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

Reviewed by Hosn Abboud

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

Sharara answers these questions in six chapters, keeping in mind the varied and sometimes-conflicting perspectives towards ‘women and organizations’, a subject that is becoming increasingly central with the growing involvement of non-governmental organizations in human development. The introduction covers the historical beginnings of women in social work, particularly their efforts to obtain the rights to vote, to run for parliamentary election, and to serve in the ministries of social affairs, education and the fine arts.

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

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

The third chapter is the ‘bayt al-qasid’ as they say in Arabic (the key verse to an ode), and covers “the dynamics of social work in Lebanese NGOs”. Here Sharara points to the factors that contribute to, or hinder, development in the structure of the organization and its vital aims. For example, the issue of sectarianism (al-ta’ifiyya) is discussed with the leaders of the organizations, with conflicting results depending upon the type of organization and its political involvement. In organizations in which the social and the political are intertwined, for example the Assembly for Municipal and Mayoral
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The fourth chapter studies “similarities and dissimilarities
between men and women in their organizations”, specifically their sectarian and gender awareness. The fifth chapter, “Challenging violence against women: ideologies and agendas”, portrays various attitudes towards vio-
ence: from the Al-Najat Islamic Organization (Jam‘iyat al-
najat al-Islamiyya), to the Lebanese Society for Resisting Violence Against Women (Al-hay’a al-lubnaniyya li-muna-
hadat al-‘unf dud al-mar’a). Sharara includes new experimental support programs and therapy groups, such as the Democratic Women’s Association (Al-tajammu’ al-nisa’i al-
dimocrati), and the group that interviewed 177 women prisoners who were freed after the liberation of south Lebanon.

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

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