khidmat al-gheyr
By Azza Sharara Baydoun, (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 2002)

Reviewed by Hosn Abboud

"Women and NGOs" is a well thought-out field study focused on Lebanese women's contributions to civic society. The author, Azza Sharara Baydoun, seeks to answer the following question: "Given that women stayed in the 'domestic domain' for many centuries, committing themselves to the mission of domestic production and reproduction, did they when moving into the 'public domain' take with them initiatives and visions? Did they come up with specific approaches to influence the public? Did they take with them special skills to operate and change the structures of the organizations, and their tools for action?"

Sharara answers these questions in six chapters, keeping in mind the varied and sometimes-conflicting perspectives towards 'women and organizations', a subject that is becoming increasingly central with the growing involvement of non-governmental organizations in human development. The introduction covers the historical beginnings of women in social work, particularly their

efforts to obtain the rights to vote, to run for parliamentary election, and to serve in the ministries of social affairs, education and the fine arts.

The first chapter, "The personal and the political in women's social work: readings in the literature", is a comprehensive survey of studies on women's activities in nongovernmental organizations in the United States. The choice of including American literature written by women scholars is justified by Sharara in these words: "This literature can situate this study in its proper context, and assist it with material that allows its evaluation".

In the second chapter, Sharara explains the methodology employed in her field study, which covers NGOs that were founded after 1990 in Greater Beirut. Sharara's total sample was thirty-two organizations that have different titles in Arabic (*jam'iyya, munazama, liqa', tajammu'* etc), and that deal with different social fields and problems: health, education, student affairs, citizenship, human rights, the environment, women's rights, the care of orphans, missing persons, scientific research, etc.

The third chapter is the '*bayt al-qasid*' as they say in Arabic (the key verse to an ode), and covers "the dynamics of social work in Lebanese NGOs". Here Sharara points to the factors that contribute to, or hinder, development in the structure of the organization and its vital aims. For example, the issue of sectarianism (*al-ta'ifiyya*) is discussed with the leaders of the organizations, with conflicting results depending upon the type of organization and its political involvement. In organizations in which the social and the political are intertwined, for example the Assembly for Municipal and Mayoral

Elections (*Al-liqa' min ajl al-intikhabat al-baladiyya wa-al-khitariyya*), the Social Movement (*Al-haraka al-ijtima'iyya*), the Lebanese Organization for Human Rights (*Al-jam'iyya al-lubnaniyya li-huquq al-insan*), or the Movement for People's Rights (*Harakat huquq an-nas*), Sharara confirms that their clash with sectarianism is inevitable since sectarianism has the power to distort and slow down the progress of political participation.

The fourth chapter studies "similarities and dissimilarities between men and women in their organizations", specifically their sectarian and gender awareness. The fifth chapter, "Challenging violence against women: ideologies and agendas", portrays various attitudes towards violence: from the Al-Najat Islamic Organization (*Jam'iyyat al-najat al-Islamiyya*), to the Lebanese Society for Resisting Violence Against Women (*Al-hay'a al-lubnaniyya li-muna-hadat al-'unf dud al-mar'a*). Sharara includes new experimental support programs and therapy groups, such as the Democratic Women's Association (*Al-tajammu' al-nisa'i al-dimocrati)*, and the group that interviewed 177 women prisoners who were freed after the liberation of south Lebanon.

Chapter six offers a history and study of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (*Tajammu' al-bahithat al-lubnaniyyat)*, a group of women researchers from different disciplines who gather for the sake of contact and intellectual communication. Sharara witnessed the beginnings of the Bahithat, and was one of its founding members. She writes, "*Al-tajammu'* does not claim for itself a great mission. From the moment of its founding, its policy was patience and waiting for the attainment of its modest objectives." The woman researcher, *al-bahitha* is, as we all know, a new entity in our societies; and she, like her male colleague, does not yet enjoy a well-defined character (social, cultural, or political). However, the coming together of the Bahithat in this organized and flexible form - through their internal activities - contributes to identifying the role of the woman researcher, *al-bahitha*, and to confirm, through their appearances on the public scene, their value for our society.

A short review of such a complex study cannot do justice to the effort which Sharara has given over four years of research. The book offers an outstanding contribution to the field of NGOs, human development, social psychology, gender studies, and others. She also offers a valuable explanation of terms related to human and social development, used every day in NGOs, from 'gender mainstreaming' to 'feminist consciousness' - hundreds of terms that she has either translated into Arabic or Arabized to make them accessible to the general reader or the specialist.

Women @ Internet:
Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace

Edited by Wendy Harcourt (London, Zed Books, 2000).

Reviewed by Samia Tabari

The book pools together a group of experts, from diverse professional backgrounds and cultures, in exploring how the lives of women can be altered by the information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet. The authors reveal how the Net can provide women with an extensive venue to express their views and vocalize their concerns about issues pertaining to women's conditions and human rights.

The late 1990s witnessed the formation of the Women on the Net (WoN) project, created by the Society for International Development (SID), with UNESCO funding. WoN encourages women, from the South and the North, to use the Internet as a political tool, promoting gender perspectives and bringing people together in the shaping of a transnational women's movement. It also aims at creating a resource to be made available for the diversified women's groups, assisting them in developing their Internet usage skills as well as enhancing their benefits from using such a medium of interaction. A group of both women and men, comprising academics, activists and technical people, have joined WoN in cyberspace discussions. Their discussions, ideas, and analysis are further materialized in this book.

Women@internet comprises three parts, all dealing with the various implications that relate to the empowerment of women through the Internet. The first part examines the emergence of women's activism and networking on the Net. The authors explore the potentials that the Internet may offer to women, without ignoring the existing gender inequalities of access to the cyberworld. Arturo Escobar, professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, perceives grassroots activism, particularly that which is channeled through the Internet, as eventually culminating into a form of political resistance in the real world. Gillian Youngs, a lecturer at the Center for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, speaks of 'cyberfeminism', for she sees the Internet as a magnetic arena, bringing together women from across the world to share their experiences and their visions for a better future.

The second part cites instances where women have been using ICTs for global networking as an attempt to promote their rights. Alice Mastrangelo Gittler, whose work focuses heavily on the use of ICTs as a tool for both community-based and global NGO activism, views the 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) as a main impetus in launching cyber activism amongst women. She reflects on the successes and weaknesses of the Net in connecting women's NGOs across the world. Nidhi Tandon, an economist and activist from East Africa, shares her knowledge of the work of women's groups in Africa. She provides examples of how these groups are seeking ICTs as tools for change. Edie Farwell, Peregrine Wood, Maureen James and Karen Banks are members of the Women's Networking Support Program of the Association for Progressive Communication (APC). The APC Women's Program, initiated in 1993, strives to limit gender inequities relating to access to, and use of, ICTs by women. In this chapter, the authors demonstrate the increasing usage of electronic tools by women, while highlighting the fact that women in the North use Internet tools much more extensively than women in the South and Eastern Europe. They further discuss the reasons attributed to these regional differences, stressing that they are primarily access-related rather than due to women's hesitation in embracing the new technological tools.

The book's last section projects the views of women researchers and NGO activists, presenting case studies from Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Arab World. Laura Agustin, whose work primarily focuses on sex tourism and the migration of Latin American and Caribbean women to Europe, illustrates how the new ICTs can be resourceful survival mechanisms for these women. Delivering ICTs to these groups of women may provide them with the chance of obtaining health assistance, legal advice, as well as human contact; things that are usually inaccessible for women in their situation. Farideh Farhi, member of the editorial board of the Iranian Journal of International Affairs, argues that the West's attitude, until very recently, towards Iran has contributed to a stunted growth of communication and information networks in Iran, without disregarding Iran's wariness of cultural invasion as an additional factor. She explains that although Gulf 2000, an Internet project, offers a vital venue for information provision and dialogue exchange, prevalent circumstances, notably political in nature, deter further development of discussions or action. Farhi also urges activists, who are involved in advocating women's rights, not to underplay the power of religious governments or institutions, even with the existence of an evolving process of modernization.

In the final chapter, Lamis Alshejni, from Yemen and a volunteer for Women in Development Network at SID, stresses that Arab women must take advantage of the new information technologies in their struggle for obtaining their rights and voicing their concerns. She elaborates that although Arab women have been increasingly speaking of and advocating their rights, they "remain silent on the Net." The 'silence' is mostly linked to the fact that Arab women tend to underestimate the platform that the Net may offer them in forwarding their cause. Alshejni, like Farideh Farhi, emphasizes that women should not ignore religious discourse in their advocacy endeavors, especially as religion is inherent to Arab culture. The Net, providing a multicultural and multilingual space, could offer a freer medium for discussing the impact of religion on the status of Arab women. On another level, Alshejni brings to our attention the high illiteracy rate amongst Arab women (at 62%) as a barrier to Internet usage. Nonetheless, she portrays a more positive outlook for the future, noting the shifting literacy rates for young Arab men and women, the increasing Internet usage by Arab women NGOs, and that the Arab world has recently reflected one of the highest growth rates of Internet use in the world.

Women@internet depicts the multitude of potentials that can be realized through the use of ICTs. Obstacles, financial, technical and cultural, to acquiring and using the new information technologies do exist. Still, the Internet is a medium that could strengthen women's movements across the world, furnishing the possibilities for a positive change in the political and social spheres. This alone is a compelling incentive to overpower prevalent barriers.

Pre-publication Notices

The 1920s was a pivotal decade which saw important changes in the Arab world. During this period the foundations of modernity in politics and economics, as well as in social and artistic life, were laid down. The conference examined the participation of women in the creation of this modernity. Scholars from Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Tunisia, Algeria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and of course Syria and Lebanon, as well as some who came from the United States and Europe, gave papers on theoretical, historical, literary, and social themes. The beginnings of Arab feminism, the participation of women in the various nationalist movements, the entrance of women to stage and screen, the problems of women's education, the changes in the legal status of women that took place during this period - all these and other questions were studied.

Zakirah lil-Mustaqbal, Maousou'at al-Katiba al-'Arabiyya. (Memory for the Future: an Encyclopedia of Arab Women Writers), a multi-volume work that covers the last two decades of the 19th century up to the end of the 20th century. The introduction surveys modern Arabic women's writing and raises questions concerning women's creativity. Ten essays explore women's writing in specific countries or regions. A bio-bibliography of individual writers contains 1,200 entries. There is also an anthology of poems, short stories and extracts from novels and autobiographies. Contributors include: Emad Abu Ghazi, Radwa Ashour, Yumna al-Eid, Hoda El-Sadda, Hatem al-Saqr, Soad al-Mane', Iman al-Qadi, Mohamad Barrada, Ferial Ghazoul, Sobhi Hadidi, Haidar Ibrahim, Hasna Mekdashi, Amina Rachid.

Publishers: Nour (the Arab Women's Publishing House) with the Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo. Forthcoming in summer 2003.

The Encyclopedia will also be on the Internet: www.arabwomen-nour.org

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This bibliography is not complete. It is weak in Arabic and French sources, and has nothing in other world languages.)

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