

## **From Public Space to Office Space: the professionalization/NGO-ization of the feminist movement associations in Lebanon and its impact on mobilization and achieving social change**

Dalya Mitri

### **Abstract:**

Women's movements are usually perceived to be the frontrunners of emancipatory social change. Yet, these movements in Lebanon seem to be in a difficult position to transform, mobilize and, ultimately, bring about social change. Instead, the institutional form of NGOs appears to be more stable, highly funded by international donors and relying on highly skilled professionals. However, NGOs do not possess the same mobilizing capacities since they are run by professionals aiming to target a specific group and implement a specific project. A women's movement, on the other hand, aims to attract a large number of people, aiming for a common goal and trying to have a positive impact on social change. This paper will try to assess the impact of the professionalization (or NGO-ization) of women's groups, the extent to which it transforms the discourse and structure of these organizations, the importance of the context in which they are operating, and their links to other social or political groups, state institutions and international donors. The main focus of this paper is to explore the effect or impact that these new forms of NGO-ized feminism has on the mobilization of various lebanese social groups.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Social Movements, Women Organizations, NGOs

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Photo from the 2014 International Women's Day demonstration in Beirut. Source: <http://blogbaladi.com/in-pictures-lebanese-protest-against-domestic-violence-on-international-womens-day/>

Women's organizations in Lebanon today seem to be at a crossroads. The failure of the Lebanese state to address women's civil rights and status in society, among other issues, indicates a general withdrawal of the state from the public sector, due to the almost total collapse of the Lebanese state during the war in parallel with neo-liberal reforms. This continuous, historical, and structural weakness of the state in the public sphere has led NGOs and associations to try and fill the void left by the state. Thus, throughout a now century-long history, Lebanese women organizations moved from charitable societies and political left-wing clubs, to a real cottage industry of NGOs run by highly-professionals activists, into the recent emergence of organizations more centered on claims related to sexual and bodily rights and gender identities, as recent studies have shown.<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of women's movements in Lebanon took place in the wake of major historical changes in the Arab world – independence and modernization embodied, among

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<sup>1</sup> Riwa Salameh, "Gender politics in Lebanon and the limits of legal reformism", *Civil Society Knowledge Center*, Lebanon Support, 2014, available at: <http://cskc.daleel-madani.org/paper/gender-politics-lebanon-and-limits-legal-reformism> [last accessed 20 December 2014]; Bernadette Daou, *Les Féminismes au Liban : un dynamisme de positionnement par rapport au patriarcat et un renouvellement au sein du "Printemps Arabe"*, Masters Thesis, Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut, 2014.

others, by secular nationalism and Islamic modernism –<sup>2</sup> and in parallel with the emergence of similar movements in the West.<sup>3</sup> Lebanese women organizations peaked following the end of Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). This period coincided with the end of Cold War era and its subsequent massive funding from Western donors to local NGOs, seeking to implement post-cold War liberal policies such as “democratization” or “good governance”, in which women’s rights seemed to be an unavoidable component.

Women’s movements are generally perceived to be the frontrunners of “emancipatory social change. However, these movements in Lebanon seem to be in a difficult position to transform, mobilize and ultimately bring about such change. Instead, the institutional form of the NGO appears to be more stable, heavily funded by international donors, and relying on highly skilled professionals. Yet, structurally, NGOs may not have the same mobilizing capacities as social movements, since they are mostly run by professional “activists” aiming to target specific groups and implement specific projects. A women’s movement, on the other hand, would be expected to attract a large number of people, aiming for a common goal and trying to have a wide impact on social change. Hence, NGOs can appear poorly equipped for mass mobilization and organization in order to achieve social change. Is it enough to infer that women’s organizations and more specifically women’s movements in Lebanon find themselves caught in a paradox, if not a deadlock?

This paper tries to grasp this question by arguing that the process of professionalization of these groups, or what has been termed as a *NGO-ization*,<sup>4</sup> does not only have a negative impact on the capacity of mobilization of women’s organization in Lebanon, but also unexpected consequences on the structuration of Lebanese political space.

In order to do so, it seems necessary to first suggest a definition of a social movement and the difference between a social movement and an NGO or other forms of organizations. Drawing on data collected via a short questionnaire distributed to 15 women’s organizations and activists working on gender issues in Lebanon, the paper will then try to assess the impact of NGO-ization of these groups on their ability to mobilize and how it led to transforming the discourse and structures of these organizations, the importance of their operating context, and their links to other social and political groups, mainly the state and international donors. After quickly identifying the main actors, the existing structures and the different Women waves (from upper-class charitable societies to the recent radical organizations), this paper will situate the struggle of women movements into a broader political and social context.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, Olivier Fillieule, *Résistances et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes*, Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Earl, “Social Movements and NGOs: A Preliminary Investigation”, International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), 2004, available at: <http://www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=31> [last accessed 20 November 2014].

<sup>4</sup> Islah Jad, “The NGO-Isation of Arab Women’s Movements”, *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2004, pp. 34–42.

## Social movements and women's movements

There is today a certain consensus in the studies of social movements<sup>5</sup> that has generally led to putting the emphasis on the three sets of factors; first, the structure and constraints of political opportunities that shape social movements; second, the formal and informal mobilizing structures through which groups seek to organize in order to engage in collective action, and finally, the framing processes necessary for mobilization accounting for the mediation between opportunity and action.

Social movements can emerge from and produce different organizational infrastructures that range from social movement organizations (SMOs), social kinship, friendship, informal activist networks and, sometimes, formal organizations. Hanspeter Kriesi grasps this heterogeneity through a typology of four types of organizations playing different parts in social movement: SMOs, supportive organizations, movements associations, and parties and interest groups. He argues that as SMOs mobilize their constituency for collective action with a precise political goal in mind, supportive groups on the other hand, in which actors such as media or religious organizations could have a more indirect participation to social movements,<sup>6</sup> movements associations are more “client-oriented.” Finally, parties and interest groups seem to aim more towards political representation than investing in real participation in collective action.<sup>7</sup>

From the view of the framework described above, women's movements could be considered as social movements. Women's movement mobilization processes are here defined as “mobilization based on appeals to women as a constituency and thus as an organizational strategy,”<sup>8</sup> encouraging them to be politically active, redefining their roles within society in both public and private spheres, and favoring the emergence of awareness networks; all this towards pointing to the need for change and ending gendered oppression and discrimination. Although not all women movements could be called feminist, they are “rooted in gendered structures of oppression.”<sup>9</sup>

To summarize, women's movements are social movements, even if not always considered as purely feminist, since they encourage women to be politically active and actors of social change. This said, this paper will see how these movements have been institutionalized and turned into professional organizations, and the impact of this process on the structure of the movements themselves. As defined by Della Porta and Diani, “the difference between social movements and these and other organizations does not consist primarily of differences in

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<sup>5</sup> Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Hanspeter Kriesi, in: McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Myra Marx Ferree, Carol McClurg Mueller, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: A Global Perspective*, in: David A Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Second Edition, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Ferree and Muellers, 2007, *ibid.*

organizational characteristics or patterns of behavior, but of the fact that social movements are not organizations, not even of peculiar kind [...] As a consequence, a single organization, whatever its dominant traits, is not a social movement.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The institutionalization of women’s movements and the emergence of women’s organizations**

The institutionalization of women movements since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century has proven to ensure a solid and undisputed place to women’s organizations within civil societies, thus allowing the circulation of feminist ideas through transnational networks. Women began participating more in international conferences and meeting and raised issues on colonialism, state independence and nationalism.<sup>11</sup> This was also an opportunity for women from the South to bring back to their countries issues of gender equality and build their own national and regional networks, on the one hand, and bring the stories of their national and local struggles to the international arena, on the other.

The 1980s, in particular, witnessed demands to raise the topic of women’s rights and include legislations within a broader human rights discourse. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was ratified by a majority of countries (including Lebanon). This trend gave way to a substantial number of women’s organizations, funded by international donors, being integrated in international networks, allowing for the creation of project-oriented organizations, which targeted women by addressing their social and economic needs. Feminist organizations, or organizations with a clear feminist approach were gradually replaced with organizations targeting specific aspects, nonetheless raising awareness about issues such as violence against women. This new trend of transformation, or “split” into different organizations was also encouraged by international organizations and donors, financing huge regional and national programs (Beijing 1995, UN declarations on Violence against Women (VAW)), based on a broader agenda, which focused on promoting “good governance”, set mainly by the United States. The 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Women’s Rights in Beijing 1995 put what had been formerly considered as “women’s issues” on the global agendas of other UN conferences, coining the term and the subsequent global policy that “women’s rights are human rights”. The types of women’s organizations that emerged post-CEDAW were categorized by Valentine Moghadam as: charitable organizations, official or state-affiliated, professional associations, women studies centers, women’s rights and feminist organizations, NGOs working on women’s and development issues, worker-based and grassroots women’s groups.<sup>12</sup> These new emerging discourses and structures, as classified by CEDAW, helped facilitate and bring to the forefront issues of gender equality worldwide. They were also a tool for mobilizing women in order to obtain social and political change.

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<sup>10</sup> Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Wiley, Oxford, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Jad, 2004, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, “Feminism, Legal Reform and Women’s Empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa”, *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 59, No 191, 2008, p. 9–16.

However, the gain of efficiency and visibility induced by these above-mentioned transformations arrived with the growing professionalization of women's organizations, bearing unexpected consequences. As put by Della Porta and Diani, “[a] movement tends to burn out when organizational identities come to dominate once more, or when “feeling part of it” refers primarily to one's organization and its components, rather than to a broader collective with blurred boundaries.”<sup>13</sup> The next section (and the rest of the paper) will further investigate the consequences of this aspect, with a particular focus on Lebanon.

### **The NGO-ization (or professionalization) of women's movements in Lebanon and the Arab countries**

Socio-political variations within Arab countries contribute to explaining the evolution of women's movements, from upper middle class charitable societies to participation in the national struggle for independence, in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. Arab women movements had their roots in political parties and nationalist movements,<sup>14</sup> then established their own organizations later on to push for their own specific agendas. The reason behind that was mainly because they felt marginalized by men within the organizations they participated in and excluded from the decision-making process. Another reason was that these women found common ground with other women inspired by the ideas of feminism as a way to struggle for their own visions and rights and establish their own political agenda and demands.<sup>15</sup>

These women pioneers usually emerged from upper-middle and middle classes. Organizing in charitable societies was a first step to break through their traditional domestic role and force their way into the public sphere. The newly independent states dealt with these movements by granting them political and economic rights and participation.<sup>16</sup> Then, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, educated young women were drawn to leftist ideas, but their feminist agendas were not always welcomed by leftist parties, who did not see it necessary to separate both agendas, arguing that women's rights would be obtained as the direct outcome of social revolutions.<sup>17</sup> Following CEDAW and international conferences that took place around women rights, women organizations in the Middle East became generally active in the reform of family laws, especially working women such as lawyers, social workers, and researchers, who usually came from an upper middle class background.<sup>18</sup>

These funded organizations raised suspicions among Islamist and conservative parties – as well as from the left – who were appalled by what they saw as an imposition of western

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<sup>13</sup> Della Porta and Diani, 2006, *op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Stéphanie Latte Abdallah, “Vers un féminisme politique hors frontières au Proche-Orient”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, Vol. 103, No 3, 2009, pp. 177–195.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Moghadam, 2008, *op.cit.*

<sup>17</sup> See the evolution of RDFL (Rassemblement Démocratique de la Femme Libanaise) in: Lara Khattab, *Civil Society in a Sectarian Context: The Women's Movement in Post-War Lebanon*, Masters Thesis, Lebanese American University, Beirut, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Moghadam, 2008, *op. cit.*

values aiming at destroying Arab societies and values. The same accusations were also directed towards women's movements during the independence and nationalism era.

The end of the 1990s witnessed new networks of feminists emerging outside political parties and rejecting all types of violence and discrimination against women, including in other Arab countries and against marginalized communities in their own countries (like Palestinian refugees and foreign migrant workers). These movements and organizations also worked with globalized civil society networks, searching for support within networks like CEDAW and trying to receive funds from international donors who were less likely to impose their own vision and ideology on them. They championed a feminism that goes beyond "partisan and national frontiers"<sup>19</sup> and which relies on a broader support base. Still, some critics argued that cooperation and networking were still funding-dependent and failed to create a real sense of coordination among common lines.<sup>20</sup>

Another aspect of institutional differences between social movements and NGOs is found at a structural level, preventing them from doing actual political action leading to social change, even if some claim to be as radical in their ideas as social movements. As Nawla Darwiche puts it, "[the] reality of the majority of women's organizations in the Arab region continues to oscillate between a charity and a developmental role, with few truly feminist agendas."<sup>21</sup>

As witnessed in other fields such as development and humanitarian work, another consequence of the professionalization process of these women's organizations leads to a "salarization process"<sup>22</sup> of the employed people involved, which is directly linked to higher budgets. This process is also related to donor agencies' requirements, which helped create a new category of women workers: a mix of employees and volunteers (or activists). Paying professionals became the norm, while activists and volunteers started to disappear in a trend that led to less action-oriented and more "managerial" type of organization.<sup>23</sup>

In the Arab world, and specifically in Lebanon, NGOs and women organizations tend to collaborate closely with state institutions,<sup>24</sup> either because of historical ties or in the aim of filling the gaps left by the state in the public sphere. These "specialized NGOs", in the words of Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, tend at the same time to bring their expertise to state institutions

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<sup>19</sup> Latte Abdallah, 2009, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Jad, 2004, *op.cit.*, Latte Abdallah, 2009, *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Nawla Darwiche, "Women in Arab NGOs: A Publication of the Arab Network for Non-Governmental Organizations, *Feminist Review*, Vol. 69, No 1, 2001, pp. 15–20.

<sup>22</sup> Joanna Siméant, "Urgence et développement, professionnalisation et militantisme dans l'humanitaire", *Mots*, No. 65, 2001, pp 28-50.

<sup>23</sup> Karam Karam, "al-Masar al-Taraju' i li 'Amaliyat al-Islah al-Intikhabi fi Lubnan: Naqd li Tajribat al-Tasharuk bayn al-Mujatama' al-Madani wal-Qita' al-'Am wal-Munazamat al-Dawliyah" (The Regressive Path of Electoral Reform in Lebanon: A Critique of the Participatory Experiment between Civil Society, the Public Sector, and International Organizations), published in part in *Al-Akhbar*, 15 July 2008, pp. 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> According to Lucy Earl, 2004, *op. cit.*, "the stamp of a social movement is precisely its refusal to provide services and resolution that this should be the role of the state".

and collaborate with them, while continuing to promote collective actions in order to put pressure on the state and to push for their agendas which tends to dilute their contentious role.<sup>25</sup>

To some extent, these NGOs acted like the state by proxy, by agreeing to play the role of the state (through bringing in their expertise, drafting laws, lobbying for their endorsement, and monitoring their application).<sup>26</sup> This specific relationship between NGOs and the state has somehow transformed their original social and political vocation, leading ultimately to a certain form of bureaucratization of political activism. In Lebanon, this openness to bureaucratization could have been accelerated by the weakness of the state. Filling the void - left by the collapse of the state in the 1975-1990 Civil War, Israeli and Syrian occupation, and persistent turbulence in the era of civil peace- meant that tremendous amounts of resources from these organizations, both human and financial, were mobilized mainly to provide services and fill gaps in governance, which could have been dedicated to enhance mobilization and collective political action.

To sum up, the evolution of women's movements in the Arab world, and more specifically in Lebanon, into the form of professional entities with a specific role vis-à-vis the state has determined the shape of their discourses and actions. This evolution also poses the question of their role within the Lebanese society and their ability to mobilize large groups of women.

### **Women's movements evolution in Lebanon, and the political implication of the NGO-ization process**

The evolution of women's movements in Lebanon, as eloquently described by Bernadette Daou,<sup>27</sup> came in four successive waves. First was the mobilization of the upper-classes in the framework of the struggle for independence. The creation of an independent Lebanon was then followed by the rise of leftist movements, closer to Marxist ideas, after the defeat of 1967. Then everything came to a halt during the civil war. A new wave emerged in the post-civil war period (coinciding with the Beijing conference, the adoption of CEDAW, the multiplication of NGOs, etc). In the past decade, a new radical model of leftist feminist organization was born within the framework of the anti-globalization movement.<sup>28</sup>

These waves were characterized not only by organizational transformations, but also by discursive differences. The first wave of women activists were claiming their political rights within the frame of national identity, while the second generation of feminists were followed

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<sup>25</sup> Marie-Noëlle Abi-Yaghi, *L'altermondialisme au Liban : un militantisme de passage. Logiques d'engagement et reconfiguration de l'espace militant (de gauche) au Liban*, Thèse de Doctorat, Université de Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> As we see, for example, in the implementation of the "anti-tobacco law", which was monitored by the association that drafted the law, TFI (Tobacco-Free initiative).

<sup>27</sup> Daou, 2014, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

a more Marxist approach and expressed their ideas within a broader struggle for socialist revolution, resistance to colonialism and liberation movements.<sup>29</sup>

A structural change within these second generation movements, due mainly to the professionalization of these organizations and their actions during the civil war and its aftermath, helped model the current landscape of civil society in Lebanon, which became mainly articulated around NGOs adopting a single-approach or a single-issue through the use of media campaigns, advocacy networks, lobbying, and awareness-raising.

The emergence of the anti-globalization movements, or the “fourth wave”, saw discursive practices of leftist, anti-imperialist, and anti-neoliberal politics, which were critical of the institutionalization of women’s organizations in Lebanon. NGOs and donors, however, often perceived this movement as “western” and imposed by external forces.

The agendas and goals of these four waves of women movements also differed and varied. They ranged from pushing for participation in the political arena and for voting rights, leaving the sectarian and patriarchal system unchallenged, to relief, development work, and reaching out to underprivileged areas. After the hiatus of the civil war, where all NGOs and associations were operating in the field of relief, either as a branch in a political party or as an institutionalized NGO, the conference on Women’s rights in Beijing, held in 1995, stated a new paradigm of women’s right as human rights, and called for the participation of women in all aspects of public and private life, encouraging awareness about their rights.<sup>30</sup>

The new agenda of Lebanese women’s NGOs, and the structural changes that some organizations went through as a result of this conference, was now aiming at targeting women with specifically designed projects, funded by donor agencies, in line with the new trends defined by the successive women’s rights conferences and in compliance with the political agenda set by western donor countries. Women who were active in associations on a voluntary basis became paid professionals, and had to adapt to new ways of work and bureaucracy that served not only the community but also the donor agencies, even if these organizations were always cautious in trying to draft their projects according to the beneficiaries needs. As put by a representative of RDFL, “we usually choose the standards and interventions of its projects that serve its main goals and objectives which in turn it is what our community needs.”<sup>31</sup>

The radical feminist movement, the most recent wave in Lebanon, was more articulated around the social role of gender, struggle against male oppression and patriarchy.<sup>32</sup> It came out of the Lebanese LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, intersex, and queer) movements<sup>33</sup>. These groups raised issues that were not tackled previously, like sexual

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> VAW became a specific topic, thus the creation of dedicated organizations (LECORVAW then KAFA in 2005 then ABAAD in 2011.)

<sup>31</sup> Interview with RDFL representative, December 2014

<sup>32</sup> Daou, 2014, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Such as Helem, Meem, and Nasawiya. See Marie-Noëlle AbiYaghi, 2013, *op.cit.*

identity, bodily rights and sexual liberation.<sup>34</sup> While it could be stated that re-centering the debate around private matters enhanced the gap between the movements and their potential constituencies, Stephanie Latte Abdallah however, argues that this focus on “private” matters, instead of “narrowing the horizon of women’s movements struggles, allowed them to take their actions to a political level.”<sup>35</sup>

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, many feminist NGOs today work alongside the state to implement women-related projects.<sup>36</sup> However, women’s organization had always worked closely with the state and different political parties, and even recent ones have implemented their projects in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA), through their local centers, targeting and reaching out to grassroots women communities.<sup>37</sup> This “strategic interaction with the state”<sup>38</sup> is often problematic and creates a tension between the necessity to fill the gaps left by the Lebanese state weaknesses and the necessary independent expression of dissent and assuming “the role of identifiers and articulators of society’s health needs.”<sup>39</sup>

Since “the stamp of a social movement is precisely its refusal to provide services and its resolution that this should be the role of the state,”<sup>40</sup> it could be argued here that women’s movements are again caught in the paradox of their inevitable NGO-ization in the Lebanese context. The NGOs workers themselves blame this inevitable collaboration on “the weakness of the legislative role of the political authority and their concern with other issues (mainly security and political issues), giving the NGOs and society in general in Lebanon the opportunity to fill in this gap and play a role which is not required from them.”<sup>41</sup> NGO workers, as well as self-proclaimed activists, clearly express their opposition to the government (the thought of cooperating with “such a corrupt state is nauseating”) and their dissatisfaction in having to “fill in” for the state – “activism [does not mean] doing the job of the government”.<sup>42</sup> However, they often deem this cooperation necessary to push and advocate for the adoption of laws, as well as observing and monitoring their proper application<sup>43</sup> by state institutions. Lobbying face-to-face or organizing training sessions for

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<sup>34</sup> A clear example of these movements is the feminist collective Nasawiya, which had a radical feminist approach to political struggle, pinpointing the importance of intersectionality in understanding power dynamics, as women’s identity cannot be dissociated from race, social class or sexuality issues.

<sup>35</sup> Latte Abdallah, 2009, *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> After signing the CEDAW agreement, Lebanon became a de facto a partner to all organizations promoting family law reforms and pushing for law on domestic violence.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with RDFL representative, December, 2014

<sup>38</sup> Earl, 2004, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Idid.*

<sup>41</sup> Interview with LECORVAW representative, November, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with founder of MOSAIC, November, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> We could see as an example the issue of the application of the law against domestic violence: NGOs themselves created monitoring mechanisms to ensure the application of the law, since no

state employees are often cited as a good ways to ensure message delivery. Lobbying and law making<sup>44</sup> are often seen as the best means to convey the demands and obtain results, even if it means monitoring the application of these results.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, there is a general consensus amongst actors and analysts that Lebanese organizations are indeed playing the role of the state, by providing services or advocating and lawmaking. Nevertheless, newly formed Lebanese organizations define themselves as highly vocal actors,<sup>46</sup> rather than service providers, and their claims come very politicized, as they are looking to focus on marginalized groups and issues that need to be addressed by the state and its policies.<sup>47</sup> In other words, “advocating in the direction where we see fit, in a radical unapologetic way to fill in for the insanely grave gaps of the government and the light and upsetting tone of many NGOs who advocate for the wrong thing or for the right ones in the most apologetic of ways.”<sup>48</sup>

### **The Impact of NGO-ization on Mobilization and social change**

These new types of NGOs have often failed to mobilize large groups of women in Lebanon around issues serving their interests, such as domestic violence, personal status law, and nationality rights. Khattab argues that one major cause is the division of women along sectarian lines. Low levels of women participation could be attributed to the Lebanese sectarian and clientelist political system itself.<sup>49</sup> Social movements<sup>50</sup> and NGOs, have been unable to mobilize beyond the barriers of sectarian identities or political loyalties.<sup>51</sup>

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government body would take the lead. The NGOs (mainly KAFA) organized training for Judges and Internal Security Forces personnel, elaborated a software to file the complaints, helped create within the ISF a department to hold accountable the personnel who doesn't apply the law properly.

<sup>44</sup> Interviews with LebMASH, RDFL, KAFA, November-December 2014.

<sup>45</sup> For example, KAFA's experience in working with state institution did not specifically mean not putting pressure on the state or challenging the system. Even members of the NGO are aware that this position is rather hard to stand by, working with MPs in order to push for the law was fruitful, but KAFA is fiercely convinced that they still have the latitude to criticize and denounce the state's institutions shortcomings.

<sup>46</sup> AbiYaghi, 2014, *op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> For example, the Ferguson Movement in the USA (following the killing of an unarmed young man by a police officer), dismissed the policies and terms of activism, civil rights, and working with state institutions and community representatives. They defined themselves as representatives from a community in “active struggle” and unrest against state sanctioned killing, and that this struggle will continue if their demands are not met.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Anti-Racism Movement representative, December, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Khattab, 2010, *op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> One could note here the presence of usually un-politicized women spontaneously joining the various protests in the aftermath of the Hariri assassination (2005) but a there was no clear attempt to capture their enthusiasm and mobilize them around other political issues.

<sup>51</sup> Salameh, 2014, *op. cit.*

Another factor hindering mobilization is the language used by these Lebanese NGOs, as international agencies and NGOs have established their own jargon, usually in English, and mastering this jargon is almost mandatory in order to work properly, write proposals, reports, programs and projects, even if a real effort is made in communicating and campaigning in Arabic, using an interesting blend of colloquial and standard Arabic, which could be understood by everyone. Since most of recent feminist theories and texts are written in English as well, non-english speakers are de facto excluded from discussion groups and thus unable to be mobilized. This has practically implied that a vast majority of women's movements, even the last generation of what has been described as the "fourth wave",<sup>52</sup> who wanted to avoid the bureaucratic and hierarchical structures of its predecessor, are still led by educated middle class or upper middle class women.

Moreover, to comply with donor agendas, resulting in dependency on available funding and the inevitable alignment with global trends pertaining to women's issues,<sup>53</sup> grassroots efforts are further hampered by the professionalization of their structures, losing touch with the realities of the terrain, while trying to properly implement heavily-funded and accountable projects. There is always the risk "that these NGOs lose sight of the fight to transform representations of gender and changes in consciousness at the grassroots level."<sup>54</sup>

Finally, donors have a tendency to approach NGOs they know, often the most institutionalized, headed by well-known figures. This perpetuates the system and provides for what Khattab coined as "technical quick-fix" solutions for more complex political issues. Despite awareness of the limitations imposed by the "fund hunt" realities, and the competition amongst NGOs stirred by this hunt, some NGOs remain strongly committed to drafting projects according the core values and aims of their original political commitment. A way to illustrate this is KAFA's recent decision to refuse to submit proposals in the framework of the emergency appeal for Syrian refugees, or ABAAD's controversial project to target men as well as women that was "imposed" on donors after they've established its necessity through focus groups and feedback from the field.<sup>55</sup>

### **New Modalities of mobilizing and targeting public opinion**

Even though NGOs have a hard time mobilizing, different models of mobilization do exist. This section provides examples of recent actions conducted by two women's organization, based on two very different approaches.

The coexistence of different models of mobilization was epitomized by the contrast of this year's most visible actions, KAFA's rally in favor of the endorsement of the Law on

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<sup>52</sup> Daou, 2014, *op. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> LebMASH founder points out that the fact that all donors are currently interested in funding LGBTIQ related projects follows a "hype", and donors are actually "knocking on these organizations' doors" to encourage them to submit proposals for funding.

<sup>54</sup> Earl, 2004, *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup> Interview with ABAAD, November, 2014.

domestic violence, and a more controversial and highly unusual project by ABAADs,<sup>56</sup> using religious leaders as the campaign image. In 2012, ABAAD launched the *Nu'min* (We Believe) campaign, a series of dialogues with religious leaders to end Gender Based Violence (GBV) and create a space for dialogue between women's organizations and CSO and religious leaders about women's rights and women's status in Lebanese society. Although this project was deemed very successful by the implementing organization, who saw a unique opportunity to bring religious leaders and women on the same table and make them take a public stance against Gender based violence, it was heavily contested by other women's organizations because the core of the project reestablishes the power of religious leaders over Lebanese society, without confronting the patriarchal system, by refusing to dispute the authority of religious leaders and their role in shaping the family model and women's role in Lebanon.

In an interview conducted with a member of ABAAD, she stated that:

“Our methods to mobilize depend on the target , if we decide to target influential people, we're going to use positive psychology, no aggressive tone, no accusation, searching for role models for men, denounce but in a soft way, without antagonizing the significant actors. We try to find space for encouraging social change and women's rights”<sup>57</sup>

A second example is Kafa, which managed to mobilize around 5000 people on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014, for a demonstration in favor of the adoption of the law against domestic violence, using a nationwide media campaign and attracting women from different backgrounds. The success of this mobilization depended on a combination of tools: meetings with community leaders and women in the field, focus groups, meetings with volunteers who want to get involved in the organization, while organizing the protest. But it also relied on a lot of campaigning using social and mainstream media. Communicating via mass media helped in the “naming and shaming process”, mainly as far as the MPs or members of the parliamentary commission were concerned. Massive media presence and having journalists relaying the information helped to a great extent raising awareness and the mobilization of the public opinion around the issue of VAW and the necessity to endorse the law.<sup>58</sup>

These actions epitomize the differing modalities of women's organization mobilization in Lebanon. Kafa chose to use the public space as a space for mobilization. However, despite their difference, they share common features: both organizations are strongly structured, have

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<sup>56</sup> ABAAD – resource center for gender equality, was founded in 2011, promoting equality, protection of women and marginalized groups through policy development.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with ABAAD, November 2014.

<sup>58</sup> In summary, three factors helped in shaping the success of this rally: building-up mobilization using awareness raising and advocacy tools, disseminating the information to reach as many people as possible; the role of the media in talking about the cases of four women in a row who died as victims of violence that created an emotional response in the public opinion, and thirdly, the thoroughness in the organization of the rally itself, by targeting people through meetings (voluntary, activist, women in sister associations).

experience in policy making, lobbying and advocacy, and know how to use the media to convey their message. Most importantly, their approach is shaped by the necessity of the interaction with the state, which is a strong indicator of the paradoxical relationship between women's organizations and the Lebanese state.

Although these two distinct actions, conducted by two of the biggest and well-known women's organizations, have been deemed successful by organizers and participants, they surely helped raise the awareness of public opinion on women's struggles. However, some members of smaller organizations argue that the policy making approach is often useless in the Lebanese context. They add that there is a need for more grassroots oriented organizations, who work hand in hand with the communities according to their needs, and who are not afraid to be vocal in denouncing the weaknesses of the state. As put by one of their representatives:

“We try to fill-in gaps on the ground rather than put effort in talking [to representatives of the state institutions]. We can take a quick look back at the last 10 years and count what sort of “civil society” policies have reached the table and then we know how little we gained on this front.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Beyond NGO-ization**

Understanding and analyzing the difference between a social movement and an NGO, or a formal organization, seems necessary to show that, essentially, both cannot, would not, and could not mobilize along similar lines. The quasi-impossibility for women's organizations in Lebanon to mobilize beyond their constituencies, beyond the lines of class, rural/urban dichotomy, education, and/ or sectarian lines, is a reminder of the most obvious impact of NGO-ization on women's movements. The difficulty to find a common cause to enhance cooperation between these organizations, and the competition stirred by the hunt for funds is also contributing in blurring the feminist message.

By acting like a proxy and filling the multiple voids left by the disintegration of the Lebanese state during the civil war, the Syrian occupation, and the neoliberal policies implemented since the end of the war, NGO expertise in “covering” for the Lebanese state's weaknesses had paradoxically creating a mutual dependency relationship, making them unable to act as catalyst for collective action and mobilization of greater segments of the Lebanese population.

That being said, a research about the transformation or drift, as would argue more critical voices, of women's rights social movements towards a professionalized/NGO-ized rationality in Lebanon (and elsewhere) remains a moving target both at the conceptual and practical level. It is indeed worth concluding here by stating that what actually and practically constitutes the very distinction between an NGO and social movements needs to be further clarified. Even if this paper has drawn on rather ideal-typical definitions for the sake of analytical clarity, a closer look points towards a more fuzzy picture. That feeling should not however be considered as a call for further conceptual clarification. On the the contrary, it

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Anti Racism Movement, December, 2014.

seems that the very practices of women's rights organizations contribute to it. Some sort of an idealization of social movements seems to be at stake here. Thus, who determines at the end of the day who is part of a social movement and who is just a bureaucrat who has lost his soul in the journey towards NGOization? And subsequently, who says who is a real feminist and who is not? As the distinction is ultimately not that clear cut on the field, the NGOization argument is maybe also partly fuelled by a critique from smaller organizations and some researchers sharing a somehow nostalgic ethos of political struggles. In order to investigate further this assumption, it would be interesting to raise the question of the limitations of social movements themselves in terms of institutionalisation and efficiency.

The demonstration to denounce violence against women organized by KAFA in March 2014 that gathered nearly 5,000 people constitutes a good example to grasp the actual women's organizations capabilities in Lebanon. Despite a fairly important mobilization, this demonstration translated its claims as the National Coalition for the Legislation of Protection of Women from Domestic Violence ultimately failed to pass the law it had spent years drafting and advocating. This case seems to indicate that even if NGOization of women's organizations is a new constitutive feature of Lebanon's civil society, the path to women's rights recognition does not rely only on the establishment of the right proportion of social movements towards NGOs, but on much structural problems of Lebanon's political field.

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