

Women and War in the Middle East

TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Edited by Nadjé Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt



Zed Books
LONDON & NEW YORK

Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives was first published in 2009 by Zed Books Ltd, 7 Cynthia Street, London N1 9JF, UK, and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

www.zedbooks.co.uk

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Designed and typeset in Monotype Joanna
by illuminati, Gosmont, www.illuminatibooks.co.uk

Cover design by Lucy Morton at illuminati

Cover photograph: 'To Eat Bread' by Sama Alshaibi

Index by John Barker

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St Martin's Press, LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data available

ISBN 978 1 84813 185 9 Hb

ISBN 978 1 84813 186 6 Pb

ISBN 978 1 84813 187 3 Eb

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Acknowledgements

We would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who made this book possible.

First of all, we thank the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, which organized the Eighth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting at Montecatini Terme, 21–25 March 2007, and hosted the workshop from which this book emerged. The workshop enabled us to invite scholars from a range of disciplines who are interested in the gendered and transnational dimensions of war, conflict, 'post'-conflict transitions, reconstruction and peace-building in the context of the Middle East. While we were unable to include all workshop participants in this volume, we would like to express our deep gratitude to everyone for their contributions, papers and the stimulating discussions throughout our workshop.

We are obviously very much indebted to all the contributors of this book, who trusted us to put together this volume and who generously and patiently worked on revisions to their chapters, often to tight deadlines.

FOUR

Gender Mainstreaming and Feminist Organizing in the Middle East and North Africa

Isis Nusair

In this chapter I examine the ways in which gender mainstreaming has been implemented in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by European Union and United Nations bodies. In addition, I examine the strategies used and the challenges faced by various feminist and women's groups and illustrate how gender mainstreaming is most effective when it involves, mobilizes and establishes solidarity networks with other local, regional and transnational groups. I argue that the local remains the main site for action for women's and feminist groups as a result of structural conditions and limitations imposed on their work by state and non-state actors. I analyse the intersection between local, regional and transnational economic and political power structures that fuel and benefit from the promotion of masculinized and militarized discourses of domination while keeping gender orders intact. The aim is to develop effective networking and gender mainstreaming processes that question these gender orders and support feminist and alternative solutions and transformations.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming originated in development policies in the 1970s and was adopted by the United Nations (UN) Platform for Action created in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and taken up by the European Union (EU) and its member states. The concept of gender mainstreaming was first developed by feminists working in the European Commission in their efforts to promote gender equality policies among member states (Hawkesworth, 2006). The fundamental premiss of gender mainstreaming is that gender perspectives are essential to all programmes and issues. As a social change strategy, then, gender mainstreaming requires that all 'decision-making processes take gender into account, exploring the implications of proposed policies for men and women, and investigating differential gender impacts and disparate gender outcomes of existing and proposed programs' (96). In the language developed by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, gender mainstreaming is a 'strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs so that women and men can benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated' (96-7). This definition emphasizes the need for the integration of women's concerns on all levels of policy and programmes, and the creation of equal conditions for realizing their full rights. Within this context, gender mainstreaming has involved 'new forms of political practice and alliances' (Walby, 2005: 467). It involves 'elected women in parliament, the development of specialized gender machinery in government, as well as gender expertise in civil society from universities to grassroots organizations' (467).

Gender mainstreaming has been transnational from the start, and dependent on gender relations and the national political context (Eveline and Bacchi, 2005). It goes beyond comparing the 'disadvantaged position of women with the privileged position of men', and aims to 'subject and broaden all policy areas to gender equality practices' (Walby, 2005: 456). It is an example of a policy develop-

ment that is 'not a simple process of diffusion from core countries to the periphery but rather one in which there is a complex hybridization and development in form in different locations' (458). Gender mainstreaming in the MENA region has involved initiatives by governments, EU and UN bodies, as well as women's and feminist groups and organizations. I assess these initiatives while paying particular attention to the Palestinian case.

EU and UN gender mainstreaming initiatives

In November 1995, the European Union and twelve Mediterranean partner countries adopted the Barcelona Declaration, thereby agreeing to establish the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). In the Barcelona Declaration, the parties undertook to act in accordance with the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other obligations under international law (Naciri and Nusair, 2003). They furthermore committed themselves to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and to guarantee these freedoms without discrimination on grounds of race, nationality, language, religion or sex.

It was agreed that gender mainstreaming should be incorporated into all three baskets of the EMP – that is, political and security cooperation, economic as well as cultural and human exchange. In addition, gender analysis should guide all development activities, programmes and projects at all stages. A follow-up mechanism should be established to assess the implementation of gender-sensitive policies within the EMP, and gender mainstreaming and affirmative action should be used as complementary strategies to ensure that women and men achieve their full potential, using gender disparities as a main indicator of policy performance in the region (Naciri and Nusair, 2003: 10).

However, despite the EMP's commitment to human rights, women's rights issues have initially received little attention in the EMP.¹ Neither the Barcelona Declaration nor the Association Agreements which govern the EMP explicitly recognize the indivisibility of women's

rights, human rights and democracy. Although all parties to the EMP have positive obligations to implement gender mainstreaming into all aspects of the EMP, women's rights have been confined to the social and economic spheres (Naciri and Nusair, 2003: 8). As a result, women's rights projects have not been well funded through the MEDA programmes.² Given the many constraints against them, women's rights organizations – particularly South-based ones – often lack information on EU procedures and structures, making any EU funding difficult to access (9).

The partners at the Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on 'Strengthening the Role of Women in Society', which was held on 14-15 November 2006 in Istanbul and based on shared international, regional and national commitments, agreed to work to strengthen women's role in political, civil, social, economic and cultural spheres, as well as to fight against discrimination.³ The conference adopted a Five Year Plan of Action to lead the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership work on the promotion and protection of women's rights. It was then stated that partners would adopt 'measures to achieve gender equality, preventing all forms of discrimination and ensuring the protection of the rights of women', while taking stock of the Rabat Preparatory Conference that was held on 14-16 June 2006 (Ministerial Conclusion). It was agreed that the Euro-Mediterranean partners need to include women's political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights in their dialogues, including in the framework of the Association Agreements, in the European Neighbourhood Policy action plans, and in the EU programmes and projects (Naciri and Nusair, 2003: 2).

In order to achieve gender mainstreaming, Euro-Mediterranean partners should move beyond minimum standards to full integration and equality in application of programmes and allocation of funds. To do so, they have to question cultural conceptions of women's rights and transform them into a well-defined and integrated gender mainstreaming approach. The 'promotion of gender equality and human rights, democracy and development are indivisible', and gender mainstreaming should involve a 'dual approach of systematic

integration of gender issues in all policies and at all levels and stages promoting male-female equality – as well as affirmative action for women to ensure that they have the same access as men' (Abu Habib, 2006: 7). The initiative should also 'stress the importance of regular and systematic dialogue' with civil society and especially women's rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on issues relating to gender equality (7). The aim is to promote gender equity via a mainstreaming process that is both 'technical, involving tools and procedures that can be carried out by policy makers, and political in that it includes women's participation in defining what gender equality means in different political arenas and contexts' (Grosser and Moon, 2005: 533). Equal access and participation by all parties are essential for the development and success of this process.

In addition to EU policies and programs for gender mainstreaming in MENA, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has been involved with national committees in the region in preparing national strategies and gender mainstreaming in programmes and national budgets. UNIFEM was also involved in 'preparing a system for the evaluation and follow-up of national strategies, and in the evaluation of achievements and obstacles' (ESCWA, 2003: 6). These involved the preparation of national reports and training materials and guides, and particular attention was given to the feminization of poverty as a major challenge. This required an updating of economic policies in order to have a positive impact on the employment of women in the official and non-official sectors. It also included the 'establishment of social security systems, the strengthening of capacities for analysis that focused on gender issues, and the mobilization of all parties involved in the development process' (6). In addition, laws governing the political rights of women needed to be amended and updated to include either a quota system or a system based on the granting of opportunity, in order to increase the representation of women (3). This includes the creation of democratic institutions and practices in MENA countries that could make a genuine attempt at gender mainstreaming, and the strengthening of women's movements and civil society organizations.

To achieve this, funds need to be allocated for gender mainstreaming at both government and non-governmental levels (5).

Gender mainstreaming and women's and feminist organizing

Feminists in different parts of the world, including the MENA region, have made effective use of the merging institutions of global governance, utilizing UN processes and expanding the discourse of human rights (Walby, 2005: 459). This approach 'contrasts with the development of gender mainstreaming in employment and related economic domains, which, in European countries at least, have been far more dependent upon developments within the EU than at the global level' (459).⁴ Therefore, gender mainstreaming is a 'leading-edge example of the potential implications of globalization for gender politics', and is a practice that is at least well developed (if not better) in the global South than in the North (464). Often, and as is the case in the MENA region, activists face opposition by their governments to gender mainstreaming and they have to deal with biases against them in the global North. There is a tendency by governments in the global North, as well as within the EU to regard women's rights in MENA in general as a domestic issue and not the concern of the international community or regional bodies. Furthermore, women from MENA countries, and especially Muslim women, are often stereotyped in the global North as being passive and without agency (Russo, 2006; Abu-Habib, 2006; Naciri and Nusair, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2002).

The women's movement in MENA has benefited from the practical knowledge and experiences that the various women's groups acquired in the national liberation movements, in political groups and trade unions, and in participating in the UN international conferences on women's rights.⁵ Such conferences highlighted the concerns of women's rights activists and organizations and facilitated local, regional and transnational advocacy on women's rights. They also encouraged mobilization on initiatives such as raising the

minimum age for marriage, combating violence against women, and lifting reservations to CEDAW. NGOs promoting women's rights in MENA have also gained from establishing and joining regional coalitions and networks in the Maghreb, Mashreq and Mediterranean countries as well as transnationally (Naciri and Nusair, 2003). Since the beginning of the 1990s, aiming to improve the effectiveness of their work, women's rights groups and organizations have started to look beyond their national frontiers to develop regional and transnational solidarities, and to use United Nations legal instruments to disseminate information about discrimination and violence against women (Basu, 1995).

As a social movement, women's activism in MENA includes strategies in the public sphere that do not 'reproduce Western frameworks' but employ 'cultural worldviews to feed into a global synergy' (Moghadam and Sadiqi, 2006: 2). It is only through 'understandings of intercultural worldviews and various meanings of "pragmatism" that MENA women's rights tactics can be appreciated globally' (2). Yet, in most MENA countries, access to the public sphere does not necessarily translate into gender equality or women's achievement of their political, economic and legal rights (Skalli, 2006: 39). Despite the increasing number of women in schools, private and public sectors of activities, political structures, and decision-making positions, 'the significance of these numbers is threatened by the vigilant eye of the political regime and Islamist groups and often negated by conservative family laws institutionalizing discrimination' (39). Thus, while the sources of resistance to gender mainstreaming remain numerous, 'women are forced to be more strategic in their interventions and creative in their actions and alliances if they want to transform their realities in a meaningful way' (39).

There has been an increase in the number of NGOs in MENA during the 1990s due to national and international economic and political developments and policies (Carapico, 2000). The increase in women's organizations is due in particular to cuts in state programmes, urbanization, and an increase in women's education and international aid (Kandil, 2002). Yet El-Gawhary (2000) raises

questions about the capability of NGOs in Egypt, for example, to produce significant political and social transformations. The question remains as to whether NGOs are able to constitute continuous and sustained social movements as a result of the 'fragmentation of the issues that they deal with, the temporality of these issues and resources, and their weak networks' (Jad, 2003: 38). In spite of this, Carapico (2000:15) contends that NGOs have helped call attention to important issues such as human rights abuses, family violence, environmental degradation, and the deterioration of public works and welfare mechanisms.

The strategies of feminist and women's groups in MENA during the past two decades have become more diverse and dynamic. Activists in the region work on many fronts. They 'raise consciousness, engage in grassroots mobilization, conduct research, and collect and publish data that serves as a basis for advocacy work' (Skalli, 2006: 39). These efforts are increasingly expressed on the pages of newspapers, magazines and periodicals, on television and radio programmes, in documentaries and feature films, and on the Internet. In this way, 'women use different mediums to articulate their needs and multiply the opportunities of creating alternative discourses on womanhood and citizenship' (39).

The impact of women's interventions and initiatives is often more 'subtle and symbolic than openly radical or revolutionary – this is precisely how women activists bargain with structures of patriarchy in the MENA region' (Skalli (2006: 53).⁶ Skalli adds that attempts to measure women's interventions by standards of achievement in regions with different politico-economic and socio-cultural realities are simply counterproductive. Taken together, these efforts and initiatives have managed to start the process of 'mainstreaming gender issues, raising awareness about women's complex realities, and interrogating the silence around family laws and other forms of institutionalized physical, mental and psychological violence' (54).

One of the main challenges to gender mainstreaming in the MENA region relates to the reform of family laws. Personal status codes and other issues related to women's roles in society have been publicly

debated in Arab countries since the nineteenth century. These debates 'changed the terms of participation and made women and gender issues a matter of national dialogue and contention' (Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2006: 86). Sadiqi and Ennaji focus in particular on the case of Morocco and the mobilization during the 1990s by women's rights activists to change personal status laws. Although Moroccan women's rights activists have succeeded in accessing the Moroccan public sphere by politicizing women's issues, the 'litmus test' for Moroccan women's activists relates to the extent to which the reformed Personal Status Code will be 'implemented and enforced unequivocally' (Abu Habib, 2006: 8). This will require putting in place measures and mechanisms that will ensure that the new code is adequately interpreted and that the implementation mechanisms ensure women's full access to justice 'including equal rights to inheritance' (8).

Across the MENA region, women and civil society organizations have organized campaigns demanding reforms in such critical areas as violence against women, early marriage, reform of nationality laws, lifting the reservations on CEDAW, and ratifying the United Nations Optional Protocol. I will describe and assess below recent initiatives promoted by women's rights activists in the region.⁷

The coalition '20 Years Barakat', which contributed very significantly to putting reform of the Algerian Family Code on the agenda, was achieved through a media and consciousness-raising campaign. The Coalition consisted of several Algerian women's rights organizations supported by women's organizations in Morocco and Europe (8). Consequently, the Algerian parliament introduced in March 2005 a number of changes and reforms to the Family Code.⁸ In Syria, significant change in the Personal Status Code allowed divorced mothers four additional custody years for their children, so that children remain in the custody of their mothers until the age of 15 years for girls and 13 years for boys. In Jordan, the personal status code was amended in 2001 with improvement for women in relation to alimony and further restrictions on polygyny (9). Recently, there was a campaign against early marriage that included workshops, discussions with religious men, and theatre performances

at schools and summer camps. In Lebanon, there was a campaign to raise the age for mothers to retain custody of their children to 13 for males and 15 for females. Finally in Tunisia, there was a campaign to change inheritance laws.

In addition, NGOs have operated women's assistance centres in Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia. In Morocco, the Anaruz Network, a network of forty associations and centres, aims at raising awareness of the concept of gender-based violence. It also aims at 'fighting its cultural and social impunity as well as lobbying for legislative reforms and improving women's access to justice' (15). Activists have organized symbolic courts and radio campaigns on violence against women. Jordanian NGOs, including the National Commission for Human Rights, launched the campaign '16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence' in November 2005. The V-Day Karama Programme was established in 2006 in order to examine the impact of violence against women in nine Arab countries in all aspects of life including economics, politics and the judicial system.⁹ Finally, the Salma Network, established as a follow-up to the Salma Project of 2003–05, aims to continue the national and regional campaigns on violence against women and create a sustainable network of Arab Women's NGOs active on the subject. The Network aims to facilitate communication, foster coordination, and exchange expertise on the local and regional levels.¹⁰

Women's rights activists have been promoting a regional campaign to lift reservations to CEDAW and to ratify the Optional Protocol. Under the slogan 'Equality without Reservation', representatives of NGOs from the Euro-Mediterranean gathered at a conference in Rabat in June 2006 to launch a regional campaign in all Arab countries to achieve gender equality. The objective of the campaign is to make states lift all reservations to CEDAW and sign up to the Optional Protocol. According to Abu Habib, despite encouraging development, MENA countries still 'lag behind other regions in the area of women's public and political participation and representation' (Abu Habib, 2006: 19). In some places, previous positive steps have even been reversed. She argues that the progress of political representation will

be slow if not accompanied by gender mainstreaming and specific gender equity measures such as the adoption of quota systems. 'Where these and other affirmative actions have been taken', as is the case in Jordan, 'there has been a positive development toward more involvement of women in political decision-making' (19).

Attempts at establishing local and regional networks and coalition-building in MENA have been increasing in the last two decades. The Maghreb Equality 95 Collective (*Le Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité*), set up in 1991/92 and still in existence today, was the first network of independent women's rights associations in the region.¹¹ Despite the difficulties associated with the political situation in Algeria and Tunisia, the Collective has been able to continue to grow, in part because of its 'flexible organizational structure and its decision-making procedures built on consensus' (Naciri and Nusair, 2003: 39). The Collective's plan of action for 2001–06 included writing parallel reports to the CEDAW Committee on Algeria and Tunisia's compliance with the CEDAW Convention, as well as a comprehensive study on Maghreb societies' acceptance of values of equality.

Aisha is another network established in 1993, composed of independent women's organizations from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan and Tunisia. It aims to develop a regional feminist agenda that challenges discriminatory laws and practices.¹² Aisha's work has been paralysed recently as a result of lack of funding and coordination between its members. The Court of Arab Women is another initiative that addresses discrimination and violence against women. The Court was established in 1996 in Lebanon by NGOs from several Arab countries. It works to combat violence against women both in legislation and in practice, and has pressured governments in the region to take measures to protect and support women survivors of violence. In 1999, the Court launched a campaign calling for gender equality, especially in regard to women's access to divorce.

Finally, the first Sisterhood is Global Institute was established in Jordan in 1998. The institute is the first technology and communications-training centre in the region, providing courses

on the use of computers and the Internet for research and advocacy on women's human rights, as well as training in basic interactive teaching and learning skills. The institute launched a website, and established a resource centre on violence against women.¹³ In addition, the Maghreb/Mashreq Network for Information and Training on Gender unites Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and, very recently, Algeria. Established in 2000, this network provides a forum for debate, learning and exchange of information on women, gender and development. In March 2002, the Network launched a regional campaign on nationality laws and the right of women who are married to foreigners to transfer their nationality to their children.¹⁴

Other networks function unofficially in the region, such as the centres for legal aid and counselling for survivors of violence. Activists who run these centres in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia meet regularly to exchange ideas and consolidate their experiences. Electronic networks have also sprung up over recent years, and have been developed more in the Mashreq than in the Maghreb, which lacks appropriate technological infrastructure, especially in Algeria, and is subject to stricter state censorship, as is the case in Tunisia. Although women's and feminist activism in MENA has been growing in the last few decades, it still faces major challenges. One of the main challenges relates to making gender mainstreaming a transformative project that addresses gender relations and power structures in both conflict and non-conflict situations.

Gender mainstreaming in conflict situations

I analyse in this section the prospects and challenges of gender mainstreaming in conflict situations in the MENA region with a particular focus on the Palestinian case. There has been an increased acknowledgement in recent years of the impact of conflict on women and of women on conflict (Zuckerman and Greenberg, 2005: 70). As emphasized in the Women and Armed Conflict section in the Beijing Platform for Action, government commitments in the Beijing

+5 review, and Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, there is a need to examine the gendered impacts of war and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. As gender discrimination in conflict situations continues 'through political exclusion, economic marginalization and sexual violence, achieving sustainable peace requires a more permanent transformation of social norms relating to violence, gender and power' (79). The drafting of new constitutions and the 'transformation of legal systems at the conclusion of a peace agreement provides opportunities for mainstreaming gender into all state institutions, including the executive, legislative, judiciary, security service and education system' (Etchart and Baksh, 2005: 32).

The participation of more women directly or indirectly in a peace process, however, 'does not in and of itself ensure the inclusion of women's concerns in the substance of any agreement reached' (Onubogu and Etchart, 2005: 36). Therefore 'gender balance in participation must be accompanied by gender mainstreaming' (36). Onubogu and Etchart argue that what is relevant to a gendered analysis of the conflict is the social, economic and political position of women before and during the conflict, and the transition to post-conflict (36). Analysing the continuum of violence in the private and public sphere and in conflict and non-conflict situations allows for an understanding of the processes entailed in the gendering of hierarchical and exclusionary systems of power, and the re-examination of terms like 'post-conflict' and 'reconstruction' (Cockburn, 2007, 2004; Kelly, 2000). Without addressing the different forms of violence that permeate women's lives in so-called peace times, it is hard to achieve transformative relations for achieving gender equality.

In order to achieve gender equality, 'institutions must be transformed and energy and resources must be given to the implementation and institutionalization of policies' (Stiehm, 2001: 44). As the 'women and security' regime has established clear norms in terms of principles and a few implementation imperatives (Carey, 2001: 63), the challenge remains on how to 'increase focus, strengthen the rule of law institutions, and improve respect for human rights

in post conflict environments' (Skjelsbaek, 2001: 81). Therefore 'gender mainstreaming should move beyond being an instrument for improving operations' (Whitworth, 2004).

Most of the formal recognition of women's vulnerabilities in conflict situations focuses on women as victims of sexual violence and not as agents in their own right. Far less common in the UN accounts is any acknowledgement of the 'relationship between insecurity and economic liberalization, or the ways in which the international division of labour is itself a violent process' (133). Peterson (2003) and Enloe (2000) analyse how the war economy has affected patterns of gender inequality and contributed to gender-based violence. 'The dynamics of gendered disadvantage, the erosion of local livelihoods, the criminalization of the economy and insecurity at the hands of armed groups and factions combine seamlessly to produce extreme forms of female vulnerability' (Kandiyoti, 2007a: 511). Therefore, attempts at addressing issues of gender justice through institutional and legal reforms need to acknowledge these interactions and their long-term effects (511).

Critical questions, not bureaucratic ones, should inform feminist work on gender mainstreaming. A larger and more focused effort must be made to 'challenge the role and limitations of the UN in framing contemporary debates on gender and security' (Whitworth, 2004: 121). 'Women's rights and the gender "mainstreaming" agenda that informs donor-assisted post-conflict reconstruction packages usually adopts a technocratic approach to address what are fundamentally political problems' (Kandiyoti, 2007a: 514). Within this context, 'pleas for the inclusion of women in peace building as a means of enhancing security is reminiscent of a type of instrumentalism evident in earlier arguments about promoting gender equity to better achieve economic growth and environmental sustainability' (514). Gender mainstreaming should not by any means contribute to militarism. Whitworth (2004) points to the potential radical strategy of gender mainstreaming rather than its simple liberal policies.

The invocation of women's rights for political purposes in the context of the 'war on terror', as was the case in Afghanistan and

Iraq (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Russo, 2006; Hatem, 2003), tended to breed scepticism in the MENA region about the Bush regime's commitment to women's rights. Using democracy and human rights to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq caused mistrust in the human rights regime viewed by many in MENA as a new form of colonialism and imperialism. This in addition to the crackdown, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, by states in the region like Egypt and Tunisia on human rights activists in the name of protecting national security. This complicates and has serious negative implications on coalition-building and solidarity work among local women's and feminist groups and transnational networks in the region.

The Palestinian case

The Palestinian case raises serious questions about the possibility and success of gender mainstreaming in conflict situations. Within this context, and as was the case in Afghanistan and Iraq, 'the legal and technical solutions offered by gender mainstreaming may be at odds with the "real politics" of highly volatile and insecure environments' (Kandiyoti, 2007a: 514). The cases of Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate how a rights-based agenda could be 'compromised by the nature of the interventions that purport to uphold them and by the corrosive, long-term effects of prolonged conflict and endemic insecurity' (504). In the next section I briefly describe the history of the Palestinian women's movement, its achievements and the challenges it currently faces. In addition, I analyse the strategies used for gender mainstreaming since the Palestinian Authority came to power in parts of the West Bank and Gaza in 1994.

The First Intifada

The first Palestinian Intifada (uprising) in 1987 created new organizations that mobilized Palestinian youth, workers, women and students. It also included the creation of various specialized committees like the voluntary work committee, agricultural committees and health

committees. These structures, according to Kuttab (1993: 73), became an 'organic part of the Palestine national movement and opened a new horizon for national awakening and identity consciousness. Because these forces were inspired by democratic principles, they provided a new ideological platform for gender and class issues.' Kuttab adds that this 'new' movement, which was mainly 'initiated by a group of progressive women of different political ideologies and of petit bourgeois origin, established new mass-based associations capable of organizing and mobilizing women in villages and refugee camps' (73). They generated literacy and consciousness-raising campaigns and were instrumental in strategizing national boycotts of Israeli products. During the Intifada, they were behind the emergence of household-based and small-scale economic cooperatives run by women. Furthermore, the Intifada witnessed the establishment of independent feminist centres (Abdo, 1999).

The second stage of the Intifada showed a 'relative decline and retreat in the intensity of the struggle that automatically generated negative repercussions for women's political participation' (Kuttab, 1993: 82). Instead of 'accumulating their experience in order to develop a qualitative change, new social and economic conditions emerged which neutralized women's activism and alienated them from their own achievements'. The 1988 Declaration of Independence in one way or another suggested that 'liberation was close by and that what was required was more emphasis and concentration on the building of the Palestinian state' (82). In 1991, the Palestinian women's movement raised publicly the concern that political fundamentalism sanctioned by conservative nationalist forces was imposing new repressive conditions on women (Giacaman et al., 2006). As a result, the achievements of women in general and the women's movement in particular 'failed to contribute to a real drastic and qualitative change in the status of women within Palestinian society' (Kuttab, 1993: 81). The Intifada left women's groups with a 'legacy of heightened consciousness and failed initiatives exemplified by the closure of many of the small-scale women's production projects' (Giacaman et al., 2006: 96).

The Palestinian National Authority and the Second Intifada

Despite the decline of and limitations on women's activism during the second part of the First Intifada, they still expected more participation in the decision-making bodies of the new political structures of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) (Abdo, 1999). Between 1987 and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, there was a reliance on NGOs to provide services, and they in turn became stronger actors than their parent political parties (Jad, 2007a). With the regression in the role of political parties, women's groups started looking for funding, and as a result technocratic institutions emptied the women's institutions from its cadres, which had an impact on the capacities and strategies used by women's and feminist organizations.¹⁵

While the PNA has developed as a governing body resembling the formal bureaucracy of a nation-state, in fact it remains politically, economically and geographically dependent on Israel (Abdo, 1999). This absence of sovereignty and geographical cohesion results in the absence of an independent and functioning civil society.¹⁶ Despite this, the women's movement began to focus on legal issues as the prospects of a state and a national legal system became more realistic.¹⁷ In 1995, the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) launched a national and regional campaign of legal literacy to discuss women's status and the need to change existing laws. This was one of many programmes culminating in 1998 in the Model Parliament.

The PNA's lack of commitment to gender issues and its fragility both internally vis-à-vis civil society and externally towards Israel led many NGOs to shift their work from the national to the local and from the general to the individual (Jad, 2007a). In their urgent search for a viable strategy for the new era, Palestinian women activists seized, perhaps too quickly, on concepts developed elsewhere such as the need for 'gender training' (Giacaman et al., 2006). This clearly appealed for two reasons, as cadre women were eager to advance their own abilities to understand and deal with gender issues, and they hoped to influence their male colleagues (Giacaman et al., 2006). 'Despite political polarization, the Palestinian women's

movement, with other social and political groups, actively negotiated rights with the PNA' (94).

The mixed experience of the women's committees and the women's movement during the First Intifada were the backdrop for examining the strategies proposed by women's activists in the early period following the coming of the PNA to power. The Women's Technical Committee, headed by Zahira Kamal, was among the first quasi-governmental bodies to be established. The Committee formed subcommittees to examine issues such as legislation, education and employment, with the aim of making policy recommendations. The gender mainstreaming experience of the Women Unit in the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation has adopted 'participation, empowerment and cooperation as procedures to govern the relationship between management and voluntary and Government women's institutions'. The Unit saw its role as 'providing the impetus for gender mainstreaming in legislation, policies, plans and programmes' (ESCWA, 2003: 7). The development of the Ministry of Women's Affairs' mandate and its experience in gender mainstreaming was illustrated in three stages. The first focused on building the capacities and institutions of management. The second related to the practical application of gender mainstreaming in policies and plans of three ministries, namely the Ministry of Local Government Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Agriculture. The third stage focused on the empowerment of women. Yet, there were limitations on the ability of the ministry to influence political decisions as it 'emphasized the exercise of influence rather than a more public contest for equality' (Giacaman et al., 2006: 97).

As the PNA focused primarily on policing functions, leaving the development of social policies and services to international aid and non-governmental organizations, there was a need to 'emphasize and realize the significance of NGOs in developing innovative and effective programmes for service provision, and in promoting democratization and community action essential for the growth of civil society' (Giacaman et al., 2006: 104). In particular, the women's movement was 'a leading force in widening and redefining social,

rather than private, issues and needs'. Yet, 'the objective constraints of the transitional stage, the inexperience of the PNA, and the limitations on national resources were constraining factors' (104). This combined with the exacerbating conditions on the ground as illustrated by Israel's continued occupation policies even in areas within the jurisdiction of the PNA.

Women's advancement and effective gender mainstreaming were impeded by entrenched patriarchal structures, the militarization of the Second Intifada that started in 2000, and the prioritization of national security discourse. The question remains how to achieve gender equality and sustainable networking under conditions of extreme instability and insecurity and with diminishing prospects of finding a peaceful and just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A case in point is the paralysis in the work of the Palestinian Legislative Council since 2006. With many council members imprisoned by the Israeli authorities and many others not allowed to cross from Gaza to Ramallah, it has been quite impossible to make progress on reforming the penal and personal status codes. The main challenge for gender mainstreaming has to do with the limited space for action for women's rights organizations, and the need to recognize and address the demands of the different Palestinian constituencies. There remains a tension in the work of NGOs on how best to meet the demands of the national and the feminist, and how to balance community struggle with the provision of services.¹⁸ The struggle for power between Hamas and Fatah factions have a negative effect on the morale of Palestinian society and its vision for an independent state, not to mention Israel's building of the separation wall, and its continued policies of occupation and cantonization of Palestinian areas, resulting in economic strangulation and de facto discontinuity on the ground.

Although Palestinian women's groups and NGOs have been able despite these conditions to network and lead pioneering programmes on the local and regional levels, networking on the transnational level remains limited. This was illustrated in the establishment of recent local and regional coalitions to reform personal status

laws and introduce new family protection laws. In addition, local communication and civil associations' forums were established to support women's issues, and to prevent and eliminate violence against women.¹⁹ Mais Warad said in response to my question about the persistent activism of women's rights groups in the West Bank that when dealing with women's issues in court, it matters more who the judge is rather than whether Hamas or Fatah are able to reconcile their differences.²⁰ She argues that work on law reform should continue despite economic, social and political limitations.

The challenge on the local level remains how to involve rural, refugee and poor women not as beneficiaries but as active participants in decision-making processes. It is not enough to rely on NGOs to provide services as they are not always able to address social and economic inequalities, especially within short-term projects dependent on foreign funding. Jad warns against the bureaucratization of relations between NGOs and local constituencies, and argues that the 'potential for NGOs to foster participatory developments beyond the grassroots level is fairly small, given the transitory nature of projects' (2007b: 187). She concludes that individual and universal women's rights approaches, including gender mainstreaming, need not ignore home-grown locally developed feminisms, and the historical realities of different layers of colonialism and occupation. There is still a need for a different form of organization with a different locally grounded vision and more sustainable power base for social change (Jad, 2007b). Yet, the establishment of national gender machinery and women's rights organizations that could produce critical thinking and change on the ground remains in question in the absence of an independent Palestinian state.

Challenges for gender mainstreaming and feminist organizing in MENA

As discussed earlier, one of the main challenges for gender mainstreaming is to turn it into a transformative project of gender order and relations of power and not descend into technocratic language

and processes (Kelly, 2005: 473). In addition, there is a need to make international law 'permeate down into the realm of everyday life' without loosening the 'foundation of feminist analysis and understandings' (489). The main critique against gender mainstreaming is that it could foster adaptation and change without transformation, especially in conflict situations, as is currently the case in Iraq and the Palestinian Occupied Territories. Working within or parallel to state institutions should be accompanied by alternative visions and strategies in order to confront the prevailing political culture and create more democratic structures and ways of doing politics (Al-Ali, 2003). In addition, gender mainstreaming and gender sensitivity should avoid becoming 'mechanistic quick fixes, which assume that problems of gender inequality can be addressed by redirecting some resources toward women's and girl's education, skills development, access to health services, or improvement of communication between men and women' (Hawkesworth, 2006: 100).

With their civic commitment, activists promoting the human rights of women in MENA are involved in an ongoing struggle for the democratization of their respective societies, which in turn could strengthen gender mainstreaming. In addition to the difficulties of maintaining human and material support for their projects, gaining and preserving independence in their work remains a daily struggle. The challenge goes beyond reforming laws that discriminate against women to ensuring their implementation as well. There is an urgent need to change the poor representation of women in elected bodies in MENA that contributes to their exclusion from decision-making positions. The aim is not to add women and stir but to integrate gender conceptually and in practice on both state and non-state levels. Or, as put by Eveline and Bacchi (2005), it is important to focus on the process of gendering where gender-awareness mainstreaming may well create more than a vision.

In conclusion, the agendas of local, regional and transnational feminist groups need to establish a plan for periodic and systematic evaluation of gender mainstreaming. They also need to examine their mobilization strategies and dependence on outside sources for

funding. They need to remain connected to grassroots efforts even while negotiating with official state bodies. Elitism is a recipe for alienation, and local and regional networks and collectives in MENA have proved most effective when coordinating their activities and advocacy strategies. Cooperation with transnational groups has also proved effective in creating alliances, as was the case when French, Italian and Spanish feminist and women's groups stood in solidarity with women during the civil strife in Algeria in the 1990s.

Finally, it is important to address structural hierarchies and power relations or the pyramid of marginalization when creating informational and solidarity networks.²¹ The focus should be on networking, making the discourse practical, and linking theory with practice. As the local remains the site for action more than the regional and the transnational, the challenge for feminist and women's rights activists remains how to build effective networking under these conditions. Although feminist and women's groups in MENA have been quick to condemn the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq and the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories, they have been slow in forming regional and transnational solidarity networks to analyse the budgetary and the gendered socio-political implications of the security discourse, and war-waging and masculinized militarization processes in the region.

Notes

1. Specific reference to women's rights is only made in the economic and financial chapter of the Barcelona Declaration stating the need for overall improvement in the living and working conditions of the populations in the Euro-Mediterranean region. It was not until November 2001 that gender issues were mentioned in the final conclusions of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Summit. Furthermore, the Partnership's work programme has only marginally acknowledged the importance of women's rights, and these rights were inconsistently addressed in the Euro-Mediterranean National Strategy paper and the National Indicative Programmes (Naciri and Nusair, 2003).
2. The MEDA programme is the principal financial instrument of the European Union for the implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. For further elaboration on the Euro-Mediterranean initiatives on women, see

- http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/euromed/women/index.htm; accessed 15 January 2007.
3. See for further reference: http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/euromed/women/docs/conclusions_1106.pdf; accessed 15 January 2007.
 4. According to Walby (2005), the EU has become a transnational actor that is very important for the contemporary development of gender mainstreaming, with strengths in promoting the policy in abstract, but with weaknesses in implementation. The USA, on the other hand, is noteworthy for the absence of gender mainstreaming among its gender equality policies, and the transfer of the policy is thus not simply from the most powerful countries to weaker ones, but takes a more horizontal form that hybridizes according to local conditions.
 5. See for further elaboration: Al-Ali, 2000; Chatty and Rabo, 1997; Lazreg, 1994.
 6. See, for further elaboration, Hatem, 2005; Joseph, 2000; Kandiyoti, 1997, 1991.
 7. This section is based on Abu Habib 2006.
 8. Key changes included the introduction of the same legal age for marriage for both men and women, and of a legal requirement for a divorced man to provide housing for his former wife if she has custody of the couple's underage children. Homelessness among divorced women and their children has been recognized as a growing problem. The new law also rescinded the legal duty of a wife to obey her husband and introduced equal rights and duties for men and women during marriage. However, numerous provisions which discriminate against women were maintained, including restrictions on female guardianship, polygyny, the husband's unilateral right to divorce his wife, as well as the discriminatory provisions governing inheritance rights (Abu Habib, 2006).
 9. See, for further reference, www.vday.org/contents/vday/vcampaings/amea/karama.
 10. Interview with Hiba Al-Taibi, project coordinator, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Ramallah, 14 August 2008.
 11. The section describing regional organizations in MENA is based on Naciri and Nusair 2003: 39–40.
 12. The network has worked on monitoring Arab countries' compliance with their international obligations; documenting abuses against women; supporting the independence of women's rights organizations from governmental and political parties; mobilizing for women's rights campaigns; supporting the establishment of women in decision-making positions; and examining the representation of women and girls in textbooks and in the media.
 13. The Institute's website is: www.amanjordan.org.
 14. See for further reference, Moghadam, 2005: ch. 6.
 15. Zahira Kamal, Sharek Center, Ramallah, 14 August 2008.
 16. Interview with Dr Nahla Abdo, Ramallah, 13 August 2008.

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. See, for further reference, www.wclac.org/about/partners.php.
20. Interview with Mais Warad, lawyer, Center for Legal Aid and Counselling, Ramallah, 16 August 2008.
21. Interview with Nabila Espanioly, director of Al-Tufula Center, Nazareth, 8 August 2008.

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