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Western Donor Assistance and Gender Empowerment in the Palestinian Territories and Beyond

Manal A. Jamal^a

^a Assistant Professor, James Madison University, Department of Political Science, 91 E Grace Street, MSC 7705 Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA

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Western Donor Assistance and Gender Empowerment in the Palestinian Territories and Beyond

MANAL A. JAMAL

James Madison University, USA

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the quest to spread democracy has become the rallying call of many Western donor agencies. Reflecting this new agenda, new program priorities prevailed that placed greater emphasis on civil society development, civic engagement and gender empowerment. Contrary to expectations, however, many of these programs have often adversely affected existing social movements. Most scholars attempting to explain these unintended outcomes have focused on the impact of NGO professionalization. Examining the Palestinian women's movement, this article addresses the inadequacy of this explanation and focuses on the political dimension of this discussion by illustrating how Western donors' lack of understanding of the Palestinian women's movement and its "embeddedness" in the broader political context served to weaken and undermine this movement. The influx of Western donor assistance in the post-Madrid, post-Oslo era, along with the greater emphasis on Western promoted gender empowerment, undermined the cohesiveness of the women's movement by exacerbating existing political polarization (that went beyond Islamist and secular divisions) and disempowering many grassroots activists. Effectively, many of these activists were transformed from active political participants involved in their organizations to the recipients of skills and services in need of awareness raising. Findings in this article also speak to current regional developments, especially in light of the current Arab uprisings and the promise of greater Western involvement to empower women in the region.

Keywords

gender empowerment, democracy promotion, Western donor assistance, Palestinian women's movement, Arab women

Since the end of the Cold War, the quest to spread democracy in different parts of the world has become the rallying call of many Western donor agencies. Reflecting this new agenda, new program priorities prevailed that placed greater emphasis on civil society development, civic engagement and “gender empowerment.” Related projects included leadership training, advocacy and lobbying, media training and civic education about democratization and human rights, often with a particular emphasis on the empowerment of women. Training programs became an integral component of democracy promotion efforts, and have saturated the Arab world since the early 1990s. Despite the variation in all these programs in terms of constituencies targeted and themes emphasized, many failed to appreciate the complexity of existing social movements in these societies, and the intrinsic political and social realities in which they are embedded. A closer look at the role of Western donor assistance, especially funding allocated to civil society development and gender empowerment, illustrates how the failure to understand and acknowledge the broader political context, as well as the local, national and regional realities in which these movements are embedded, often undermined the cohesiveness of these social movements, exacerbated existing political polarization and transformed collective struggles into individual cases that conceivably could be addressed through rights training.

Developments in the Palestinian women’s movement over the course of two decades illustrate how Western-funded women’s empowerment programs inadvertently (or otherwise) undermined one of the strongest sectors of Palestinian civic and political organization. In the immediate years after the Madrid Peace Conference¹ and the signing of the Oslo Accords,² the Palestinian territories were among the world’s highest recipients of Western donor assistance on a per capita basis (Jamal 2012).³ This aid was allocated to reconstruction, development and government support, with substantial allocations to civil society development and women’s empowerment.⁴ Relative to other sectors, the women’s sector was an important priority for many Western donors.⁵ According to the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC), foreign donors committed US\$19.943 million to the women’s sector between 1994 and 2000.⁶ Although this figure did not include all funding committed to the sector, especially to the professionalized NGOs,⁷ it was relatively higher than commitments to other sectors such as children and youth, private sector development and telecommunications.

GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN CONTEXT

Departing from standard explanations which have focused on the unanticipated impact of NGO professionalization (see Henderson 2003 and, in the specific Palestinian case, Hammami 1995; Jad 2007) and the polarizing role of Islamist groups to explain the weakening of women’s movements in the region, this article illustrates how Western donors promoted gender empower-

ment programs that were disconnected from the local, national and global realities in which the women's movement was embedded, and reinforced political and social hierarchies that ultimately weakened the movement. Over a decade ago, Parpart, Rai and Staudt (2002) cogently explained how empowerment required understanding and engaging within the specific historical context of power operating at the micro and macro levels, and why it must be analyzed in global and national as well as local terms. As they elaborated:

Although empowerment is a process whereby women and men experience as well as challenge and subject power relationships, it takes place in institutional, material and discursive contexts. Whether gaining skills, developing consciousness or making decisions, individual empowerment takes place within the structural constraints of institutions and discursive practices. Groups become empowered through collective action, but that action is enabled or constrained by the structures of power that they encounter. (Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2002, 4)

Power hierarchies, therefore, are not only locally produced, but may be reinforced and reconstituted by the involvement of regional and international actors, including foreign donors. True (2011, 88) cautioned that a limited approach to gender-mainstreaming, where inequality and injustice are seen as problems of developing countries, can reinforce these dynamics because international institutions are not removed from power politics.

Staudt (2002, 95–109) highlighted a number of the problems associated with bilateral assistance to women's NGOs. She asked the critical question: "... which NGOs get support, and whose interests do they represent?" Her observation about the outcome of this aid is of importance to an examination of the Palestinian women's movement. Drawing on Alvarez's work on Brazil (1990) and Lewis' work on Cameroon (1997), Staudt observed that, unless donors know their national contexts, such support can aggravate women in poverty, facilitate cross-class coalitions or get snarled in partisan politics.

In the Palestinian case, the depoliticized nature of many of these gender empowerment programs ignored internal local political dynamics, and more onerously, Israel's ongoing military occupation, and operated as if in a sovereign context. Scholars such as Kuttab have highlighted that empowerment schemes must address the impact of occupation, arguing that: "... the community and women's efforts in the political struggle which feed into continuous resistance, steadfastness and coping should be the new framework to measure Palestinian women's empowerment" (2009, 73). In my analysis, although I concur that the impact of Israel's military occupation must be addressed by women's empowerment schemes, I do not agree that it should shape the entire framework of women's empowerment. Local political and social dynamics are equally important in constraining women's empowerment. According to my research findings, a situation emerged in which the interests of dominant political groups that were accepted and promoted by the spirit of the Oslo Accords and Western donors converged; this convergence served to

exacerbate existing political polarization between those who were included in the post-Oslo political landscape and could receive Western funding to support their organizations, and those who could not (see Jamal 2006, 2012). Western donors' lack of understanding of the Palestinian women's movement (especially in terms of its historic strength and societal reach and its relationship to the broader political context) and lack of recognition of the extent to which women were adversely affected by the ongoing military occupation policies, undermined the movement as a whole.

New tensions and animosities emerged in the women's movement that coincided along political lines: new incentive structures transpired that depoliticized this movement, and the female activists were effectively transformed from political participants involved in shaping their own organizations to recipients of skills and services – often with little opportunity to apply these skills. The broader constraints of Israeli military occupation (at the regional level) and the post-Oslo political framework, which effectively marginalized opposition groups (at the local level), did not figure in these empowerment programs. In a paper prepared and submitted to the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs, Abu Nahleh, Kuttab and Taraki (2003) examined the program documents of six donor organizations, assessing their limited approach to women's "empowerment" in the Palestinian context. In what follows, I engage this discussion by illustrating how these limited notions of gender empowerment manifested in the Palestinian women's movement.

This article focuses on the Palestinians women's sector with its constellation of women's grassroots committees, professionalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and gender-related programs and projects in the Jerusalem-Ramallah access area, and it assesses the types of relations that transpired between different tendencies of the women's sector, their ability to incorporate grassroots constituencies and how the female activists themselves felt about the changes that the women's sector had undergone. This article compares two time periods: (1) the pre-Madrid, direct Israeli military occupation rule period during which the Palestinian women's committees emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s; and (2) the post-Madrid, Palestinian Authority and indirect Israeli military occupation rule period beginning in 1991. Departing from a top-down approach that has dominated the study of how donor assistance has shaped civil society, or society more generally, I examine developments at the micro-level. Moreover, the article reaffirms a feminist approach to scholarship (Youngs 2004), and places the female activists and their experiences at the center of the analysis. My conversation therefore is not only with other scholars but also with the activists who enabled and informed my study (for more on this methodological discussion, see Tickner and Sjoberg 2011, 6–14). In addition to extensive interviews with the directors of NGOs, this article also draws from interviews with grassroots activists. This article relies on primary materials collected from Palestinian NGOs and Western donor agencies and on over ninety interviews I conducted in the Palestinian

territories during 2001, 2006 and 2009 with grassroots activists, heads of NGOs, political leaders and directors of donor agencies.⁸

Beyond the Palestinian case, this article speaks to the “assumed promise” of external intervention to promote democratization and gender empowerment in different parts of the world, and especially in light of the current Arab uprisings and the Western world’s promise to promote gender empowerment in the region. Although the historical background of the Palestinian women’s movement is unique, especially in terms of its emergence from the political organizations of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its focus on mass mobilization, it illustrates the problematic dynamics that may transpire when donors do not fully appreciate the economic and political realities in which these movements are embedded. The Palestinian case is an extreme example of debilitating regional constraints and a non-inclusive political context in which Western donor involvement, especially state-sponsored donors, was highly politicized and played a critical role in exacerbating existing political and social polarization, and depoliticizing women’s work. Other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Tunisia, do not share the same history of women’s organizing as the Palestinian case. However, female activists, existing women’s movements and the emergence of future women’s organizations in these contexts will also be tied to local political realities, and it is imperative that donors understand these linkages and the longer-term implications of supporting certain women and women’s organizations over others. The Palestinian case also contrasts strongly with other cases such as El Salvador and South Africa in which more accommodating regional dynamics and the inclusivity of the post-conflict political settlements, in which all parties were represented, prevented the degree of political polarization that transpired in the Palestinian case. Moreover, because cases like El Salvador and South Africa became less geo-strategically significant to many state-sponsored donors after the Cold War, the major funders of the women’s organization were often the less politicized smaller donor organizations and foundations, and not state-sponsored donors.

EXPLAINING UNANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

In general, scholars explaining the impact of donor assistance on social movements have focused on the inevitable impact of NGO professionalization: Western donors often require institutions to “professionalize” their operations so that they are better able to keep detailed financial records and provide more accurate financial recording. The professionalization process entails a host of organizational changes which includes increased specialization, hierarchies of pay, more formal channels of communication and decision-making, and often a greater need for better-educated, English-speaking employees (Markowitz and Tice 2002). Consequently, professionalization results in more elitist NGOs that are more accountable to their donors than the constituencies they

are supposed to serve (see Henderson 2003). A number of scholars have written on the professionalization of NGOs in the specific Palestinian context (Hammami 1995; Hanafi and Tabar 2005; Jad 2007) but, as this article illustrates, professionalization is an inadequate explanation to account for changes that the Palestinian women's movement has undergone. In particular, professionalization alone does not explain the variation in outcomes between cases, especially pertaining to degree. Although institutional changes as a result of professionalization may explain the weakening of organizations or distancing from grassroots as organizations become more accountable to their donors rather than the constituencies they are supposed to serve, they do not account for macro transformations in the overall fabric of a social movement, or for the political exclusion that became a defining feature of post-Oslo, civic organizational life. Moreover, professionalization explanations assume that these are involuntary, abstract processes in which no agency is involved. As the following discussion illustrates, various parties formally adopted strategies that would enable professionalization, and knowingly and willingly distanced themselves from various political groups, including different grassroots constituencies. What transpired in the Palestinian case was not simply tension between those organizations that professionalized and those that did not, but rather an exacerbation of polarization that coincided along political lines shaped by the parameters of the Oslo Accords.

In the context of the Middle East, a second explanation often advanced to account for the overall weakening of women's movement relates to the rise of Islamist groups at the expense of more secular groups. Although the rise of Islamists can explain the increased polarization between secularists and Islamists, it does not explain the multiple and complex patterns of polarization that transpired in Palestinian society more generally. Patterns of polarization in Palestinian society also existed among secularists, especially those who supported the Oslo Accords (or were more liberal and Western in their cultural orientation) and those who did not. Since the take-over of Gaza by *Hamas* in 2007 (see Hroub 2010 for more on *Hamas*), some women's organizations have confronted more challenges. However, as Sayigh (2011) explained, the record is mixed, and although *Hamas* has been more willing to restrict the activities of organizations that encourage mixing of males and females, they have been encouraging of organizations which focus on socio-economic programs.

Although important differences exist between the various Western donor agencies, they are much more similar than different in their democracy promotion and civil society building efforts, which includes funding to women's groups and women's empowerment programs. Scholars, such as Challand (2009) and Le More (2008), have argued that Western donors to Palestine differ significantly in their politics and programs. A closer look at the democracy promotion programs of state-sponsored donors in particular, however, points to considerable similarity. Carothers (1999, 12) concurs: "In fact, in comparing democracy programs sponsored by varied governments

and international institutions, what is most striking is not their difference, but their similarities.” Western democracy promotion assistance, especially allocations to civil society development, contrasted sharply with assistance from Arab countries, which was most often allocated to Palestinian Authority (PA) budget support. What funding Arab countries disbursed to the NGO sector was most often allocated to charities.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PALESTINIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE CENTRALITY OF MASS MOBILIZATION

Historically, the women's sector was at the forefront of Palestinian civic, political and social activism. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the capacity of the PLO-affiliated women's committees to incorporate women from all socio-economic and political backgrounds and to genuinely involve them in the decision-making of their respective committees was their most significant achievement. In spite of this rich and dynamic history, in the post-Madrid, post-Oslo era, this sector became less representative and inclusive of women in society at large, more fragmented and generally less able to address women's most important concerns. Mass mobilization and inclusion of women from all walks of life appeared to be part of a bygone era.

In 1978, female cadres from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) founded the first women's committee, the Women's Working Committee (WCC). Though the founders were politically affiliated, the organization was not supposed to be partisan and was open to all women in spite of their political affiliations (for a detailed discussion of the Palestinian women's committees that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, refer to Hiltermann 1991; Hasso 2005). By 1981, the women's group began to splinter along factional lines. Female leaders from other political factions worried that the leaders of the WCC would later recruit some of the members to the DFLP.⁹ In March 1981, women affiliated with the Palestinian Communist Part (PCP) founded the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees (UPWWC) with branches throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGS). Later that year, women affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) established the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC). In 1982, women affiliated with *Fateh* founded the Union of Women's Committee for Social Work (WCSW). In 1989, the WCC was renamed the Federation of Palestinian Women's Action Committees (FPWAC) (Hiltermann 1991, 134).

Although the women's committees splintered along political lines, for the most part they shared the same goals: to enhance the status of women by empowering them to improve their daily living conditions, and to lend support to the broader national struggle.¹⁰ While this splintering heightened competition between the different women's groups in terms of recruiting members, it propelled them to extend their reach and recruit larger numbers of women to their respective committees. By establishing committees in

different areas, the women were able to address concerns that were specific to their location.¹¹ In general, many of the programs in both the rural and urban areas addressed women's practical needs and included literacy classes, health education, small-scale vocational training, the provision of childcare and the establishment of ventures such as cooperatives for the production of goods.¹² The leaders of the committees felt that by addressing women's most pressing needs, they were working towards greater gender equality in society. The effective incorporation of women provided them with a forum to identify their immediate needs and the opportunity to develop programs to address them. These women acquired skills that helped them better organize themselves and more effectively advocate their interests and preferences. Moreover, some of the activists in the women's committees were recruited to the parent political organizations, and some attained leadership positions.

The various committees supported their activities primarily through membership fees, small income-generating activities, occasional seed money from solidarity organizations and funding from the parent political faction or organization. Few, if any, of the activists were paid for their involvement in the women's movement; this ensured that the spirit of voluntarism was the driving force behind civic and political participation. The Palestinian women's committees' ability to recruit large numbers of women (in the thousands) from different sectors of society, including remote villages, and to involve them effectively in decision-making structures were among the most important and uncontested of their achievements. In reminiscing about this period, all of the activists recalled with nostalgia their commitment to the committees and the important roles they played in shaping their programs and in meeting the needs of women in Palestinian society. In "Feminist Generations," Hasso (2001, 586) traced the impact of women's previous involvement in these committees on their later life choices, and demonstrated how the activists had developed a higher sense of self-efficacy and were differentiated by their gender egalitarian ideology. The success of this mobilization strategy became most evident during the first *Intifada*, the Palestinian uprising which took place between 1988 and 1993 (Robinson 1997). Women's widespread, grassroots-based, non-violent civil disobedience was pivotal in sustaining the uprising during that period.

THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE WOMEN'S SECTOR IN THE POST-MADRID, POST-OSLO PERIOD

Following the initiation of the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991, the leaders and organizers of the grassroots committees felt that that the programs of the committees needed to accommodate the new state-building and burgeoning peace process stage. This realization coincided with the increased availability of Western donor assistance and Western donor objectives which prioritized supporting the peace process. The transition strategy adopted by

the women's grassroots committees was determined by their expressed political positions vis-à-vis the Oslo Accords and, as a result, their ability to access Western donor funding. Western donors' had a lack of understanding of the movement, especially in terms of its strength and reach, and a lack of appreciation of how unequal access to resources and selective support for certain individuals and components of the movement would undermine it as a whole.

In general, three broad tendencies emerged in Palestinian society and in the Palestinian women's sector in particular. The first of these could be best described as the "Liberal Moderates," a non-opposition to the Oslo Accords tendency which was able to access Western donor funding, and as a result professionalized many of its organizations. This tendency was more Western-oriented in its cultural and socio-economic orientation, and therefore more acceptable to Western donors. The second tendency, "the Opposition," included groups of women's grassroots committees and organizations¹³ which did not support the Oslo Accords, and therefore were in a less favorable position to access Western donor funding, but bound to the professionalized organizations for resources. In between were the *Fateh*-affiliated grassroots women's committees, which had consolidated a clientelistic relationship with the Palestinian Authority (PA). Though these organizations were in a position to access Western funding, they were often less compelled to do so because of their access to resources from *Fateh* and the PA. While a number of strong and professionalized organizations that were active in international networks emerged in the Palestinian women's sector, their contribution to collectively strengthening the Palestinian women's movement became dubious. The newly emergent professionalized women's organizations were not required to incorporate and engage grassroots constituencies; in effect, a strategic delinking of the grassroots resulted as an agenda focused on promoting peace accords and "appropriate" societal leaders transpired. Depoliticized NGO programs often addressed the empowerment of women as separate from the broader economic and political context. Moreover, programmatic changes exacerbated polarization between included groups that were able to access foreign donor funding, and excluded groups that could not.

The Liberal Moderates

The tendency of the women's sector that became most intimately associated with professionalization is what I describe as the "Liberal Moderates." This group of activists was not adamant in its opposition to the Madrid and Oslo Accords, and were more liberal and Western in their cultural orientation, and therefore in a better position to access Western donor funding. Two such groups in the women's sector were a faction within the FPWAC, which supported the peace accords and was loosely affiliated with Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA, a splinter party of the DFLP) and women within the UPWWC who spearheaded the process of establishing professionalized

women's NGOs. Groups within FIDA and PPP adopted NGO professionalization of their grassroots organizations as a way to facilitate their political transition in the post-Madrid era. NGO professionalization would provide these factions and their leaders with an opportunity to obtain Western donor funding, and thus a chance to remain involved in the political life of Palestine without being wed to the Oslo Accords. Many of the cadre who established professionalized organizations adopted programs which addressed human rights, "women's empowerment" and civic education to appeal to Western donor priorities.

Most of the organizations established by PPP and FIDA did not incorporate their grassroots constituencies and decided to distance themselves from their grassroots bases, so that the organizations would not be "politically labeled" and therefore in a better position to access Western donor funding. In 1991, cadre from the PPP, along with pro-FIDA cadre of the FPWAC, established the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC).¹⁴ Pro-FIDA cadres from the FPWAC also established the Women's Studies Center.¹⁵ A few of the leaders of the UPWWC took over the Ramallah membership base and established a professional women's NGO in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area, the Palestinian Working Women's Society for Development (PWWSD); this decision was reached against the will of other organizers of the UPWWC¹⁶ and of the PPP. In 1994, members of the UPWWC went on to establish the Jerusalem Center for Women, and two gender desks in PPP-affiliated NGOs: Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (LAW) and the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC).¹⁷ The PWWSD and PARC's gender unit were among the only organizations that incorporated their grassroots constituencies into the organizational structure of their organizations.¹⁸

Meanwhile, in 1992, a number of female cadres from *Fateh* and the Liberal Moderate organizations founded the Women's Affairs Technical Committees (WATC) to assist the Palestinian negotiators in preparing for negotiations with Israel.¹⁹ WATC leaders eventually decided to professionalize the institution into a coalition of women's organizations in which women's committees could serve as institutional members. Despite the intended inclusivity of the WATC, some felt that for the most part it was still controlled by pro-*Fateh* members, or at least not as inclusive of women associated with the opposition tendency.²⁰

The newly professionalized organizations tended to be the major recipients of state-sponsored Western donor funding. In general, the larger state-sponsored donor agencies provided more generous donor packages to their recipients, especially in regions where they were geo-strategically invested. In return, they were more stringent about the political backgrounds and credentials of their recipients. Funding patterns to the WATC were illustrative: most of the donor agencies that funded this organization, as well as other professionalized NGOs, included larger bilateral or state-sponsored donor agencies. In 2001, among the donors to the WATC were *Diakonia* (a Swedish

development organization), the European Union (EU), the Norwegian Representative Office, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Canada Fund and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (a German political foundation) – a number of which were/are heavily invested in promoting the Oslo Accords.

To better meet the professionalization criteria of Western donors, projects that lent themselves to quantifiable outputs and could be implemented within established funding cycles became more prevalent. Those organizations that were in a position to access Western donor funding were also clever in manipulating their programs to meet donor objectives. Invariably, the programs shifted towards short-term goals, thereby compromising the longer-term developmental objectives of many organizations that had intended to address the needs of women in the grassroots committees. These professionalized organizations were successful in terms of the number of seminars and training courses they held and the number of reports they produced. Although these outputs met important criteria for the donors who funded them, the impact of this work was less appreciated by fellow activists.

Changes in the organization of this sector as well as in the programs led to a new hierarchy which weakened the movement. The polarization, also characterized by discernible anger, was not only between salaried and non-salaried employee, but between those who found a place in the post-Oslo political landscape and those who could not. The greater emphasis on post-Oslo state-building led to a general de-politicization of programs, and lesser ability to address women's most pressing concerns. Of the eight newly professionalized women's NGOs (mostly of the Liberal Moderate tendency), only two worked directly with grassroots constituencies – the PWWSD and PARC through its Rural Women's Development project. In general, interactions between the Opposition grassroots organizations, the WCSW and the Liberal Moderate professionalized NGO sector became limited to lectures, training sessions and workshops; these interactions were often mediated through the WATC and the General Union of Palestinian Women. Popular topics in these workshops included domestic violence, women's rights and civic education. Training sessions included gender-sensitivity and gender empowerment training, computer classes, promotion of women in the media and government lobbying strategies. A founding member of the FPWAC and a force behind the founding of the WCLAC and the Women's Studies Center, Zahira Kamal, acknowledged that these professionalized NGOs had not served their intended goals. She explained: "We did not anticipate that these NGOs would become so distant from the grassroots. An important link between the female former political cadres who run these NGOs and the grassroots has been lost."²¹ These schisms between the grassroots women's committees (excluding the WCSW) and the professionalized women's NGOs (including the WATC) coincided along political lines which further exacerbated polarization.

Most problematically, the members of the women's committees were effectively transformed from active political participants involved in their own organizations to recipients of skills and services in need of "awareness raising," often with little opportunity to apply their skills. Previously, many of the members of the women's committees were involved in choosing the projects and programs of their respective committees. Economic projects, although not always very lucrative, often figured prominently in these programs. As Western donor priorities shifted to promoting the Oslo Accords and the associated state-building phase, women's most pressing economic and political problems, often intimately associated with the persistence of Israel's military occupation, were no longer priorities. Because of Israel's closure policies which restricted Palestinian movement, many families lost their main breadwinner which necessitated more women to seek paid employment. Aside from PARC's gender unit economic development program, most of the professionalized NGOs did not focus on the actual living conditions of Palestinian women and their productive role, but rather disproportionately focused on changing legislation and gender stereotypes, "consciousness-raising" and sometimes the provision of individual relief. Keen to promote potential political leaders and pro-Oslo discourses and norms, by 2001, all of the five new women's NGOs and three gender desks in the Jerusalem-Ramallah access area provided educational training sessions: six of the organizations provided training in the area of women's rights, human rights and democracy.²² Qazzaz's (2007) more recent research on women's NGO and election literacy training further corroborated my earlier findings. According to Qazzaz (2007), recipients of the training complained that they had received the same training from a number of different NGOs.

The division that transpired was not simply between an elite sector of the women's movement and the grassroots, but rather political in that one sector of the women's movement was able to establish professionalized NGOs, and another could not. Meanwhile, the *Fateh* affiliated women's groups further cemented their clientelistic networks. For those associated with the former pole (what became the professionalized NGOs), the Palestinian territories were in state-building phases and therefore NGOs needed to prioritize legislation, institution building and the development of responsible citizens. This sector of the women's movements, by definition, became more accountable to the donors who funded them. For those associated with the latter pole (the grassroots committees that were unable to professionalize), the plight of women could not be addressed as separate from Israel's continued military occupation, the economic challenges women faced and the local political dynamics in which they were immersed. Many women in the grassroots committees, especially associated with the latter pole, felt that a defining problem was that the newly established Western donor-funded NGOs had begun addressing issues pertaining to women's rights as if they existed in a

vacuum. One activist succinctly explained: "These NGOs began to work as if they existed in an independent Palestine."²³ Another organizer explained: "We used to focus on social issues at a popular level, but we now overwhelmingly focus on legal and educational issues related to civil society, democracy and elections."²⁴ Another activist ironically referred to the establishment of a hotline for domestic abuse by one of these new professionalized NGOs: "Don't these women or the donors who fund them understand that most Palestinian villages still don't have phone lines, or running water for that matter?"²⁵

According to many of the activists, there needed to be greater emphasis on skills training which would enhance their employment opportunities. One coordinator explained: "Many of our members are disappointed with the current programs [of the WATC] . . . We talk about lobbying, advocacy and democracy, but this does not address many women's real problems which are related to the lack of employment and poverty which are directly an outcome of the current political situation."²⁶ Another coordinator complained: "Most professionalized NGOs only focus on educational programs and lectures. Very few focus on the productive role of women."²⁷ Another coordinator added: "One set of WATC training sessions in Hebron cost approximately US\$4,000.00; this money could have been more constructively used for more sustainable projects."²⁸ Programs that emphasized skills training, they argued, would yield the greatest returns to society, instead of training sessions and workshops that were not sustainable in the absence of donor support. One organizer lamented: "I feel much of this funding is for nothing. When we criticize these programs, the response is that the donors want this, or this is the donor's plan."²⁹ Many of the activists shared the view that foreign donor funding could have been put to better use.

Although at face value these complaints may have represented the grievances of unsalaried activists, they encapsulated an emerging tension shaping post-Oslo Palestinian political life: an emergent political elite that was able to navigate through the post-Oslo political landscape, and an opposition that felt that local political dynamics and Israel's military occupation were persistent problems that could not be adequately addressed by the new programmatic priorities of Western-funded, professionalized NGOs.

New Tensions and Animosities

The new structure of relations in which non-opposition, or Liberal Moderate professionalized women's organizations especially umbrella organizations such as the WATC, received most of the Western foreign funding created new animosities and tensions between the different tendencies. Ultimately, many women conveyed that the creation of the WATC lessened the likelihood that the grassroots women's committees would be the direct recipients of foreign donor assistance.³⁰

Although the grassroots committees remained crucial for implementing many of these programs and provided the necessary social conduits for reaching women in various locations, especially more remote villages, they felt that, since they were associated with anti-Oslo political groups, they could not receive the financial assistance they needed to effectively promote or sustain their work. When invited to training sessions, individuals from these grassroots committees received transportation costs and meals if they participated in WATC events. A grassroots coordinator explained how they [the grassroots committees] were willing to forgo funding from an organization to ensure that the WATC did not receive additional funding in their name.³¹ Although this particular USAID funded program no longer exists, the activists' sentiments towards the program were illustrative of the dynamics that had transpired. Often only leaders of the grassroots committees were invited to events in the hope that these women would relay the contents of the events to their constituencies. In effect, the same women attended most of the different events and lectures. Another organizer added: "They would not be able to do their work without us... We are their link to the villages and to the grassroots."³² Many of the activists, especially those in the villages or those not affiliated with *Fateh* and its clientelistic networks, felt increasingly alienated from these organizations. On the part of donors, such a strategy ensured that, although they might be promoting individuals who are affiliated with the Opposition, they were not promoting entire organizations.

New Incentive Structures

Many of the activists in the women's committees were particularly disturbed that the prevailing incentive structure no longer reflected one's previous political involvement in terms of impact or influence. Moreover, individuals affiliated with certain political groups were now paid for the same work that activists had engaged in for years without compensation. These developments departed from ordinary professionalization outcomes in that those individuals who were not paid employees could simply plan to acquire the necessary training and join an organization. Rather, in this non-inclusive political context, these individuals would have to sever their ties and, in many cases, renounce their previous political affiliation. One organizer explained: "These projects and programs are not sustainable, but they now provide salaries and funding to former leaders of other committees."³³ Another grassroots coordinator complained: "They expect us to volunteer while they get paid."³⁴ The relatively higher salaries of professionalized NGO staff – sometimes four to five times higher than the average salary in the public sector – exacerbated the situation. Another organizer added: "It is shameful that the salaries of some of the directors of these NGOs are approximately US\$4,000.00/month at a time when some Palestinian laborers cannot even earn enough money to buy food."³⁵ Many women expressed their dismay that the whole concept

of volunteer participation no longer existed in Palestinian society – in part because of the work of the professionalized NGOs and because many *Fateh* activists were now on payroll.³⁶ Many activists felt that social disparities in society were heightened by this newly created schism: between those who could work in NGOs and are therefore eligible to earn high salaries and those who could not; those who were part of the accepted post-Oslo political landscape and those who were not.

CONCLUSION

Since the early 1990s, democracy promotion programs including gender empowerment projects have saturated the region. Feminist thinking on empowerment has cogently demonstrated how women's empowerment is structurally constrained and does not take place in an apolitical vacuum, but is intrinsically linked to the socio-political local, national and global context at a particular historical moment. It has also highlighted the importance to consider power differentials among women based on their socio-economic and political backgrounds. Despite the persuasive argumentation of feminist scholars on the subject, emergent praxis of Western promoted gender empowerment programs have often overlooked this complex interplay of factors. At a most basic level, gender empowerment programs that have targeted and promoted only certain groups in society while ignoring their relationships to the broader local, national and regional context have been shortsighted at best and have contributed to the weakening of these movements in many instances.

The objective of this article was to examine the impact of Western-funded gender empowerment assistance to the Palestinian women's movement and implications for other contexts. Professionalization and Islamist-secular polarization alone do not capture the multiplicity of dynamics that weakened the women's movement. Departing from these explanations, this article illustrated how Western donors' limited notions of "empowerment" and its application, and lack of understanding of the Palestinian women's movement and its "embeddedness" in the broader political context served to weaken and undermine this movement. Previously, the grassroots women's committees, though not necessarily politically autonomous, had extensive reach in Palestinian society. For the most part, the activists felt that they had been actively engaged in these committees, and helped shape the programs and projects to address their most pressing needs. The influx of Western donor assistance in the post-Madrid, post-Oslo era and the greater emphasis on Western-promoted gender empowerment served to exacerbate political polarization between those groups that were included in the post-Oslo political landscape and could access and receive donor funding, and those that could not. Furthermore, the changes in the organizational structure of the movement as well as programmatic priorities paradoxically disempowered activists who had pre-

viously felt that they had been active political participants and now were simply the recipients of “skills training.”

Findings in this article also speak to current regional developments, especially in light of the current Arab uprisings, and the promise of greater Western involvement to empower women in the region (as expressed, for example, by both US presidential candidates during the 2012 debates, and renewed Obama administration commitments to women’s empowerment in the region). Although, the historical background and trajectory of the women’s movement in the Palestinian territories is different than that in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Bahrain or Tunisia, there are important lessons to be drawn. Bearing in mind that the women’s movements in these contexts also vary significantly: in Bahrain and Libya, associational life has been limited, if not near non-existent, and to date there are few women’s organizations. Both Egypt and Tunisia, and to a much lesser extent Syria, share histories of more active women’s organizing, as well as women’s involvement in political party structures, including participation in national women’s machineries that are/were affiliated to the respective regimes. In Egypt and Tunisia, women have also been active in establishing more autonomous Western-funded professionalized organizations. Despite the extensive variation among the women’s movements in these national contexts, different sectors of each movement are embedded in a particular local, national and global reality that must be understood and recognized. The discriminate support for certain components of these movements and the exclusion of others, while failing to appreciate and fully understand the relationship of these movements to broader political processes, can undermine these movements and disempower the women involved in them. Moreover, the over-focus on gender empowerment training while paying insufficient attention to women’s economic grievances is likely to be lost on these activists, and serve to delegitimize these organizations.

Manal A. Jamal
Assistant Professor
James Madison University
Department of Political Science
91 E Grace Street, MSC 7705 Harrisonburg, VA 22807, USA
Email: jamalma@jmu.edu

Notes

- 1 This refers to the period after the Madrid peace conference in 1991. The Madrid peace conference was hosted by the Government of Spain and co-sponsored by the US and Russia (then the USSR), opened on 30 October 1991 and lasted for three days. The conference inaugurated two separate yet parallel negotiating tracks – the bilateral track and the multilateral track. The bilateral track included

negotiations between Israel and its immediate neighbors, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians.

- 2 The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the state of Israel signed the Declaration of Principles (DOP) in 1993. The DOP and the series of agreements to follow collectively came to be known as the Oslo Accords.
- 3 According to some estimates, on a per capita basis, Palestine received the third or fourth highest level of aid in the world.
- 4 Between 1992 and 2001, Western donors disbursed US\$91.34 million to the Strengthening Civil Society Sector in the Palestinian territories. Based on OECD data: Development Assistance Committee (DAC). All disbursements in constant prices 2006 USD.
- 5 Donors to the women's sector included a number of state-sponsored donors, as well as international organizations such as the Canada Fund, Diakonia, the European Commission, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Netherlands Representative Office, the Norwegian Representative Office, Save the Children, the Swedish Representative Office, United Nations Development Program, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United States Agency for International Development and World University Service.
- 6 Despite the extensive efforts dedicated to documenting donor flow information, allocations to each sector and to professionalized NGOs are not always clear or included in the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC) matrix. For example, funding to the women's sector also included funding to PA institutions and to development organizations. Moreover, commitments to the Human Rights and Civil Society sector (which amounted to US\$18.719 million between 1998 and 2001) also included funding to women's NGOs for civic education and human rights training.
- 7 Professionalized NGOs in the women's sector received a high percentage of this funding. For example, according to the MOPIC's 2001 First and Second Quarterly Monitoring Report, between 1994 and 1998, foreign donors committed US\$697,000 to one professionalized NGO, the Women's Affairs Technical Committees (WATC), compared to US\$10.234 million committed to the whole women's sector during that same period.
- 8 In referencing interviewees, I provide the names of political leaders, NGO directors and directors of foreign donor agencies, unless they specify otherwise. To ensure the confidentiality of grassroots activists, I refer to the interviewee as Member with a corresponding number if I interviewed more than one grassroots activist/organizer from the organization.
- 9 Interview with Siham Barghouti (one of the founding members of the WCC, later renamed the FPWAC, and later splintered to FPWAC-FIDA), Ramallah, 12 July 2001.
- 10 Interviews with Siham Barghouti, Ramallah, 12 July 2001; Maha Nassar (one of the founding members of the UPWC), Ramallah, 21 July 2001; Zahira Kamal (one of the founding members of the WCC, later renamed the FPWAC, and later splintered to the FPWAC-FIDA), Ramallah, 19 August 2001; Member 1 (executive committee member of the WCSW), Ramallah, 14 July 2001; Nuha Barghouti (one

of the founding members of the UPWWC), Ramallah, 12 July 2001, and Nihaya Mohammed (one of the founding members of the WCC, later renamed the FPWAC), Ramallah, 29 July 2001.

- 11 Interview with Siham Barghouti, Ramallah, 12 July 2001. The FPWAC, in particular, was involved in organizing female laborers.
- 12 All my interviewees from the women's committees discussed these types of programs and projects.
- 13 I distinguish between the grassroots committees and the non-governmental organizations in that the professionalized NGOs have a higher degree of institutionalization and professionalization, and rely on foreign donor assistance. Moreover, the grassroots committees by definition rely on grassroots constituencies for legitimacy; this is not the case for most professionalized NGOs.
- 14 The Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling provides legal advice and counseling services to women.
- 15 The Women's Study Center houses a feminist library, and commissions various reports on the status of women in Palestinian society.
- 16 Interview with an organizer from the UPWWC in Ramallah who requested not to be identified.
- 17 In 1986, PARC set up the Unit of Domestic Economies. Since 2001, the new name of the organization is the Rural Women's Development Society. The center predominantly worked in rural areas, and provided training in agriculture, husbandry and self-reliance schemes, including food production and skills training.
- 18 By 2003, PARC had 12,702 members and fewer women in the gender unit.
- 19 Interview with Maha Khayat (coordinator of the WATC), Ramallah, 9 July 2001.
- 20 Among the women who attested to this are Member 4 (WCSW coordinator), interview on 22 July 2001, and Member 3 (executive committee member of the UPWC), Ramallah, 24 July 2001.
- 21 Zahira Kamal, Ramallah, 19 August 2001.
- 22 The size of the geographic region under consideration, approximately 64 km² for the East Jerusalem and Ramallah access, was further telling of the redundancy involved.
- 23 Interview with Nuha Barghouti, Ramallah, 12 July 2001.
- 24 Interview with Member 1 (executive committee member of the WCSW), Ramallah, 14 July 2001.
- 25 Interview with Nihaya Mohammed, Ramallah, 29 July 2001.
- 26 Interview with Member 3 (executive committee member of the UPWC), Ramallah, 24 July 2001.
- 27 Interview with Member 1 (FPWAC-FIDA coordinator), Ramallah, 12 August 2001.
- 28 Interview with Member 1 (UPWC coordinator), Hebron, 20 August 2001.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Interview with Member 2 (FPWAC coordinator) Ramallah, 6 August 2001; Interview with Nihaya Mohammed, Ramallah, 29 July 2001; Interview with Maha Nassar, Ramallah, 21 July 2001.
- 31 Interview with Nuha Barghouti, Ramallah, 12 July 2001.
- 32 Interview with Member 1 (FPWAC coordinator), Ramallah, 5 August 2001.
- 33 Interview with Member 1 (UPWC coordinator), Hebron, 20 August 2001.

- 34 Interview with Member 1 (FPWAC coordinator), Ramallah, 5 August 2001.
- 35 Interview with Nihaya Mohammed, Ramallah, 29 July 2001. As of 2001, no women's shelters existed in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area. Since then, at least three such shelters have been established.
- 36 Interview with Member 4 (WCSW coordinator), Ramallah, 22 July 2001.

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Notes on contributors

Manal A. Jamal received her PhD in political science from McGill University specializing in comparative politics. She also holds a BA and MA in International Relations from the University of California, Davis, and San Francisco State University, respectively. Prior to joining the faculty of JMU she was a Sultan post-doctoral fellow at UC Berkeley's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, a research fellow at the Dubai School of Government and a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Dubai Initiative at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government. This article draws from research for which she won the best fieldwork award of the Comparative Democratization Section of the American Political Science Association. During the late 1990s, she worked as a journalist and researcher in the occupied Palestinian territories.

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