The ‘Women and Development’ Discourse and Donor Intervention in Palestine
Histories Intersecting the Palestinian Women’s Movement

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Summary

This article examines the global and local factors underpinning the entry of two agendas into Palestinian society: income generating projects and gender equality programs. It has been argued that there is complimentary meeting and connectivity between globally endorsed approaches to women’s advancement and the strategic interests of women’s groups emerging from their own historical development, as situated within their local context.

In regard to gender equality programs, we shed light on some of the biases and hierarchical classifications implicit within donor conceptual frameworks. Therefore, we have identified the importance of donor systems of representation as well as some of the implications of how they represent Southern women’s interests.

From that, this article also raised many questions: to what extent does a similar
consciousness exist in Palestine? Why did the donor emphasis on strategic ‘feminist’ agenda find such resonance in Palestine? To what extent are the charitable societies considered apart from the Palestinian women’s movement due to the fact that they address women’s practical needs? What about the women’s committees?

I. Introduction

We can conceptualize the agenda setting process between donors, INGOs and Palestinian NGOs in Palestine as a process in which global agendas and donor-promoted programs are articulated locally, and then are contested, reinterpreted, or integrated into the local context by the actors involved. Since this multi-layered process is best examined over the long-term in order to be fully understood, we will attempt to deconstruct the way agendas enter the local context, and then examine this process at various levels and in its manifested forms and relations.

Two main factors affect the context in which agenda setting between donors, INGOs and Palestinian NGOs occurs. Firstly, given the restructuring of aid channels reviewed above, and the fact that donor assistance is often attached to broader development paradigms, donor aid frequently arrives with predefined funding priorities. One implication of this, as a representative of the INGO ANERA explained, is that today if a local actor approaches the organization with a project idea, the success of the initiative will depend on whether the idea falls under one of the donor’s identified thematic areas of concern or funding priorities. If not, the local actor will have to modify their course of action, either by finding independent sources of funding or by redefining their project approach.

On the one hand, this suggests inflexibility on the part of some of the donors, which is a result of the way they are structured, and inhibits real debate between donors and NGOs over agendas within sectors. On the other hand, as the representative from ANERA suggested, it also means that agenda setting is a process that occurs over a longer time frame than what is usually acknowledged. If the local actors possess the organizational capacity and skills to engage with the donor, in time they may overturn a donor’s priority or, at the least, facilitate negotiations over what sort of agendas are appropriate in the particular sector.

Secondly, it is apparent that within NGO sectors such as health care, as well as among NGOs working to empower women or advocating human rights, there are globalized debates among the actors in each field about strategies and objectives, and on how to promote social progress within a development framework. Moreover, international forums and UN world conferences facilitate consensus building and the formation of global agendas within these sectors by establishing international standards; these form an important reference for governments, activists and development professionals alike. Thus, in contrast to perceptions of dichotomous donor-NGO agendas, it is more accurate to acknowledge the common ground shared by NGOs and donors, and the way NGOs and donors move within the same spaces both locally and globally. Indeed, this reflects the fact that NGOs occupy multiple positions, and this in turn implies a complex structuring of knowledge that extends beyond the boundaries of locality.

NGOs keep themselves well informed about international trends and global agendas. Clearly, they will not always arrive at consensus with donors, especially when NGOs are
equipped with their own knowledge of international developments within their sector, and can recognize when donor programs represent a hollow interpretation of globally endorsed approaches.

Finally, it is also evident that what one means by ‘agenda’ is in fact dependent on context. While ‘agenda’ can be used to refer to a donor priority within a sector, it can also refer to a global agenda within the same sector, and while the two can be co-terminus, this is not always the case. At the same time, local NGO actors have their own explicit agendas as well as those that remain unstated.

**The meeting of the global and the local**

At one level, the study that follows examines the conceptual framework and the theoretical underpinnings of the global agenda and local donor programs within each profiled sector. The ideational dimension of donor assistance is an essential part of the impact donors have on recipient societies, since knowledge plays a central role in structuring social interaction. At the same time, the conceptual biases of aid programs and the accepted hierarchy, such as those between scientific and local forms of knowledge and theoretical debates within the field, all feed into the agenda setting process.

At another level, the study aim to elucidate the way a global agenda or a donor-promoted program enters the local society. In this respect, it should be recognized that if an approach is adopted that assumes that unequal power relations between the donor and recipient determine the pattern of interaction, with the donor imposing an agenda onto the local society, then the possibility of affecting relations with donors through the positions and actions of local actors involved is negated. However, NGOs have different modes of agency available to them and can employ methods of resistance or re-articulation. Moreover, this meeting of global and local can take various forms. Besides being in a state of agreement with donors, local actors may internalize a global agenda, and accept without question its validity or relevance. Or they may resist and contest a donor priority in a particular sector. Further still, NGOs may utilize and try to transform an external agenda for their own aims and purposes, re-appropriating it.

Some analysts have already adopted this approach in analyzing agendas and relations between donors and recipients in aid channels. Tvedt ascribes to the view that NGOs must be analyzed and understood within complicated overlapping processes: international ideological factors and donor policies impact on NGO agendas, and the NGO must maneuver within overlapping historical and cultural contexts (1998: 4). Illustrative of this, Tvedt provides an interesting discussion of Norwegian missionary organizations, illuminating the contradictory influences at work when religious organizations are incorporated into secular development funding systems. He identifies the interaction between two impulses: in particular the religious organization’s objective of conducting missionary work in the South, and the pressures of secular policies of agencies such as NORAD. Further to this, he illustrates that the missionary organizations have developed their own strategy to contend with the secular orientation of aid channels. For instance, two departments are often developed: one to deal with development agencies in donor language, and another department to engage in traditional missionary work. He also points out that these missionaries have an umbrella organization in Norway that insulates them from NORAD and state influences, allowing them to cultivate their own values (Tvedt, 1998: 216-219). In this discussion of Norwegian missionary organizations, he provides an excellent analysis of contrary forces at work and how these organizations navigate their way through the agenda of the aid channels and maintain their own missionary agenda.

Yet in contrast to the resisting posture of these missionary organizations, the engagement of
NGO actors with global influences is not restricted to simply resisting donor influences. In reality, donor ideas, interests and policies may dovetail with local actors, concerns and interests, in some cases meeting up with and becoming involved in local power contestations. The process of observing and analyzing the meeting of global and local should be understood in a more fluid manner, keeping open the possibility for merging interests, or instrumentalization of the donor agenda toward local concerns. It is to be expected that the re-articulation of donor influences by local actors will in some cases feed into the local context of action and pre-existing power relations.

II. "Women and Development": between Discourse and Donor Intervention

This study investigates the articulation between the women and development discourse, donor programs and Palestinian women’s organizations. One of the aims of this study is to address the view, expressed in local criticisms of Palestinian NGOs, that gender programs in Palestine are part of an externally driven agenda. This view not only neglects the historical development of Palestinian women’s initiatives, and effaces the agency of local organizations, but it also fails to adequately conceptualize the relationship between external and internal actors and forces.

In contrast, this study recognizes the necessity of pursuing two ‘simultaneous projects’ (Mohanty, 1998: 70). On the one hand, our approach is preceded by the recognition of the autonomous formation of Palestinian women’s organizations, and the evolution of their concerns and strategic interests, as set within the historical contingencies of Palestinian society and the Palestinian national struggle. At the same time, our approach is cognizant of and emphasizes the necessity of critically re-reading the dominant discourses of the aid regime, with specific attention to the way these discourses define women’s interests and shape the conceptual horizon of local women’s organizations.

Palestinian women’s organizations have a long history dating back to the early decades of the last century. The first organizations were established during the British Mandate period by upper middle class women, and provided charity assistance, social welfare and relief work. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, a new generation of activist women’s organizations emerged in the West Bank and Gaza, each association directly affiliated to a political faction of the PLO. During the popular movement of the first intifada, women’s committees formed part of the popular front of mass mobilizing efforts. Today, the overall direction and institutional composition of the Palestinian women’s movement has shifted: professional NGOs, consisting of research institutes and women’s centers, now comprise the leaders of an emerging, autonomous women’s

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1 The survey commissioned by the Welfare Association found that the funds disbursed to women’s organizations in Palestine, and to projects that target women, amounted to $14 million; this constitutes 6% of total funding for PNGOs (Hanafi, 1999). Some have questioned the capacity of women’s organizations to absorb this much funding. More centrally, others have wondered whether donor priorities are in fact being adapted to the local reality: some criticize projects such as gender awareness campaigns, arguing that this is a luxury for a society reconstructing itself after decades of de-development and military occupation.
movement. The relative marginalization of both the women’s committees and the charitable societies today, however, signifies a hierarchical reorganization of the women’s movement within the post-Oslo period.

This article reexamines some of the salient moments within the historical evolution of the strategic interests of Palestinian women’s organizations, contextualizing this within the intersecting logic of development discourses. Using the example of Women in Development (WID) programs and good governance programs, we investigate the way income generating projects and gender equity projects define women’s issues, priorities and strategic concerns. While this study identifies symmetry between Palestinian women’s organizations’ strategic concerns, and the timing of the arrival of global agendas, their simultaneous histories, however, do not preclude a disarticulation between the genuine objectives of local actors, and the theorization of women’s interests by development discourses.

The first section of this article investigates the arrival of WID programs in Palestine. Focusing on donor income generating projects, it examines the way these programs have been superimposed over local women’s initiatives, specifically, the women’s cooperative schemes set up during the first intifada. This section maps the subsequent fissures and discontinuities that ensue within local organizations’ own strategic options. The second part of the article examines the shift in donor agendas, signified by the arrival of Good Governance programs and a new aid regime, buttressing the Oslo process. It is within the Oslo juncture that one identifies a symmetry between local agendas and the objectives of donor development aid. This article argues that simultaneous transformations within the Palestinian national movement, new donor agendas and the reformulation of Palestinian women’s movement’s own strategic aims have all contributed to the hierarchical reorganization of the women’s movement.

The third section of this article examines the dissonance between women’s ‘practical’ versus ‘strategic’ feminist interests. It is argued that, in the Palestinian case, many donor projects invariably assume ‘women’ are an already constituted category (Mohanty, 1998: 80). This facilitates an elision over their actual material realities, and a projection onto the ‘third world woman’ of certain western feminist interests and priorities. The article concludes by examining the way the logic of the western feminist discourse has interrupted and produced a disabling effect within the Palestinian women’s movement and its relationship to popular forces.

In doing so, this article is informed by Michel Foucault’s notion of genealogical research, a method he developed to explicate the struggle between hierarchically organized, globalized discourses, which circulate within institutions, and local, disorganized knowledge. While local knowledge is invariably disqualified and subjugated by these totalizing discourses, they, however, continue and remain present in discontinuous forms (Foucault, 1986: 83-85).

**Short-term Interests and Long-term Dilemmas: The Case of Income Generating Projects**

In turning to review the emergence of the WID paradigm and its entry into the Palestinian context, our analysis is informed by and organized around the following four arguments. First, WID is characterized by a certain ambivalence in regard to its definition of, and prescriptions for, ‘women’s empowerment.’ That is to say, and as we will illustrate below, by seeking the unproblematized incorporation of women into the economy, WID overturns one form of exclusion (from development programs) and re-inscribes women within another system of inequality (in the economy). Secondly, this ambivalence, which stems from WID’s own theoretical and ideological underpinnings, is reproduced within local donor’s projects. Thirdly, income generating projects were first introduced in Palestine within the framework of nationalist
popular mobilization, and grassroots women’s empowerment initiatives. Fourthly, the arrival of donor income generating projects, specifically, ‘micro-credit’ programs, introduced a destabilizing logic within the women’s sector; not only did this result in fissures in women’s organizations’ strategic options, but it also interrupted local cooperative schemes, which began to be superseded by donor-funded NGOs and micro-credit agencies. These four arguments will be further explicated and developed in the following section.

The Women in Development paradigm first arose in the 1970’s in response to the exclusion of women from international development programs. The literature and policies, which developed out of this approach, thus represented the first systematic attempt to incorporate women into mainstream development initiatives.

Emphasizing women’s role as economic producers, WID’s initial focus was on increasing women’s participation and integration in the economy (Moghadam, 1995). In the 1980’s, WID was broadened to include increasing women’s access to education and to private property, as well as facilitating women’s vocational training, income generation and family planning (Abdo, 1995). Within the WID framework, income generating projects emerged as a major initiative. The aim of income generating projects is to expand women’s access to credit, and increase their opportunities for self-employment through home economic projects or cooperative schemes.

As indicated above, there is ambivalence evident in the way WID defines women’s empowerment for, while it overturns the exclusion of women from development projects, it re-embeds women within a new system of inequality in the economic sphere. Two factors have contributed to this ambivalence: the first pertains to the logic of incorporating women into development discourses dominated by mainstream liberal economic paradigms, and the second relates to the theoretical underpinnings of the WID approach. In regard to the first, it has been noted that in the 1980’s, WID policy advocates sought the acceptance of mainstream economists, paying lip service to their concept of development, in order to enable women to emerge out of the social welfare category they had been placed in and, thus, to obtain more funds for women’s advancement (Moghadam, 1995: 8). Thus for a long time, income generating projects have, and largely continue to, dovetail with the interests of multilateral institutions like the World Bank, particularly the latter’s concern for increasing women’s productive capacity (Simmons, 1997). When one recognizes the overlapping and contiguous influences operating on donors today, especially in the context of neo-liberal hegemony, such observations become particularly significant.

In regard to the second factor, it is important to emphasize that WID emerged out of both modernization theory and liberal feminism (Chowdhry, 1995). Simmons suggests that WID’s association with modernization theory implies the acceptance of a teleological notion of progress that diverts attention away from structural relations within the economy, as well as away from gender and class differentials. According to Simmons, WID’s assumptions are not only overly simplistic, and reduce the scope of power relations, but they also obscure particularities of third world women’s interests. WID’s assumptions include: economic growth is synonymous with development and improved standards of living for all; economic growth and the aims of women’s movements are compatible; and women in the developed world have progressed further than women in the Third World towards equality with men (Simmons, 1997: 246).

While our focus is on WID, it is also central to note that new perspectives have emerged which extend beyond the latter’s narrow liberal feminist framework. In particular, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, adopted by radical feminists, acknowledges gendered social norms, and the differential ways women and men are incorporated into political and economic structures. The difference between the two perspectives is that “WID puts emphasis on providing women with the opportunities to participate in male-defined and male-dominated social and
economic structures, while Gender and Development (GAD), questions the assumptions implicit in these structures” (Rathegeber, 1995). In the 1990’s a gender component was added to the WID approach, drawing attention to the ways gender social relations structure and constrain women’s participation in development. In terms of income generating projects, this revised WID approach now acknowledges the double burden of women’s dual reproductive and productive responsibilities. However, the overall priority of this approach remains one of increasing women’s productive role in the economy and in the development process.

Local Donor Priorities

As feminist scholars have pointed out, in the Palestinian context the WID paradigm has dominated donor approaches to women’s empowerment and income generating projects have emerged as a central priority. Abdo argues that all women’s organizations, ranging from the charitable societies to the women’s committees and the professional NGOs, have taken part in WID programs with multilateral, state or UN agencies. The major focus of these projects has been income generating projects, including business credit centers (UNRWA) and credit/loan centers (NOVIB and Canada Fund) (Abdo, 1995: 37). Similarly public health expert Rita Giacaman maintains that GAD has rarely been applied by aid agencies working in Palestine. According to her: “On the whole, the agencies use either welfare or equity approaches and, to a lesser extent, the empowerment approach which has been adopted by European NGOs working in this area, such as NOVIB and Oxfam. With the recent and increasing involvement of the World Bank in the area, the anti-poverty and efficiency approaches (associated with productive projects for women) have emerged as major policy frameworks of development” (Giacaman, 1995: 53).

Entry into the Local Context: the Overriding National Interest

Using a genealogical approach, our aim is to locate the emergence of income generating projects in Palestine within grassroots women’s initiatives, and map the entry of donor programs into the women’s sector and the resulting fissures.

As indicated, income generating projects entered the Palestinian national landscape through the local initiative of Palestinian charitable societies and women’s committees. While these projects predated the intifada by five years, income projects for women rapidly expanded following the eruption of the uprising in 1987. Economic cooperatives were set up by the women’s committees, as part of the nationalist popular mobilization, and dovetailed with broader efforts to establish alternative services to those provided by the Israeli occupying power. In this context, income generating projects, such as embroidery and local food production, were a way to increase women’s economic resources, facilitating the dual role of empowering women as well as sustaining the national struggle and meeting specific aims such as supporting the families of

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2 American bilateral aid agency USAID is currently one of the biggest financial supporters of income generation projects for women, particularly micro-credit schemes. In 1997, USAID provided $1.5 million in loan capital to expand Save the Children Federation’s and UNRWA’s micro-lending programs. In 1998, $3 million was provided to Save the Children for micro-lending activities for women. (www.usaid.gov/wbg) As such, the agency is reflective of a certain type of logic and orientation that these projects take when set up at the local level. USAID’s approach to women and development revolves around two objectives: increasing women’s productive capacity and increasing their participation in civic development and democracy building activities. According to its own literature, its main strategies include: enhancing the economic status of women; expanding educational opportunities for girls and women; improving women’s legal rights and increasing their participation in civil society; and integrating gender considerations throughout USAID programs.
martyrs and of political prisoners (Jad, 1995: 231-234).

The significance of this should not be underestimated. While internationally, economic projects for women were being implemented in close association with structural adjustment programs as part of the polices and programs of institutions such as the World Bank, in the Palestinian context income-generating projects for women crystallized around the goals of the nationalist movement.

The original purpose and strategic aims of the income projects, as implemented by the women’s committees, therefore, were not dictated by a singular logic, but were driven by a number of overlapping objectives. The economic cooperatives were sites for recruiting women to the national struggle and, as mentioned, these projects also promoted the national self-reliance of the Palestinian people, and the national economy, as part of resistance to the Israeli occupation (Kuttab, 1989; Giacaman and Johnson, 1989). The cooperatives thus provided a space within which to increase women’s autonomy, as well as develop their gender awareness and political consciousness. According to some, however, while the cooperatives and the committees as a whole may have increased women’s opportunities for political participation as well as their social and economic autonomy, these avenues of participation were contained within dominant patriarchal structures of authority (Hiltermann, 1998).

Eileen Kuttab, a former leader in the committees, offers noteworthy comments on the role of the women’s cooperatives. She begins her comments by noting that any attempt to look back and evaluate the role of the women’s cooperatives of the first Intifada purely in terms of the economic criteria of productivity/efficiency, which are currently used to evaluate donor programs, is simply inadequate. Kuttab’s comments, developed in hindsight after significant donor intervention in the women’s sector, reveal the limits of the liberal feminist viewpoint as characterized by the WID approach. According to Kuttab, a narrow economic focus ignores what she labels: ‘the interrelationship between the national context and the development option’ during a period of popular national struggle. Also the search for ‘profitability’ neglects the empowerment women involved in these projects experienced, both in terms of their perceptions and their social and political awareness (Kuttab, 1995: 49-51).

Kuttab’s comments prefigure our own findings which reveal shifts in the strategic options available for women’s organizations following the arrival of donor income projects for women. Kuttab challenges the narrow economic focus of WID and indicates the importance of other goals, such as raising feminist consciousness and participating in the national struggle. In line with Simmons, quoted above, Kuttab questions whether economic logic of income projects and women’s movement aims are always compatible. This is not to deny the importance of profitability as such, but rather to problematize its relationship to the broader goals and aims of feminist movements.

Beyond the National Interest

Thus far we have discussed the short-term interests buttressing the emergence of income-generating projects in Palestine. What about the long-term questions that arise when an agenda is set in this manner? Since the end of the first intifada, the women’s sector has been overrun by donor funded micro-credit projects, superimposed over the grassroots popular initiatives and run by donor-established professional centers. Today, increasing criticisms have been made about the benefits of this type of project for Palestinian women. According to Abdo, available reports indicate a weakness or, more aptly, a failure of micro-finance projects. According to a report prepared in 1992 by Save the Children and Shu’un al-Mar’a (Women Affairs Committee, Gaza),
80% of the 15 income-generating projects surveyed in the West Bank had failed; either the micro-economic venture did not survive or was shut down not long after having been established (Abdo, 1995: 38). Other reports have also noted similar failures with this type of project (Holt, 1996: 59). Why does this happen?

We suggest this ‘puzzle’ should be explained with reference to both the shift in the strategic options available for women’s organizations, and the introduction of a new logic in the organizations following the arrival of donor-prescribed income projects, particularly micro-credit.

Kuttab’s perspective is illuminating in this regard. She underscores the interruption and the shift in options available for the women’s committees following the onset of donor micro-credit projects. The problem pertains to the way the latter define women solely as individual economic units, eclipsing their multiple positions and their different locations within nationalist and feminist forms of agency. Kuttab explains the consequences of this: “(Today) some women produce pastries for the market. If you see the conditions they work in, they take on full family duties and the burden of the production center. They are exhausted and in a terrible state. We need to ask what kind of empowerment is this. The problem is there is little attention to the human side; it is not just about economic indicators. There should be protection for women against the exploitative nature of this type of incorporation into the economy. Before there was a buffer. As a part of the party, the committee creates a form of protection – a moral protection against the private sector. Today Palestinian Working Women’s Society is the only organization to focus on women workers.”

Kuttab also questions the economic rationale of donor micro-finance projects for women, given the structural limitations on the Palestinian economy imposed by the occupation. Certain factors, however, continue to propel this type of activity. In particular, donors have focused on these projects as part of their concern for short-term employment solutions as a way to increase stability and produce visible ‘peace dividends.’

Projects and the Ideological Factor

This last point directs our attention to the ideological underpinnings of donor projects. Abdo’s analysis is important in this regard; she locates the problem with the application of income generating projects in Palestine within the WID paradigm. This deserves attention, particularly given that the theoretical basis of donor programs is an issue that receives little attention by Palestinian organizations. The WID approach, based on liberal feminism and in keeping with liberalism, conceives of women as the sole agent of their destiny and considers gender as an individual, rather than a relational concept (Abdo, 1995: 40). As an extension of this, WID and liberalism suffer from the flaw of seeing society strictly as an “aggregate of atomized subjects,” and therefore cannot provide solutions to problems which are structural in nature. Moreover, liberal feminism, in its close association with modernization theory, fails to see the contradictions in the capitalist system and is incapable of conceptualizing structures of oppression. In line with this, the fact that income generating projects integrate women into the informal economy, one of the most exploitative sectors of the economy, is

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3 Interview with Eileen Kuttab, Women Studies Program, Birzeit University.
4 Ibid.
Local criticism mirrors Abdo’s analysis. Kuttab’s comments, referred to above, fall into line with Abdo’s analysis, as do those of Sama Aweida of the Women’s Studies Center. The latter conducted a study on micro-credit programs and uncovered that while the main indicator of success of these projects was loan repayment, women were actually selling their own gold as a way to repay these loans. One could argue that Aweida’s study suggests a failure of appropriate indicators. However, the facts revealed by Aweida suggest the issue is much broader than this. The absence of an indicator to measure anomalies such as women selling their own property to repay micro loans itself stems from an ideological perspective that aims to integrate women into the economy, without attending to the modes or means by which this incorporation is realized. Such a view fails to see the potential danger of entrapping women in the exploitative informal sector. The indicators used to assess micro-lending projects are embedded within this economic paradigm, which evaluates the project strictly in repayment terms – ignoring the broader questions related to risks and exploitation within the market. The paradigm is pervasive: for instance, Faten, a donor-supported credit institution established in Gaza in 1998 by the Save the Children loan program, has provided $5.33 million in loans. When asked about indicators, Mrs. Amani Filfil, the Director of Faten in Gaza, said that the institution “did not have any figures or statistics about the extent to which women’s projects were successful. But one of the indicators of success is the continued dealing of a group of women with this institution.”

Recently, more and more women’s organizations are tackling difficult questions pertaining to the efficacy of economic projects for women. While some argue that Palestinian women’s organizations have failed to see the politics behind donor-prescribed micro-credit projects (Abdo, 1995: 41), one cannot neglect the shifts in the strategic options available for women’s organizations in the context of donor intervention and supply-driven micro-finance projects, which were superimposed over the work of the grassroots women’s committees. Irrespective of this, today Palestinian women’s organizations are faced with the challenge of re-articulating income generating projects in a manner which will reduce some of the risks involved for women.

Oslo, Good Governance and the Advocacy Paradigm

This section examines the arrival of the aid regime supporting the Oslo process; we look particularly at donor good governance programs as exemplified by their gender advocacy component. This section seeks to locate this shift in donor agendas in relation to the historical trajectory and strategic choices of the women’s movement. The final section of the article will examine the implications of this donor paradigm for the women’s movement.

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5 WATC Newsletter #103, August 12, 2000.
The Palestinian Women’s Movement in the 1990’s: Towards a Feminist Agenda

Some argue that the women’s movement in Palestine, straddling both nationalist and feminist movements, has faced specific challenges in developing its own feminist agenda (Glavanis-Grantham, 1996:173). As this author rightly states, during the first intifada, the Palestinian women’s movement, “gave expression to a female and not a feminist consciousness, based on women’s awareness of their rights within the prevailing division of labor and dominant ideology” (Glavanis-Grantham, 1996:173).

Glavanis-Grantham’s observations are important since they orient our attention towards the period of the end of the first intifada, when women’s activists were reevaluating their relationship to the political parties, and their role within the national movement. Of importance for our analysis is that the arrival of donor good governance programs and an advocacy paradigm were prefigured by a parallel shift in the women’s movement towards the development of their own agenda and strategy for women.

Within the literature on the Palestinian women’s movement there are five major factors recognized as shaping the strategic transformation of the movement, and its reorganization around the leadership stratum of women’s activists employed in professional NGOs and research centers. These factors are:

1. The marginalization of women within the national movement. This was related to, among other things, the challenges the women’s committees faced articulating their own women’s agenda within the context of the male-dominated nature of the parties. The patriarchal nature of the party increasingly came to stifle the voicing of women’s issues, especially as women’s committees’ programs were dictated from above by the party head (Jad, 1995:238-239).

2. The rise of the Islamists. In 1990 the Islamists, led by Hamas, spearheaded a campaign attacking women wearing western dress while participating in demonstrations. A vicious campaign was launched which imposed an Islamic dress code on a large number of women in Gaza (Jad, 1995:241). The mainstream secular parties, including the leftists, did not respond to this campaign despite being urged to do so by female members of the movement. Women found themselves isolated, without support from national forces. For many this signaled a failure of the national movement, including its inability to serve as a mechanism to advance women’s issues.

3. The waning of the national movement in 1991 and the retreat of the political parties in the post-Oslo period. With the weakening of the nationalist movement, there was increased recognition of the need to develop a women’s agenda and new avenues of action and participation (Kawar, 1998:234).

4. The fostering of democratic participation within the emerging national political arena. Concurrent and pursuant to the last point, following the establishment of the PNA in 1994
and the beginning of the state-formation process, the aim was to contribute to democratic participation. (Kawar, 1998:234).

3. These factors overlapped one another, often occurring simultaneously. Together they framed the period between the decline of the first intifada in 1990, and the beginning of the state-building era in 1994. Within this period, the women’s movement shifted away from their position embedded within the nationalist movement, towards an autonomous social movement and participant within the nationalist struggle.

This change did not occur at once; it was a process which took place over time. With the commencement of negotiations between the PLO and Israel, women representing Fatah, Fida and the People’s party came together with representatives from women’s centers to begin for the first time to develop ways to address discrimination against women (Azzouni, 2000). Subsequently the Women’s Affairs Technical Committee was established at the behest of women’s organizations. Further to this, in the post-Oslo period new strategies were developed for the women’s movement. In March 1995 a roundtable discussion was organized by the Women’s Studies Center at Birzeit to consider the future of the women’s movement. Some of the priorities agreed upon were: to contribute to the development of a democratic society; to train women to participate in the democratic process; and to focus on the drafting of Palestinian laws (Holt, 1996:54). Overall, this brief account charts the changing nature of the women’s movement and the process by which it developed its own agenda separate from the political parties and the national movement.

This shift should not be underestimated; it is important in explaining the rise of gender advocacy programs and gender training schemes. Clearly, the Palestinian women’s movement had similar agendas, which brought them in line with donor priorities. Not only was the women’s movement looking to increase women’s equality, but the beginning of the state-building process meant that donor governance and civil society schemes resonated with the actors’ aims to contribute to democratic processes.

Beyond the shift in the women’s movement, there were also ideological factors at work which increased the convergence between donor and women NGO interests. Some committees and specialized women’s centers began to devalue service programs after the first intifada. This occurred along with a broader shift towards a more ‘feminist’ orientation, which prioritized advocating for women’s rights. As well, with the establishment of the PNA, many activists felt that the future Palestinian Authority should assume responsibility for offering basic services for women, such as kindergartens, nurseries, income-generating projects, health services, and education (Jad, 1995:243). Moreover, this type of ideological position also brought women’s organizations in line with donors’ program focus on advocacy projects.

**Gender and Governance: the Impact of the Donors**

The aid regime that has buttressed the Oslo process has facilitated the arrival of a new type of project in Palestine: democracy and civil society building programs, and broader ‘good governance’ agendas (Williams and Young, 1994). As Taraki suggests, donor governance programs overlap with and re-embed liberal feminist agendas (1995). These programs prioritize women’s strategic gender interests and promote gender equality in the public sphere. In donor democracy schemes, women’s organizations are looked at to participate in civil society building by articulating specific group interests, supporting gender mainstreaming initiatives, and advocating for the rule of law. Moreover, it is assumed that women’s organizations will take up the advocacy paradigm and extend it to women on a mass scale through gender training projects as well as projects that teach women lobbying skills.
Our aim in this section is to highlight the logic of this shift to advocacy as a new type of project approach, tied to the global governance paradigm, and explore its implications for social relations and organizations.

It is important and necessary to see the changes in donor programs in the context of the rise of the neo-liberal paradigm. According to Carapico, the significance of the neo-liberal paradigm is that it has been followed by a shift in project approaches. As she suggests, the neo-liberal paradigm has resulted in a changing role for Southern NGOs, away from providing services to the marginalized groups, and towards ‘empowering’ them to change their own situation. This represents a shift from services to workshops, training and advocacy. Furthermore, as she outlines, this also represents a movement towards projects which seek to inculcate self-help techniques, and put the onus for change on the individual as opposed to structural factors: “Women, landless peasants and marginal classes are encouraged to organize as interest groups….Social problems like female unemployment are attributed to attitudes and lifestyles, not political or economic constraints, so solutions are to be found in individual voluntary behavior” (Carapico, 2000:14).

The literature on NGOs indicates when a donor paradigm coalesces around a certain priority, such as a particular type of project, the local society begins to take on supply-driven features. For instance, the overabundance of NGOs providing credit in Bangladesh is viewed as an example of a supply-driven formation in the local society (Edwards and Hulme, 1997).

In Palestine it is clear that the arrival of donor good governance programs has been associated with a shift in the type of projects available for women. Professional women’s NGOs now concentrate on activities that include gender training and awareness campaigns as well as lobbying. This is explained by both a change in donor programs, but also a shift in the strategic interests of the Palestinian women’s movement. Taraki underscores this meeting of global and local agendas, highlighting the intersection of donor liberal feminist prescriptions with the strategic agenda of the Palestinian women’s movement. “[E]ncouraged by international aid agencies and propelled by their own search for an effective women’s agenda, Palestinian women activists and some academics began the task of identifying the obstacles in these various areas” (Taraki, 1995:30).

This notwithstanding, the prevalence of advocacy-oriented projects which privilege the individual and self-help strategies raises questions about the interruptive logic of donor liberal feminist prescriptions and more specifically about what forms of empowerment are being made available to Palestinian women.

**Local-Donor Priorities**

Promoting women’s equality in the public sphere is a big priority among donor agencies working in Palestine. Such projects are mainly funded through two different types of donor programs: the first, democracy and civil society building programs, and the second, gender mainstreaming programs which promote women’s participation in decision-making processes. It should be recognized, however, that the concept of ‘gender’ and gender training projects were introduced into the local context by donors as early as the 1990’s (Hammami, 1995), that is to say, before the arrival of democracy programs, yet as part of the changing international development paradigm outlined above.

Starting with donor democracy and civil society programs, it should be stated that following the arrival of the PNA, a new type of donor arrived in Palestine or, in the case of existing agencies and INGOs, a new program began to receive attention, that of democracy development programs. This was a donor priority that had existed for some time internationally and predated
the establishment of the PNA. Within this program logic, women’s demands for equality are viewed as part and parcel of the process of democratization; such activism should be channeled through civil society building and enhancement of democratic processes. Moreover, in Palestine one finds that most donor democracy and human rights programs include projects specifically targeted for women or are open to projects for women. Let us take the case of the USAID.

USAID has one of the largest democracy programs of donor agencies. In FY2000 it spent $17 million on democracy building projects. (www.usaid-wbg.org/) The aim of its program is to enhance the capacity of citizens to participate in and influence governing processes. As part of this program there is one large project for women, *Advocacy for Equal Rights for Women Project Through the Grassroots*, implemented by WATC. The project targets rural women, including those in the women’s committees, through civic education sessions in gender, lobbying, computer and administrative skills. Note the approach: training with the purpose of impelling future advocacy by rural and grassroots women. (See WATC Annual Report, 1998). This is linked to USAID’s democracy program goal of increasing participation of civil society in public decision-making. (www.usaid-wbg.org/) Underlying this type of project is a focus on perceptions: informing women of their right to act to defend their interests. Insofar as the focus is on the committees, presumably this is the site which serves as the structure through which women will act; however, the question of what structures women will act through and who will organize them is left ambiguous in the project. Without attention to such issues, the project becomes more of a self-help initiative.

This example raises a noteworthy point, relevant for our understanding of the implications of this type of advocacy/training project. Firstly, critical questions have been raised about training projects and their disregard for directing the participants into sustainable networks of action or avenues of participation. Discussing USAID civic education programs in Palestine and Egypt, Brouwer notes that a program in Egypt to raise women’s awareness about elections and increase their participation in the process actually served to increase the pessimism of the women involved. This was due to the women’s high expectations of the impact of their vote, raised by the civic education. Highlighting the problem of focusing on the individual over organizing people into action, Brouwer notes, “In such conditions, it might be more productive to help citizens mobilize against the regime, instead of educating them how to vote” (Brouwer, 2000: 13).

Regarding the civic education program in Palestine implemented through Civic Forum, Brouwer points out that, “They might not need additional ‘technical’ knowledge about democracy or advice about how to change their values. What they might want to learn is how to mobilize, not under a foreign occupier, but under a Palestinian authoritarian regime. But they might especially want support for doing so” (emphasis added) (Brouwer, 2000: 14).

Building on Brouwer’s observations, we can identify that the first implication of this type of project is that it privileges the ‘individual’ while neglecting to emphasize the centrality of organizing people, and bypasses questions such as through what structures should people act.

The second implication of this type of project is a shift to an advocacy project approach and an emphasis on strategic women’s interests. This may imply that practical interests – those related to everyday existence – are given less priority. In general this represents a move from questions of daily life towards questions of position and rights in the social realm.

The second type of donor programs that promote women’s equality in the public sphere and are being funded are the ‘mainstreaming’ initiatives. Mainstreaming has been defined as either donor efforts to incorporate women into their development plans, or donor attempts to increase women’s access to decision-making, for example, establishing a women’s unit (Jahan, 1995: 10). It is the latter which concerns us here. Let us briefly consider UNDP and UNIFEM policies.

If we review UNDP policies, it is evident that their gender mainstreaming projects have included supporting the establishment of Women’s Units within the PNA ministries, with the aim
of advocating gender equality within decision-making structures and policy-making processes. As well, they advocated for the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Advancement of Women. Similarly the UNDP has funded gender training courses and workshops for heads of departments within the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (www.papp.undp.org/shr/gender.html).

With regard to the UNDP mainstreaming policy in Palestine, it has been stated that after supporting the establishment of women’s directorates: “The UNDP project also facilitated networking among these women by providing them with a framework of ongoing communications through the ad hoc committee” (Kawar, 1998: 241). Discussing the effectiveness of this project, Kawar states: “These directors have a common vision to lead in the development of gender-sensitive policies in the ministries and in strategic planning for women’s development” (Kawar, 1998: 241).

This UNDP project also reveals the manner in which the shift to gender equality projects is very strongly strategically oriented. This type of project follows a top-down approach to empowerment. Within this new framework women’s units are created from above with donor funding. Coupled with the type of projects discussed above, which focus on training women to lobby for their gender interests, the policy-making process is ultimately prioritized. There are clear advantages and gains associated with this approach especially in terms of avoiding discrimination against women in laws and legislation. Indeed, Palestinian women’s organizations have made many gains through their lobbying efforts: for instance, they have reversed legislation requiring women to obtain a male guardian’s consent to obtain a passport (Azzouni, 2000). Yet one cannot avoid the question, what about the rural women embedded in multiple struggles in her daily existence?

One should be alert to some of the corollary changes accompanying this new project focus. What can be termed the rise of the advocate raises questions about the relationship between women’s organizations and Palestinian women, which underlies and is affected by such changes. Consider the comments of the UNIFEM office in Palestine: “Why do such organizations need a wide popular audience? As NGOs, they work as advocates: therefore their relationship is with policy makers. Having said this, however, it is important NOT to forget who you are working for, or on behalf of. Obviously, the situation varies depending on the organization, its activities and its orientation, what they are trying to do, how they do it, and whether they are geared to policy level or grassroots. But in general one can say that what has been happening in Palestine is that NGOs have become advocates: people are not being empowered to speak out on their own.”

Global to the Local: ‘Gender’ and the New Phase in the Palestinian Women’s Movement

Palestinian academics have reconfirmed the general hypothesis we have presented thus far, and have alluded to the converging global and local factors underlying the insertion of training and advocacy projects into the local society. Hammami and Taraki have both discussed the insertion of the concept of ‘gender’ by donors into the local context and the parallel concerns among women activists that made this global agenda meaningful to them. Rema Hammami has argued that ‘gender’ was introduced into the Palestinian society under the guise of gender awareness or gender training within the women’s movement in the early 1990’s and onwards. She goes on to argue that, at the time, ‘The women’s movement (factional activists as well as independent NGOs) realized it was necessary to work on women’s issues as women’s issues, and attempt to mobilize women around their shared oppression as women. ‘Gender’ awareness became perceived as the appropriate method within a general craze for training occurring simultaneously.” (Hammami, 1995: 25)
Moreover, in line with Hammami’s explication, in the local context gender became the means for focusing on women’s rights or their lack of rights. Although, as Hammami notes, gender was used as equivalent to “women,” as opposed to a theoretical notion of gender inequalities being sustained by complex systems of power and discursive structures. (Hammami, 1995: 25)

Both Hammami and Taraki’s comments are useful in enabling us to locate the meeting of global and local priorities and how gender training and advocacy projects were inserted into the national landscape.

Clearly, in considering the arrival of gender projects in Palestine, there are overlapping developmental, social and political agendas at stake. The shift in the women’s movement towards a more concrete social agenda for women was met by expanding donor developmental spaces. There are complex questions: what issues can be raised about this process? Who were the actors in the women’s sector that directed this shift? What about the other organizations in the women’s sector? Overall, it is clear that the meeting of global and local agendas has served to carry the women’s movement forward, and facilitated the development of a women’s agenda centered around tackling discrimination against and inequality of women. Simultaneously, however, this has occurred as women’s organizations beyond the professional NGOs have faced increasing marginalization. Moreover, one can identify two characteristics of the women’s sector today. Firstly, it is clear to observers that the activities of the professional women’s NGOs and specialized centers, which have adopted gender training projects and an advocacy approach, have become the focal point of the women’s movement and center of women’s activism. They have been described as follows: “The women’s centers movement is made up of well-educated, politically sophisticated and feminist women” (Kawar, 1998: 237). Kawar goes on to explain, “The strategic goals of the women’s centers movement is women’s empowerment, and the agenda’s focuses are women’s political education and women’s rights. They conduct research, publish, hold workshops and provide forums for issues to be discussed and leadership developed” (Kawar, 1998: 237).

Notice that the author uses the term “women’s centers movement” to describe the activism of the women’s NGOs and centers. This is reflective of the second change that has occurred in the women’s sector since the shift in the women’s movement and the meeting of global and local agendas around the theme of gender projects. This second change is that there is a state of relative marginalization of women’s organizations, specifically some of the women’s committees and the women’s charitable societies. In this regard, it remains to ask whether this meeting of global and local agendas is accompanied by unintended changes or a reorientation of the women’s sector.

**Donor Priorities, Systems of Representation and Women’s Empowerment in Palestine**

As stated above, in contrast to the professional NGOs, the women’s committees and charitable societies are in fact quite marginalized. In this section, it will be argued that the current predicament of these organizations is related to many factors. According to some, professionalism and the donors’ political agenda have played a role in determining the fate of these organizations. In contrast to this, we will argue that one needs to consider the donor priorities, as reflected in their conceptual frameworks: more specifically, the manner in which donors represent third world women in their development frameworks and how they define women’s interests. Here, we are referring to donor prioritization of strategic women’s interests over practical women’s interests. On one level, this is the result of a narrow definition of ‘feminism,’ one that does not consider the possibility of a diversity of ‘feminisms’ (Sen and
Grown, 1987: 18-19). At the same time, such donor conceptualizations often reflect a particular (western) historical experience. However, the prioritization of strategic gender interests is not only reflected in donor discourse, but to some extent it is mirrored in the position of professional women’s activists.

In addition to this, at another level, inside the women’s sector one discerns discursive structures which operationalize/materialize the prioritization of strategic over practical interests and give it tangible form while also furthering its expance. In this sense, Hammami has argued that the concept of “gender” has been translated and used in the local context to mean “women” and has been associated with the expanse of a knowledge of women’s rights (Hammami, 1995: 25). We will introduce the idea that “gender” represents a discursive formation that has been used in the local context in settings of workshops, conferences, training sessions, etc., in settings where there is a meeting of different types of women actors. It is often introduced in a manner which facilitates the “creation of advanced/backwards binary constructions” (Puar, 1996: 86). This is to suggest that the idea of gender is introduced in encounters between women of different class, educational backgrounds or different urban-rural origins in such a way as to privilege those that identify empowerment with women’s rights, while the experience of those concerned with basic rights, such as concern for economic security, are somehow devalued. This will be discussed further below.

Before continuing, some qualifying statements are in order. In the literature on the Palestinian women’s movement, the charitable societies have been represented as ‘traditional,’ suggesting somehow that they are outside the women’s sector, or more accurately that they are incapable of contributing to the progress of women. It is true that such a differentiation has often been made on the basis of the women’s committees’ outreach capacity and their mobilization of women and the younger more activist orientation of their leadership (Jad, 1995; Kawar, 1998). At the same time, it has been agreed that in practical terms, and in terms of their actual projects, the difference between committees and charitable societies is minimal. Here one cannot avoid the question, what or, more pointedly, whose notions of empowerment inform such perceptions about the charitable societies?

Demystifying Essentialist Constructs

Views on the Palestinian women’s charitable societies are often situated within a dichotomous classification of tradition versus modernity. This will be challenged here. Such a classification is premised on teleological assumptions similar to those of modernization theory; it posits a linear view of progress, which has been effectively challenged by post-modernist thinkers. Such static notions of ‘tradition’ have been challenged by Palestinian women academics (Taraki, 1997: 20-21). Yet some of the criticisms raised against the charitable societies in the local context are clearly guided by this false assumption of a negative notion of ‘tradition’ existing in diametric opposition to modernity. For example, it has been said that the societies are run by an ‘old guard’ that is happy to keep monopolization of power with the head of the organization. This, however, ignores the fact that the problem of personal power pervades the NGO sphere as well, and is not restricted to one type of organization. As well, this position neglects that there is a new generation involved in the charitable societies that desires a change in leadership of these organizations (Interview with younger staff at Hebron Women’s Charitable Society). There are more problematic biases than these: for example, the societies are not recognized for their ability to provide a positive women’s space for poor and under-privileged rural women. In many cases, the practical needs that the societies try to meet are barely acknowledged as relevant for women’s advancement. Finally, it should be added that today there is a need for a reexamination of the charitable societies, since these organizations are still apart
from the women’s movement yet they remain relevant in that they are closer to the rural women than the professional NGOs.

**The View from the Ground Up, Three Examples from the Grassroots**

The following examples illustrate the conditions of charitable societies and women’s committees today. More importantly, they also provide an alternative perspective on the changing priorities of both the donors and the professionalized women NGOs.

*Inash el Usra*

Inash el Usra, established in 1965, operates a home for destitute girls and provides vocational training programs for young women. With Arab funding and solidarity support from Europe, the organization grew into a large national institution with over 100 employees. Today, the Inash is in a deep financial crisis; its main sources of funding have dried up and its income generating schemes rendered unprofitable due to increased competition with the opening up of the market to cheaper products from Asia.

The importance of this example is that it reveals the tension between practical and strategic feminist agendas and the difficulty of separating the two. Consider the comments of the Inash’s Director; she asks whether women can be expected to look towards their strategic interests, in terms of their rights as women, if the practical daily questions related to their existence, remain unsettled: “I cannot talk about gender before giving a woman the means to eat. The first step is to empower women, for example, to increase illiteracy and then give her some independence. When she is independent she can then think independently.”

This comment is significant, especially given the priority placed on strategic goals among the donors and the professional organizations. Moreover, the director of Inash seems aware of the shift in priorities overlapping the arrival of a new type of funding, and she hints that the donor’s have a hierarchical understanding of women’s forms of empowerment: “I have my role, others have their role. Why do donors put funding into one channel and not the other channel? I want to make women independent, this is our work…..We cannot all appeal to them or all play the same role. We are not neglecting any issues in Inash: women, gender, democracy or anything else. If they want to help an institution they should get to know it and help develop it. We need to improve our sewing machines. They are old and outdated, from the1970’s. They should understand this aim, not say “oh, machines….for women.” Let me tell you these machines will help increase the independence of individual women and enable them to buy food and not be a beggar in the streets.”

*Hebron Charitable Society for Women*

The charitable societies are the oldest type of NGO in Palestine and are often cast off as traditional organizations. This example, however, illustrates how an organization which addresses women’s practical needs can also develop into a *women’s space* – a positive domain for women where they receive support issues related to their daily lives. Therefore, such an organization can represent a site for a different form of empowerment.
We spent a day at this society; and it was truly a positive space for women. On that day they had organized a fundraising lunch for Iraq. Women were coming and going, bringing children to the day care. One important example, which challenges some of the perceptions of the societies, is the following: a woman police officer came in to leave her daughter at the day care. In a sense, this incident alone challenges the tendency to cast the societies into some abstract category labeled as ‘traditional.’ A woman police officer is a rarity in Palestine, especially in Hebron. In addition to important strategic forms of action such as lobbying for gender equality, this also represents a small but bold step that challenges gender boundaries through one’s own life choice. This very modern, gender conscious step was taken by a woman close to the Hebron Charitable Society.

It is indeed true that the older women who run the society are not the sophisticated, highly educated, donor-savvy women of the NGOs or centers, but at same time they seem to have succeeded in creating vibrant space for women in Hebron. Moreover, there are younger generations of women that work in or are associated with this society, such as the female police officer. Furthermore, it may be that from the perspective of professional NGOs, the societies do not have enough of ‘feminist’ consciousness and fail to challenge patriarchal structures in the family, and society at large. But at the same time, one should not neglect that the society provides important services for women in Hebron and a form of empowerment, which while not related to women’s strategic position in society, is still relevant. In this sense, this example shows that notions of empowerment need to be rethought and critically assessed for the possibility that a neglected complimentarity exists between what is viewed as strategic and what is perceived as practical matters of daily life.

Women’s Committee for Social Work

This third example shows the significance of a woman’s organization as a structure that enables women to act collectively to develop their own survival strategies. In contrast to the logic of the self-help notion that underlies projects that train women in gender and lobbying tactics, the importance of a structure that facilitates a mechanism through which women can act together remains very salient.

During our visit to this committee to meet with the Director, it was clear that women were coming in with their problems and seeking ways to address issues related to their daily lives with the other women of the committee.6 One woman was in a state of despair, wanting to find a way to cover her daughter’s transportation costs from the village to Birzeit University so the young woman could continue her education. The women in the committee discussed possible solutions. We were invited to help, and they asked us about possible support available from the ministries or NGOs.

This example illustrates the way that the women of the committee come together and solve problems collectively, therefore highlighting the relevance of the organization as a focal point for empowerment. Moreover, this raises the question that the projects, which focus on training, may dislodge women from the community, from essential organizational structures and networks that facilitate survival strategies and address the practical questions that are important.

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6 In contrast to the other committees, the Committee for Social Work is in better financial standing. One of the reasons may be its affiliation to the state party, Fatah.
for any strategic change in women’s position. On the other hand, as will be discussed below, some of the project officers in the professional NGOs try to escape the logic of training schemes by cultivating informal social networks with the women that can facilitate longer-term relations with these women.

### Possible Explanations for Marginalization of Women’s Organizations

There are different views on what explains the marginalization of the charitable societies and the women’s committees. According to one perspective, professionalization is one of the factors at work. Donors vary in the degree to which they assess administrative capacity when deciding to fund an organization. Nonetheless, in general, donor reporting requirements and the proposal writing process itself presupposes certain organizational capabilities. Some argue that the societies and the committees have been unable to keep up with, or to restructure themselves in order to meet these new demands. A director of an NGO describes the relations with donors today as follows: “On professionalization: now there is more reporting, documentation, transparency, in this era. This may not have existed before.

There was not this strong demand to report everything, they would give funds and you would show where funds went. There were no specific conditions or set procedures to follow. I do not think reporting is wrong. Funds should be accounted for, it is the right of donors to do so….But these small organizations really have a problem….We are in a new era and the smaller societies lack the professionalism to meet the demands of this era. It is not enough to run an organization on *baraka* or the spirit of voluntarism.”

Another perspective argues that in regard to the women’s committees, the donors’ political agendas combined with whether the organization was able to transform itself into an NGO had significant bearing on their development. According to one prominent female activist, the donor political agenda had direct impact on the future of the women’s committees: “There is also the donor agenda to support the peace process. The PFLP and DFLP have not entered into cooperation with the state. They are a real opposition and oppose Oslo. This is a problem we face with the funders. The donor community has a clear agenda, to support the peace process, not the opposition. These same committees that are marginalized today were heavily funded by donors during the first intifada; then they were recognized as an important tool to democratize society. Today they are not.”

The same activist acknowledges that some of the committees, which are supported by the donors today, have also undergone deep institutionalization and are more relevant for the donors than others: “The political parties that have cooperated with the PNA, including the left, namely the People’s Party and Fida, are more professionalized than the DFLP or PFLP. The latter have maintained their grassroots, but have little funding. They could not transform into a professionalized NGO due to ideology and mentality; they have very limited access to funding.”

As this quote suggests, the two factors, namely the ability of the committees to transform
themselves and the donors’ political agendas, overlapped and resulted in the configuration of marginalized grassroots versus professionalized NGOs that one observes today. This perspective is very illuminating but it neglects one point: the capacity of organizations affiliated to the communist (People’s party) to transform themselves into professional NGOs may be explained by the experience these organizations have gained with the donors, for the communists historically entered into relations with foreign donors before any other party.

**Donor Priorities: Practical over Strategic Interests**

In contrast to both of these useful perspectives, we suggest that the women’s sector in Palestine has been transformed in relation to both the shift in the women’s movement discussed above and the parallel arrival of a new donor agenda for women’s rights. The marginalization of the women’s organizations outside the NGOs is not just due to agendas of professionalism or political agendas. It also has to do with the effects of a new type of funding and manner in which donors represent women in their development frameworks, specifically in the way they define women’s empowerment. This has much to do with the prioritization of strategic interests over practical interests and touches upon a complex set of issues: donor development frameworks, the frame of reference for donor programs, and the implications that the conceptional dimension of donor programs has for the local society.

According to Puar, donor development frameworks are produced within a specific historical and cultural context and therefore inevitably reflect Western biases (Puar, 1996: 74). As an extension of this, Puar and others have argued that within donor conceptual frameworks, practical and strategic women’s interests are understood in a hierarchical manner, with the women’s strategic needs prioritized over the practical ones.

Drawing on Molyneux’s work, Puar defines practical versus strategic as follows: practical needs include access to health care, childcare, food, that is, matters that relate to daily survival. Strategic needs are those which try to change the patriarchal structures of society, related to re-conceptualizing society based on equality between men and women (Puar, 1996: 77).

In Puar’s analysis donors, due to certain forms of historical and cultural biases, prioritize the strategic gender interests of women, for these interests are the central front along which women in the West waged their own struggles for gender equality. Moreover, interests that are associated with the articulation of a ‘right’ or, as she states, ‘identity politics’ are understood as those that will change women’s condition. This has implications for ordinary and rural women and the way their experiences ‘fit’ into donor frameworks and funding schemes. As Puar states: “The positioning of Third World women within such oppositional frameworks (practical versus strategic) seems to privilege a middle-class status automatically understood as having a ‘higher’ or more ‘feminist’ consciousness revolving around identity politics. Strategic gender needs are thus understood as what ‘will ultimately change society’ and practical gender needs as the ‘best one could hope for from poor women’” (Puar, 1996: 77).

Marchand (1995) goes further than Puar, arguing that in the Latin American context, the dichotomy between practical and strategic needs is not only reflected in the development field, but within writing on Latin American women, and is reproduced by Latin American women feminists themselves. Marchand adds that this dichotomy is associated with a hierarchy of a ‘feminist’ (or strategic) over a ‘feminine’ (or practical) agenda. Furthermore, in her view this ultimately serves to silence the majority of Latin American women, their voices and knowledge. She points out that poor or working class women knew that discrimination against women, while exploitative and painful, is not as painful as being without food, shelter, or being unable to afford health care. Therefore, some argue that gender-related survival needs of poor women should be just as much a part of a mainstream ‘feminist agenda’ as reproductive health or liberal
feminist priorities (Marchand, 1995: 63).

What emerges from Puar and Marchand’s analysis is that, implicit within the donor prioritization of strategic over practical gender interests, is a form of representation which devalues women’s daily experiences, especially the poor and the rural women, and therefore silences the majority of women. Can the Palestinian women’s movement be built on internalization of these forms of representation, which disempower the majority of women and their daily experiences?

Some of the points raised in the theoretical discussion are evident in the Palestinian context. For instance, the UNDP’s gender program in Palestine, paints a picture of the Palestinian woman facing struggle on many fronts including access to basic services such as education and health care. This is definitely accurate. However, one can also argue that their portrayal of Palestinian women also falls in line with a static vision of the third world woman, the ‘victim’ of multiple and overlapping structures, including social norms and Islamic ‘fundamentalism.’

Moreover, after identifying basic needs as being a critical part of the challenges women face in improving their condition in Palestinian society, the UNDP go on to discuss their program, which is overwhelmingly tilted towards furthering strategic gender interests. Obviously, activities which bolster gender equality are extremely important, such as UNDP’s support for the development of a gender sensitive curriculum. This is not the issue, however, as strategic and practical interests are not diametrically opposed and can be advanced simultaneously. The point here is that the donor has prioritized the strategic agenda, and oriented its funding in that direction. (See, www.papp.undp.org/shr/gender.html)

At another level, if one maps the women’s organizations, one observes divisions emerging and the broader effects of hierarchical notions of women’s empowerment projected onto and re-articulated in the Palestinian society. Consider the comments of the General Union of Palestinian Women: “One thing I do want to say is that there is so much misinformation about women’s reality, and the nature of organizations such as ours. There is an idea of ‘traditional society’ which is very misleading. The former head of GUPW, Mrs. Khalil, was such a daring and creative woman. In the YWCA we were operating according to our constitution and holding regular elections (long before all of this talk about ‘governance’). Some people view these organizations as traditional and not moving forward. There is a grave misunderstanding here. The most important accomplishments have been made by such organizations. . . . Inash al-Uusra is like a mini-state. This is a huge organization. Rawdat az-Zuhur has been so creative in its teaching methods, it is really innovative, and started teaching about democracy a long time ago. These organizations have done fantastic work.”

It is true that there are other factors at work here contributing to a marginalization of these groups, such as the issue of professionalization. Nonetheless, the hierarchical ranking of strategic over practical women’s interests has contributed to producing certain forms of exclusion among women’s organizations, increasing stratification and gaps between groups. As implied by the quote above, many women’s organizations find themselves excluded from definitions of women’s advancement and some are trying to resist this.

One question which should be asked is: to what extent are the women’s professional organizations reproducing a hierarchical and possibly dichotomous understanding of practical versus strategic interests? Is there a space for the women’s committees, which are more strongly linked to the NGOs and women’s centers, to maintain a type of women’s organization that addresses basic rights, and serve as a space for women?

For example, the WATC, whose members include the women’s committees, has two discernible positions vis-à-vis the committees. On the one hand, WATC encourages and tries to facilitate ‘institution building’ of the committees by providing training in organizational skills, including accounting procedures and computer skills. (See WATC Annual Report 1998.) Clearly this is quite important. On the other hand, WATC’s other position is somewhat problematic; the
organization seems to be pulling the women’s committees down the path taken by the women’s NGOs, namely, towards advocacy, training and adopting a self-help attitude towards women. (See, for example, WATC, Sanabel and Advocacy with Grassroots Women Projects, Annual Report, 1998.) The committees are encouraged to follow the project approach used by the women’s NGOs, namely, the advocacy approach to empowerment. This is not in itself bad. As pointed out above, some committees choose to be more oriented toward women’s rights due to their ideological considerations. Moreover, some women’s activists argue that the committees themselves face a quandary in terms of their relationship with the grassroots population. The committee’s own legitimacy is hurt by the waning of the national movement. The point here, however, is that without incorporating initiatives to maintain space for women’s committees in which these organizations can adopt a more basic rights approach, professional women’s NGOs reproduce and reinforce the dichotomy of strategic versus practical.

Finally, the idea was introduced above that the concept of ‘gender’ has manifested inside the women’s sector as a discursive formation, which differentiates and sets up a ranking of women’s experiences, valuing the posture which is directed towards equality and women’s strategic position. This requires further explanation.

Foucault enriched our understanding of social relations through his work, particularly by identifying the interrelationship between knowledge and power and by explaining the way power operates. According to his work, a discursive formation not only represents a claim to truth but, when normalized, it supports an overarching regime of truth. In his discussion of Foucault’s method, Al Amoudi explains that with the genealogical method, Foucault expands his ideas, arguing that discursive formations are both generated by, and also generate non-discursive practices (Al Amoudi, 2000:13).

In the Palestinian context, the concept of gender carries with it a hierarchical notion of women’s empowerment. This emerges out of the complex meeting of global and local factors discussed above; in turn, this has a constitutive effect on local practices. Consider the feelings of exclusion expressed above by the GUPW or Inash el Usra. Some of the women from rural areas, whom we interviewed after they attended workshops in Ramallah, expressed feelings of alienation and dissociation with the conceptual tools used in the discussions. In contrast to this, consider the example of the ENDA organization that does not use the term ‘gender.’ This is somehow a very neutral approach, which escapes the hegemonic enforcement of a concept into a local context.

III. Conclusion

This article has examined the global and local factors underpinning the entry of two agendas into Palestinian society: income generating projects and gender equality programs. It has been argued that one can observe a complimentary meeting and connectivity between globally endorsed approaches to women’s advancement and the strategic interests of women’s groups emerging from their own historical development, as situated within their local context.

In regard to gender equality programs, we shed light on some of the biases and hierarchical classifications implicit within donor conceptual frameworks. Therefore, we have identified the importance of donor systems of representation as well as some of the implications of how they represent Southern women’s interests.

Let us conclude with a few observations on the conditions of Palestinian women’s organizations today, indicating the implications of agendas becoming embedded in the local structures.

At a recent conference, a prominent Palestinian female academic critiqued the women’s NGOs. According to her, today NGOs do not play a role in organizing women or in trying to
build ties with them. Moreover, she sees the professionalized women’s organizations as having less of an impact on women than the old model of charitable society, which at the very least has a general assembly, and people are members and are invited once a year to debate policies. The new organizations have a closed board: reflecting an elitist construction. Similarly, another female academic and activist expressed to us that today there is a feeling among Palestinian women at the grassroots level that groups providing training have become like missionaries, and increasingly women don’t want to listen. In her opinion, it is important not only to theorize about women’s rights, but also to try to solve practical issues.

At the same conference referred to above, a paper was presented on the experience of the South African women’s movement. The presenter from South Africa problematized the notion of a ‘women’s movement,’ highlighting the fault lines inside the movement and the need for alliance building among South African women’s groups. As she states, “Practical gender needs continue to be the major focus of black women, the majority of whom are African, poor, unemployed and living in rural areas…. Strategic gender struggles seem academic, remote, far fetched for the majority of women who are literally struggling to survive” (Mtintso, 1999: 10).

She discusses the gap between the popular ‘feminine’ movement and the more ‘feminist’ movement, which is led by academics and professionals. She stresses the importance of alliance building between the two groupings and asserts that gender activism should be strong and united: “Such activists should be organized in a strong woman’s and feminist movement to act as a proper base for gender transformation. There should be no dichotomy between the Popular Women’s Movement and the Feminist Movement but rather they should be seen as interdependent and complementing each other” (Mtintso, 1999: 15).

To what extent does a similar consciousness exist in Palestine? Why did the donor emphasis on strategic ‘feminist’ agenda find such resonance in Palestine? To what extent are the charitable societies considered apart from the Palestinian women’s movement due to the fact that they address women’s practical needs? What about the women’s committees?

**Dialectical Development of the Women’s Movement**

Let us conclude by looking at the nascent trends evident in the women’s sector. A program officer at the Palestinian Women’s Working Society (PWWS) described to us the way in which she tries to transforms her program, which is essentially a civic education project intended to train women in issues such as gender. As opposed to simply training women in a particular set of skills, the program officer uses the training schemes as a means to enter into the grassroots and form lasting relations with women. Since 1996 she has worked in the same rural locations and has become familiar with the women and their issues. She insists that this is not a typical training exercise in which women are met once and then never seen again. She points out that over the years through this program she has gained 78 volunteers from among the beneficiaries. She also points out that when the women, for example, raise an issue related to their health care needs, or that concerns agriculture matters she has brought the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees and Medical Relief Committees into the community.

In discussions with us, an important women’s activist expressed her thoughts on the future

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7 These comments were made by Islah Jad. See: “The Palestinian Women’s Movement Problematics of Democratic Transformation and Future Strategies,” Proceedings of the 5th Annual Muwatin Conference held in Cooperation with the Women Studies Institute, Birzeit University, Ramallah: Muwatin, 1999.
of women’s organizations in Palestine. As she explained, women’s NGOs have taken up an extremely essential role and are creating a gender aware public. Yet she also revealed that some of the professional centers, for instance, that provide counseling on legal issues still have women coming to them and asking how to deal with poverty and daily survival. This women’s activist foresees a dialectical development of the women’s movement, and it is fitting to end with her observations:

“There is a kind of transformation happening. I think in 2-3 years there will be change in the women’s movement, it will become more political — it will politicize daily life. The best outlet is to try to promote some projects that address practical issues. It is the only way to convince the grassroots and regain their confidence. I think that with a return to the grassroots, organizations will have to deal with a new agenda.”
IV. Bibliography


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