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## The NGO Industrial Complex and Palestinian Feminism: A Case Study

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The NGO Industrial Complex and Palestinian Feminism: A Case Study

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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## **Introduction**

The Palestinian feminist movement has undergone significant transformations in recent years, particularly through the increasing prevalence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC). While NGOs have played a crucial role in advancing the feminist agenda, their growing influence has led to a process known as NGOization. This phenomenon refers to the ways in which NGOs have become the primary form of organizing and mobilizing social movements, often at the expense of grassroots activism and local community organizing. In this paper, I will examine the case of WCLAC and the NGOization of the Palestinian feminist movement. My argument is that while NGOization has led to significant transformations in the Palestinian feminist movement's agenda and approach, leading to certain drawbacks, WCLAC's efforts to challenge these negative outcomes demonstrate a critical stance toward NGOization and highlight the importance of critical engagement with this phenomenon. Therefore, NGOization can bring about positive as well as negative outcomes for social movements, and it is crucial to engage critically and take measures to tackle its negative consequences, which include demobilization, fragmentation, and non-sustainability. This is imperative for achieving lasting and impactful social change.

Studying the Palestinian feminist movement is particularly significant in the current political climate when Palestinians continue to face ongoing human rights violations, including gender-based violence and discrimination. This research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the role of NGOs in social movements, as well as provide insights into the specific challenges and opportunities faced by the Palestinian feminist movement. Through an

analysis of WCLAC's history, organizational structure, and engagement with the broader feminist movement, I will examine how NGOization has impacted the feminist agenda and the movement's approach to social change. Additionally, I will explore the strategies employed by WCLAC to address the negative consequences of NGOization and promote critical engagement with the phenomenon. The main objective of this paper is to foster a better understanding of the complexities of NGOization and its influence on social movements, particularly regarding the Palestinian feminist movement, through a comprehensive and holistic approach. By highlighting the importance of critical engagement and efforts to address the negative consequences of NGOization, this research seeks to contribute to the development of more effective and sustainable strategies for creating social change.

My approach to this topic diverges from the current literature on NGOization concerning both its general scope and its specific focus on the Palestinian feminist movement. Rather than adopting a binary argument in favor of or against NGOization, I adopt a non-binary stance and aim to understand its positive and negative outcomes comprehensively. I analyze the impact of NGOization not only on the larger social movement, but also on the organization itself, its constituents, and communities, all while placing it within the context of the broader global landscape as well as its intersection with the past and present of Palestine, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of its effects. Additionally, I examine how WCLAC has leveraged the effects of NGOization to achieve its goals which provides insight into the practical implications of this phenomenon. Furthermore, I have adopted a well-rounded approach to my research by incorporating a wide range of sources with diverse perspectives. Alongside my internship experience at WCLAC, which granted me an insider perspective and provided



valuable insights into the organization's operations, I have utilized a multitude of sources, including WCLAC's publications, their funders' publications, research studies, and secondary sources that contain testimonials from both staff and beneficiaries of the organization. This diversity of sources allows for a more comprehensive and balanced analysis of the effects of NGOization on its stakeholders.

In my first chapter, I discuss the significance of NGOization, as well as the effects of NGOization on social movements in general and on the Palestinian feminist movement in particular. I argue that NGOization leads to the transformation of social movements, their agendas, and the approach taken to address those agendas. I examine the function of NGOs and social movements in Palestine, with a particular focus on feminist NGOs and their connections with local communities, foreign donors, and the Palestinian Authority (PA). I explore how the professionalization and dependence on donors have created a divide between grassroots movements and NGOs, leading to the depoliticization and demobilization of the NGO sector in Palestine. This chapter also examines the power dynamics between NGOs, donors, and the Palestinian Authority, and it reconsiders the role of NGOs in promoting social and political change.

My second chapter is a case study of the way the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) has been affected by the phenomenon of NGOization of the Palestinian feminist movement, as well as its contribution to this phenomenon as the most prominent feminist NGO in Palestine. I argue that despite not always conforming to conventional practices associated with NGOization, such as using their co-option by the Palestinian government as a tool to achieve their goals, WCLAC has undoubtedly played a role in reproducing its effects such

as contributing to the fragmentation and demobilization of the Palestinian feminist movement. However, it has made efforts to address certain negative outcomes related to NGOization, thus demonstrating a critical stance toward this phenomenon. In this chapter, I provide a thorough examination of WCLAC's approach to advocating for women's rights in Palestine, including their use of advocacy and awareness campaigns, legal reform, and co-option strategies. I discuss both the successes and failures of these approaches, as well as the challenges and limitations facing feminist NGOs in Palestine, such as the professionalization of the sector and the shrinking space for civil society. Overall, the chapter provides a nuanced perspective on the complexities of feminist activism in Palestine and raises important questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of different approaches to promoting women's rights in the region.

#### Transformations in Palestinian Women's Activism: A Historical Overview

Since the 1920s, Palestinian women's activism has been shaped by their connection to the national liberation struggle and the Palestinian resistance movement. The Palestinian Women's Union, established in 1921 (Abdulhadi, 1998, p. 654), played a significant role in organizing women and shaping the women's movement (Kuttab, 2009, p. 104). While Palestinian women shared their nation's aspirations for independence and sovereignty, they have also asserted their feminist agency and autonomy from the nationalist project and the imposition of neo-traditional customs by colonizers (Fleischmann, 2003). In Palestine, where successive and ongoing forms of colonial oppression have made it particularly difficult to disengage a project for women's emancipation from one for national liberation, women had to carve out a space for themselves to participate equally in the national struggle (Jad, 2008, p. 4). During the 1948-1967 period,

politically active Palestinian women played a crucial role as a vanguard despite being a minority (Sharoni, 1995, p. 62).

Women's organizations faced new demands as a result of the events of the Nakba in 1948 and the Naksa in 1967. The creation of the Israeli state in Palestine following the Nakba led to the uprooting and dispersion of Palestinians as well as the fragmentation and destruction of Palestinian social networks. As a result, women's organizations were forced to expand their structures to offer relief and social services to needy families. The Naksa further destroyed the political, economic, and cultural infrastructure of Palestinian society, reducing its ability for survival and continuity and demanding solidarity and unity among the people and within the national movement in a greater capacity. This led to the transformation of the women's movement into a wide network of charitable organizations that supported and responded to the needs of their communities (Kuttab, 2009, p. 105). These changes led to the emergence of civil society organizations in the absence of direct government assistance, as Israel barely covered basic health and education for Palestinians (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 13). Before the emergence of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the West Bank and Gaza had a strong and pluralistic infrastructure of NGOs, achieved both despite and because of the Israeli occupation (Hammami, 2000, p. 16). Due to the absence of government support, civil society organizations were utilized as the means to establish formal structures for coordination.

NGOization in Palestine occurred as a process of professionalizing already existing organizations. The early formation of professionalized NGOs in Palestine was a result of several factors that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as factionalization and contracts with European donors (Hammami, 2000, p. 16). Prior to the formation of the PA, Palestinian

society was organized around political parties and grassroots organizations that operated under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Jad, 2008, p. 4). This was when grassroots organizing was non-factional, composed of loosely organized women's, students', and workers' groups. But by the end of the 1970s, the national movement had split into faction-based groups, and the PLO had made various funding sources accessible to some of these groups that had evolved into organizations. At the same time, organizations searched for funding opportunities through foreign donors; they were able to use donor funds to subsidize their factional funding (Hammami, 2000, p. 16).

What Sonia Alvarez refers to as the "NGOization boom" (1991) manifested in Palestine throughout the first intifada, where foreign donors played a significant role in the NGOization of the Palestinian movement. During the First Intifada, which began in 1987, organizations played a crucial role in mobilizing Palestinian society and became the main channel for foreign aid delivery at the grass-roots level. As a result, the organizations acquired more power than their parent parties (Jad, 2008, p. 4) and transformed popular initiatives into professionally-based and foreign-funded centers (Hammami, 2000, p. 16). This indicates that, by adopting the global operational methods and practices of NGOs, these organizations were undergoing NGOization. Consequently, Foreign funding freed organization leaders from financial dependence on their factions but also imposed new constraints on the organizations, such as long-term planning, measurable objectives, and developmental rather than political goals (Hammami, 2000, p. 17). This led to the depoliticization of NGOs and their dissociation from grassroots constituencies, which also happened due to the militarization of the Intifada that led to the disconnection of mobilizer organizations from their constituencies. Professionalized NGOs became safe havens

for dissatisfied party cadres, and leftist rejectionist factions focused on NGOs as the political alternative to the Palestinian National Authority in the early years of its rule. However, by 1998, a majority believed that NGOs were no substitute for political parties, reflecting a growing recognition of the limitations of NGOs in representing the grassroots (Hammami, 2000, p. 27).

In the early 1990s, women's activism transformed into new forms of NGOs, which marked a significant shift towards policy-oriented agendas. This structural transformation marginalized the grassroots movements and weakened the credibility and legitimacy of historical women's committees. The majority of women's NGOs were further disconnected from the national movement through a rationale of decreasing control and hegemony among different political factions, which resulted in the depoliticization of the women's agenda (Kuttab, 2009, p. 112). The depoliticization of NGOs continued during the formation of the Palestinian Authority rule, which integrated Palestinian NGOs into the global NGO ethic and culture, largely due to the presence of a significant number of international aid agencies supporting the peace process (Hammami, 2000, p. 16). After the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, The region saw a great influx of foreign aid for Palestinians in what has been described by the World Bank as "one of the largest mobilizations of donors in absolute terms and per capita" (Bornstein, 2009, p. 183). This influx of funds led to a proliferation of women's NGOs, making it harder for older forms of non-professionalized women's organizations to survive and sustain their activities in the same capacity. The professionalization of organizations that were primarily run by activists was a key aspect of their NGOization. This shift was prompted by various factors, including the need for individuals with specialized skills to enhance the organization's performance. Furthermore, activists recognized the importance of securing additional funding, and engaging professionals

was seen as a means of attracting more support. This approach was preferred by funders who found it easier to deal with women who already possessed experience managing an organization in a professional manner (Jad, 2008, p. 12). Therefore, the NGOization of these organizations occurred through the process of professionalization due to donor influence.

In this discussion, I have offered an account of the history of Palestinian feminist activism and the emergence of NGOs in Palestine. By highlighting the relationship between the evolution of feminist activism and the political changes taking place in Palestine, I have emphasized the interconnectedness of these phenomena. The transformation of Palestinian women's activism is a complex process that reflects the intersection between nationalism, feminism, and external forces. As we continue to navigate the changing landscape of social movements, it is crucial to engage in critical reflection and dialogue to ensure that our strategies are effective, sustainable, and inclusive.

## **NGOization: Transforming Social Movements from Within**

### Introduction:

The professionalization of social activism has brought about a significant shift in the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advocating for social change. This process, known as NGOization, has led to NGOs playing an increasingly dominant role in social activism through professional and institutionalized means. Professionalization is vital to this process, involving adopting professional standards and practices by NGOs engaged in social and political advocacy. This includes the establishment of formal structures and hierarchies within these organizations, as well as the implementation of standardized procedures and practices for carrying out their work. While this process has led to more measurable outcomes and increased compliance with bureaucratic requirements, it has also resulted in the institutionalization and bureaucratization of social action. This shift from loosely organized and broadly mobilizing social movements to professionalized and structured bureaucratic NGOs has fundamentally altered the strategies of feminist activism globally (Lang, 2012, p. 62).

This chapter examines the benefits and drawbacks of NGOization. I discuss this by looking in detail at the effects of NGOization on social movements in general and on the Palestinian feminist movement in particular. In this chapter, I argue that NGOization leads to the transformation of a social movement, its agenda, and the approach taken to address that agenda.

Establishing the transformation of a social movement, its agenda, and its approach under NGOization as a significant factor lays the groundwork for evaluating WCLAC's role in

reproducing and challenging the effects of NGOization on the Palestinian feminist movement.

By acknowledging the positive and negative impacts of NGOization on social movements, I can investigate how WCLAC's practices align with or diverge from conventional NGOization practices, and the outcomes can be analyzed in-depth.

#### Effects of NGOization on social movements:

NGOization's most significant impact is the change it has brought about in the approach to social action and political change. This transformation is characterized by various processes such as professionalization, donor dependency, depoliticization, co-option, and demobilization. Consequently, there has been a shift in the strategies utilized for mobilizing and responding to society's concerns - moving from activism to advocacy. Additionally, accountability has shifted from being downward-focused on the movement's constituencies to an upward orientation directed towards governments and funders.

Numerous academics and activists, including Sonia Alvarez, have critiqued NGOization globally. Alvarez, a Professor of Latin American Politics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, studies the role of NGOs in the Latin American feminist movement. In her article, *Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom,'* Alvarez critiques NGOization and feminist NGOs' ability to advance women's rights due to the neo-liberal nature of the collaboration between the state and its NGOs; Furthermore, she argues that NGOization and feminist NGOs have transformed a movement concerned with improving women's rights and fighting against the patriarchy into one consisting of gender experts that are subcontracted by the government to execute women's programs. She states,



“Three recent developments potentially undermine NGOs’ ability to promote feminist-inspired policies and social change. First, States and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) increasingly have turned to feminist NGOs as gender experts rather than as citizens’ groups advocating on behalf of women’s rights. Second, neoliberal States and IGOs often view NGOs as surrogates for civil society, assuming they serve as ‘intermediaries’ to larger societal constituencies. And third, States increasingly subcontract feminist NGOs to advise on or execute government women’s programs” (Alvarez, 1999, p. 181).

Alvarez sheds light on the changes that NGOization brings to the feminist movement. The author highlights a shift in the perception of the governments who now view NGOs as gender experts that consult and administer programs rather than viewing them as groups that advocate for women’s rights. This shift constrains their advocacy role and diminishes their capacity to push for change. Additionally, the co-option of the NGOs by the state reinforces neoliberalism and implies that NGOs are agents of neoliberal policies. By administering services and programs for women on behalf of the state, NGOs contribute to the privatization of public services. These global trends are just some of the factors that erode the ability of NGOs to advance women’s rights.

To help us better understand this neoliberal relationship between the state and its NGOs, Sangeeta Kamat depicts NGOization as the privatization of public interest (Kamat, 2004, p. 170). Other academics like Islah Jad view this neoliberal relationship a little differently. In her article *The ‘NGOization’ of the Arab Women’s Movements*, Jad understood this phenomenon of

co-option as a sign of decentralization of power and politics following the failure of the centralized Arab states to bring about social change (Jad, 2003, p. 38). On the one hand, Kamat's depiction suggests that the state is using NGOs to outsource its responsibilities to provide public services, which ultimately undermines social justice. On the other hand, Jad's view implies that NGOs are filling the void left by the centralized state and are taking on responsibilities that the state is unable or unwilling to provide. These two positions represent different perspectives on the same issue and provide insight into the diverse ways scholars conceptualize the relationship between the state and NGOs in the context of neoliberalism. While some see NGOs as partners in development and agents of social change, others criticize them for co-optation and perpetuating the status quo.

NGOization has transformed the feminist movement in various aspects, shifting from a collective approach to an individualistic one. Prior to NGOization, the movement fought against patriarchy for women's collective rights; nowadays, as the movement is diluted with NGOs, it supports women seeking help on a personal level. Additionally, The movement's focus has shifted from advancing the cause collectively to adopting individualistic values that prioritize the organization's sustainability. This prioritization of the organization over its mission is demonstrated by a 2009 study conducted by Richard Harwood and John Creighton, who were concerned with investigating how organizations approach community engagement. Through this study, Harwood and Creighton found that “ [community] engagement for these leaders [of organizations] is usually defined in terms of the needs and interests of their organizations, and not those of the community” (Harwood, Richard & Creighton, John, 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, this research highlights that the primary concern of NGO leaders is consistently centered on the

success and sustainability of their organizations rather than the advantages they are intended to provide for the communities they serve. The study's findings on NGO leaders prioritizing their organization's needs over the community's needs reflect the individualistic values adopted as a result of NGOization. This focus on individualistic values also perpetuates the idea that success is measured by the organization's growth and productivity, not the community's well-being, which negatively impacts any movement's overall effectiveness.

One of the most apparent and significant effects of NGOization on social movements is the professionalization of activism. As previously defined, professionalization refers to developing and promoting professional standards for an occupation to become recognized according to certain standards and qualifications. This process fundamentally alters the structure of existing social movements. It converts a horizontal structure of action and leadership into a hierarchical one, constituting a major shift in the way social movements operate and, more importantly, in the decision-making power (Lang, 2012, p. 62). This transformation in decision-making power is demonstrated by Yasir Shalabi, who examined the structures of operations of more than 60 Palestinian NGOs for the senior thesis of his Master's degree from Birzeit University in 2001. Through his research, Shalabi found that most Palestinian NGO employees do not participate in decision-making due to “their passivity or their lack of competence” (Shalabi, 2001, p. 152). In addition, he found that the local constituencies, also referred to as the target groups by NGOs, do not participate in decision or policy-making either. When he questioned the rationale behind these actions, the administrations responded by asserting their membership in the society and claiming to possess knowledge of its needs, thereby justifying their authority to make decisions on behalf of their constituencies. According

to Shalabi, the internal governance of the surveyed NGOs was “a mirror reflection of the Palestinian political system based on individual decision-making, patronage and clientalism” (Shalabi, 2001, p.154). The fact that most NGO employees do not participate in decision-making and that local constituencies are excluded from policy-making raises concerns about these organizations' legitimacy and ability to serve the communities they claim to represent effectively. Further, The prevalence of patronage and clientelism within Palestinian NGOs hinders the potential of organizations that strive to promote democratic and inclusive practices. Shalabi's observations and depiction of NGOs as a mirror reflection of the Palestinian political system suggest that the way NGOs operate in decision-making processes follows a dictatorial system that contradicts their purported promotion of democracy. Thus, Shalabi implies that NGOs may be hypocritical in their stance on democratic values.

In addition to professionalization's alteration of the structure of the movement, professionalization also alters the recruitment structure of movements. Due to professionalization, recruitment of NGO employees now occurs based on proficiency and competence rather than shared values. The new professional workforce is recruited based on education and expertise in the NGO system and language. As a recognized form of labor, salary is one of the main incentives for working in an NGO (Lang, 2012, p. 67). This contrasts the state of recruitment that social movements use, which is based on shared goals and values with a defined shared mission and vision, that is, the movement's success. The shift in the Palestinian feminist movement's recruitment style has resulted in a complete overhaul of its workforce, thereby altering the very fabric of the movement.

By changing the workforce of a movement and effectively changing the workforce's skill set, the NGOization of social activism has transformed how change is brought about. Rather than relying on large-scale rallies and physical forms of protest to pressure institutions into enacting change, NGOs often opt for internal negotiations with political institutions to exert their influence and the administration of services and programs. Such practices typically involve experts rather than directly engaging with the NGOs' constituencies. NGOization can also lead to the depoliticization of social movements as their emphasis shifts from radical change to more modest reforms, undermining social movements' transformative potential. This depoliticization is particularly evident in Palestine, as observed by Lama Arda and Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, who conducted an in-depth analysis of the shifting roles of NGOs in governing areas of limited statehood. Their research has revealed that “The emergence of professional NGOs depoliticized the public sphere, which undermined resistance and normalized occupation”(Arda & Banerjee, 2021, p. 1690). In their article, Arda and Banerjee explain how Palestinian NGOs have been more focused on improving the living conditions of Palestinians living under the occupation rather than actively engaging in efforts to resist and reverse these conditions. This approach has resulted in a vicious cycle of normalized Israeli violence, which has been perpetuated by the NGOs' dependence on foreign funding sources. This dynamic has served to fragment and to demobilize the political activism of Palestinians, as NGOs have come to play an increasingly important role in their lives. Arda and Banerjee argue that this is largely due to the funding criteria set by foreign donors, which often prioritize achieving measurable outcomes rather than addressing the root causes of the conflict. Thus, the depoliticization of resistance efforts through NGOization and professionalization has profoundly impacted the ongoing status of the

occupation of Palestine. By shifting the focus away from resistance and towards service provisions, NGOs have inadvertently contributed to the normalization of occupation and the weakening of Palestinian agency.

NGOization has also led to a reliance on external funding sources, resulting in NGOs becoming accountable to donors for their operations. This has led to a shift in priorities, with a greater focus on donor-driven agendas at the expense of community needs. Consequently, the efforts of NGOs can become diverted from their intended purpose, creating an accountability gap. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the field of international development, where governments and international organizations fund many NGOs. The priorities of these donors can often influence the work of NGOs, leading to a disconnect between the needs of local communities and the focus of NGO activities. Additionally, NGOization can leave NGOs vulnerable to co-optation by powerful entities, such as governments or other stakeholders. This can result in a loss of independence and freedom, as well as a reduction in the capacity of NGOs to challenge the status quo. A clear example of this occurred during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in the 1980s, where the apartheid government co-opted numerous NGOs and provided them with funds and resources. As a result, many anti-apartheid advocates perceived these NGOs as being too closely associated with the government, causing them to lose credibility and support (Glaser, 1997, p. 9).

With that being said, NGOization can bring about increased visibility and legitimacy of social movements, providing them with a recognized platform to advocate for their cause and engage with decision-makers. This can lead to greater recognition of the issues they are working on and increased public and institutional support. While some, like Cloward, may argue that

NGOization is incompatible with large-scale and effective mobilization efforts (Cloward et al., 1984, p. 587), Sabine Lang argues that NGOization can mobilize effectively with broad engagement tools. She believes that NGOs are able to act as intermediaries by engaging with the public and using tools that institutions with power are more likely to be susceptible to. Thus, NGOs can achieve change without requiring large-scale public mobilization (Lang, 2012, p. 66). With that in mind, the power vested in NGOs by its donors and professional employees allows for cooperation with their constituents, as well as powerful political institutions, with more control due to their advocacy strategies that involve political etiquette, therefore giving them access to work with all facilitators of change (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 207).

In response to the NGOization of the feminist movement and the focus on the lack of autonomy associated with NGOization due to donor dependency and co-option, we must recognize the inherent complexity and diversity of feminist activism, whether it takes an autonomous or institutionalized form. Although the NGOization of social movements (including the feminist movement) is not ideal in many aspects, as shown in this discussion, It should not be dismissed as insufficient for not living up to former frameworks of political mobilization, such as mass mobilization. As Jonathan Dean accurately highlights the importance of expanding our understanding of feminism in order to reflect the diverse and complex reality of contemporary feminist practice. Rather than trying to defensively control the boundaries of the movement in favor of more traditional and historical forms of mobilization (Dean, 2012, p. 319).

### Effects of NGOization on the Palestinian Feminist Movement:

Although The NGOization of the feminist movement in Palestine has had similar effects to other social movements undergoing it globally, The way NGOization occurred in Palestine diverges from how it generally takes place in other nations. Specifically, rather than creating new professionalized NGOs from within a larger social movement, the professionalization of existing organizations was the primary means of NGOization in Palestine. Additionally, the political circumstances in the region had a significant impact on the trajectory of NGOization in Palestinian society. Due to statelessness and occupation, there was no government infrastructure before the establishment of the PA in 1994, which led to the early emergence of a strong and pluralistic NGO infrastructure in Palestine. The fragmentation of the PLO in the 1970s and 1980s encouraged organizations to seek foreign funding, leading to their NGOization. The events of the first intifada further fueled the professionalization of organizations to access more funding. The first intifada also disconnected the mobilizer organizations from their constituencies due to the militarization of the uprising (Hammami, 2000, p. 16). The signing of the Oslo Accords resulted in a dramatic surge of foreign donations (Bornstein, 2009, p. 183), leading to the proliferation of professionalized women's NGOs and the decline of older forms of women's organizations (Jad, 2008, p. 12). Despite these unique factors, the NGOization of the feminist movement in Palestine has produced similar effects to other social movements.

By 1991, many organizations transformed into professionally based, foreign-funded, and development-oriented centers. This means that they became professionalized, significantly changing how they operate. Professor Islah Jad, co-founder and director of the Institute of



Women's Studies at Birzeit University and author of *NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements*, discusses the growth of women's organizations in Palestine and claims that

“Women's activists were in need of people with specialist skills to 'push our work forward'. The inclusion of professionals, on boards or in administration, introduced different interests and an alternative vision. The period from 1988 to 1994 witnessed a proliferation of feminist women's organisations. These new organizations propagated a new discourse on women and women's status, but within the context of a steady decline in women's mobilisation. The dichotomy between 'professional' and 'political' was one of the factors that undermined the kinds of initiative found previously among women's organisations in Palestine” (Jad, 2007, p. 624).

Jad explains how the entrance of new professionals in the NGO sector came about due to the growing nature of the field, which required a new and unique skill set for better communications with the donors. She illustrates how women's committees during the first Palestinian Intifada successfully mobilized the masses due to their personal relationships with their constituencies and their strong belief in their political mission. In contrast, NGOs rely on modern communication methods to advocate for a target group or educate it for a defined period of time rather than building personal relationships with their constituencies. These circumstances demonstrate the transformation of the ways in which the NGOs operated, therefore transforming the relationship between the NGOs and their local constituencies. With that in mind, to understand the current relationship between NGOs and constituencies, Islah Jad articulates, “NGO leaders, empowered by high levels of education, professional qualifications, and the

international development ‘lingo’ tend to patronize the others [grassroots efforts]” (Jad, 2003, p. 45). In this statement, Jad addresses the problematic mindset of NGO leaders and how it overlooks the knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences of community members directly affected by the issues being addressed. It can also contribute to disempowerment and disenfranchisement among local actors, which can ultimately undermine the success of development initiatives, and the movement.

Rema Hammami, another founding member of the Institute of Women’s Studies at Birzeit University and author of *Palestinian NGOs Since Oslo: From NGO Politics to Social Movements*, supports Jad’s argument when she asserts that “The new professionals tend to treat the grassroots in a patronizing and condescending manner, perceiving them as social groups in need of instruction, rather than as constituencies from which they take their direction and legitimacy” (Hammami, 2000, p. 27). While both Jad and Hammami agree on the fragmentation between the NGOs and their constituencies due to professionalization, as well as the fact that it has resulted in the further depoliticization and demobilization of the NGO sector in Palestine. Hammami believes that foreign funding shifted the goals of NGOs from political to developmental ones. Thus, attributing the primary responsibility for the depoliticization of social movements in Palestine to the donors of the NGOs. In describing the shift in the agenda of NGOs, Hammami hints at a great donor dependency capable of transforming an entire movement.

Shahrzad Mojab, an academic activist and professor at the Women and Gender Studies Institute at Toronto University, and author of *Women's NGOs Under Conditions of Occupation and War*; expands on the subject of donor dependency and depoliticization when she claims,

“[Palestinian Women’s NGOs] have a short-term agenda, and their contribution is often piecemeal, curative, limited and dependent on the agenda of donors. By contrast, women’s movements pursue long-term goals such as reform or radical change of patriarchal relations in both civil society and the state” (Mojab, 2007, p. 4).

With both perspectives on donor power, one can see how donors can shift the agenda and create deep fragmentation between grassroots and NGOs regarding accountability. Since NGOs rely on foreign donors for funding, they are accountable to those donors' interests and criteria rather than the local population and constituencies they serve. This arrangement that furthers the donors' interest over that of the local population leads one to think of NGOs in Palestine, including feminist NGOs, as co-opted groups by foreign donors. Shahrzad Mojab affirms that theory when she articulates,

“States in the Middle East are more tolerant of women’s NGOs than women’s movements, and the imperialist powers under the U.S. leadership encourage that. NGOs in general are increasingly becoming policy instruments for the implementation of the foreign policy of the U.S. (and other Western states), ostensibly at “arm’s length.”... This occurs through funding arrangements and through the co-option of progressive and/or elite women into NGOs. The cultural ideology of neoliberalism is promoted through this

hegemonic process through which the notion of democracy is limited to civil society and the market, that is, not inclusive of political rights” (Mojab, 2007, p. 4).

Here Mojab highlights the imperialist co-option of Arab and Palestinian women’s NGOs. Yet Mojab is not alone in recognizing this trend of co-option in the region. In her article, *The ‘NGOization’ of the Arab Women’s Movements*, Islah Jad acknowledges this issue when she states,

“The increase in Arab NGOs in general, and of women’s NGOs in particular, has unleashed a heated debate on their ties to their donors, their ideology, the utility of their roles in development and social change, and their links to their national states. In brief, they have been viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on the West, and as a tool for it to expand its hegemony. This debate is currently taking a new edge with signs that the current American administration is giving greater attention to ‘democratization’ and ‘modernization’ of Arab societies and Arab regimes, through increased funding for ‘civil society’ organizations” (Jad, 2003, p. 38).

Jad underscores the complex relationship between NGOs and their donors, as well as the geopolitical context in which they operate. She highlights the need to critically evaluate NGO activities' motives and impacts and examine the power dynamics at play. With that in mind, Islah Jad later emphasizes that NGOs are not just actors of foreign agendas. As she explains how this relationship between donors and NGOs benefits both parties and their interests when she claims,

“The link with international donors is not a one-way relationship, but donors and local actors interlink in a web of relations that is far more complicated than one party imposing its will on the other. This is not to say that both parties have equal power, but simply to problematise the links between them to include the personal interests of both donors and recipients that give them the power to decide what to take and what to leave” (Jad, 2007, p. 627).

Here, Jad acknowledges that donors often hold more power in the relationship due to their access to resources and funding but also suggests that recipients have some agency and ability to influence decision-making. She explains how the personal interests of both parties play a role in shaping the outcomes of the relationship and how NGOs have access to a dynamic where both parties negotiate what they want to take and what they want to leave.

In addition to the co-option of NGOs in Palestine by foreign donors, The co-option of Palestinian NGOs by the PA is a crucial issue that must not be overlooked. The NGO law introduced in 2000 requires NGOs to register with the Ministry of the Interior, which houses intelligence services, resulting in their forceful integration into the Palestinian state structure. Consequently, these organizations have lost their autonomy, become de-politicized, and have been made to adopt a state-sanctioned political, social, and economic development agenda. This has led to an additional layer of upward accountability of NGOs to the state rather than downward responsibility to their constituents. Furthermore, this has made NGOs in Palestine reliant on the state for their basic functioning. While Jad reveals the complicated “web of relations” behind donor dependency, she also explains the non-sustainability of this relationship

when stating, “NGOisation itself has cultural dimensions, spreading values that favor dependency, lack of self-reliance, and new modes of consumption” (Jad, 2007,623). This leads us to believe that because NGOization in Palestine appeared as a result of donor funding and because of its continued reliance on these funds, it will always be co-opted in one way or another. This in turn, causes the demobilization of the mass movement as a result of the new tactics used by these NGOs.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, the professionalization of social activism, also known as NGOization, has resulted in a significant change in the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting social change. Although professionalization has brought about more measurable outcomes and better adherence to bureaucratic requirements, it has also led to the institutionalization and bureaucratization of social action, thus fundamentally changing the strategies of feminist activism on a global scale. The effects of NGOization on social movements, including the transformation of their agendas and approaches, are crucial factors that determine its positive and negative impacts. While some scholars view NGOs as partners in development and agents of social change, others criticize them for co-opting and reinforcing the status quo. The feminist movement has been transformed in many ways by NGOization, resulting in a shift from a collective approach to an individualistic one. This prioritization of the organization over its mission has significant implications for the Palestinian feminist movement and the role of the NGOs in perpetuating and challenging the effects of NGOization. In this chapter, I explored how NGOs in Palestine are dependent on the state and their funders for their

continued local operation, which in turn influences their agendas, and their way of operation and transforms their chain of accountability from a downward one to their constituencies, to an upward one to the state and their funders. With the domination of non-governmental organizations over a large part of the Palestinian women's movement, NGOization means that an increasingly large part of the Palestinian feminist movement is now held accountable by the same institution they target to change its policies. In the case of Palestine, that institution is the Palestinian government.

## **Dissecting WCLAC: A Case Study**

### Introduction:

The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) is the most prominent Palestinian feminist NGO, providing a unique perspective on the patterns and consequences of NGOization in Palestine. In this chapter, I argue that despite not always conforming to conventional practices associated with NGOization, WCLAC has undoubtedly played a role in reproducing its effects. However, it has made efforts to address certain negative outcomes related to NGOization, thus demonstrating a critical stance toward this phenomenon. This chapter will investigate the contribution of WCLAC to the NGOization of the Palestinian feminist movement and analyze its efforts in challenging the effects of NGOization. This case study will give us a more detailed and informed comprehension of the broader manifestations of NGOization in Palestine. This case study aims to challenge assumptions about the impact of NGOization in Palestine and highlight the potential of NGOs to navigate and transform the dynamics of foreign funding, local politics, and resistance. Most of the conducted research about NGOization in Palestine, only highlights its negative aspects. However, this case study takes a more nuanced approach. It sheds light on the positive impacts NGOization has had on the feminist movement as well, such as the increased legitimacy and visibility that organizations like WCLAC receive due to their work. This advantage has allowed them to access further resources, build partnerships with other organizations, and advocate for their causes in a way that was previously unavailable to the Palestinian feminist movement. By examining both the successes and challenges faced by WCLAC as part of the NGOization of Palestine, other NGOs working in similar contexts can gain valuable insights that inform their roles in social, political, and



economic development. These insights can extend beyond Palestine to other areas with comparable dynamics of foreign funding and local resistance.

#### A Dilemma of Power Imbalance:

Amidst an ongoing and intensifying year-long debate, the issue of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has reignited in 2021. With supporters and opponents of the convention voicing their opinions across social media platforms and in the streets, thousands of protesters have joined the debate. Against this backdrop, feminists and feminist organizations in Palestine who publicly support CEDAW were facing an increasing surge of hate. During that period of time, several pages were created on social media platforms to spread false and misleading information to discredit, vilify, and mobilize against the convention, which the Palestinian Authority (PA) acceded to without reservations in 2014, but is yet to implement as local legislation. This upsurge of hatred persisted throughout the summer of 2022 during my internship period at the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), where I had the opportunity to participate in a conference organized by the Women Civic Coalition for the Implementation of CEDAW in Ramallah, Palestine, on June 14th, 2022. The conference hosted dozens of Palestinian feminist non-governmental organizations from all over the West Bank and Gaza, with the goal of figuring out ways to strengthen the implementation of CEDAW and push back on the hate the organizations have been facing for supporting it.

During one of the sessions, a fellow participant asked about creating change toward feminism in Palestinian society. Two panelists, one who works directly with the coalition and

another who works for a feminist non-governmental organization in Gaza, were speaking at the time. The Gazan panelist began her answer by saying, “First of all, may God prolong the life of Abbas, because if he’s gone, our work will have been in vain.” At the time, news and rumors had been spreading across the country about the deteriorating health of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Right after this statement by the panelist, numerous loud noises of support were made by those in attendance across the conference hall with comments like “correct,” “Yes Wallah,” “your right,” “indeed,” and “may God prolong his life.” Based on the overall reaction of the dozens of organizations in attendance, including WCLAC, it seemed clear that they supported Abbas's presidency's continuity and recognized their dependence on it to carry out their operations.

As it was only the second week of my internship with WCLAC, and my first experience within a Palestinian feminist institution, I found myself confused about their endorsement of Abbas's presidency. The reason that these organizations needed to convene and work on strengthening the implementation of CEDAW is because Abbas never published the CEDAW regulations in the Official Gazette, and it is not permissible to implement any legislation unless it is published per the text of the Palestinian Basic Law. Even though the Palestinian Authority acceded to CEDAW in April 2014, which makes Palestine legally bound to put its provisions into practice, they have yet to make it binding as domestic law (Human Rights Watch, 2018). There are various opinions on why the Palestinian Authority has not implemented the convention, but they have yet to disclose the actual reason officially. Some argue that the PA's accession to the convention was a mere political move for publicity rather than a step towards building a civil state and consolidating the rule of law (Ibrahim, 2019). Others suggest that the

negative public opinion towards CEDAW is the cause, despite previous instances where the public's opposition did not impede the PA's operations. The PA is choosing its battles carefully. By acceding to the convention without reservations but failing to implement it locally, the regime can benefit from positive publicity internationally while maintaining a decent reputation within Palestinian society. The administration may prefer to oppose public opinion on issues that would benefit Abbas's government more significantly rather than garnering further positive publicity on women's issues. Further, the fact that the regime has not enforced CEDAW as local legislation provides an opportunity for them to present themselves as decision-makers who prioritize public opinion, despite being a dictatorship.

While attending the conference, I was puzzled by the organizations' endorsement of Abbas's presidency. It took time to comprehend how they could support the same government and leadership that compelled them to form the coalition and fight for something that should have already been implemented. Moreover, I found it challenging to swallow that these organizations depended on a dictatorship's continuity to carry out their work. Until that moment, I never really understood that feminist NGOs in Palestine, including WCLAC, rely so heavily on the Palestinian government's approval for their mere existence and operation. I thought that the fact that WCLAC is a foreign-funded organization with a special status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) would leave WCLAC completely unaffected by local government policies and somehow give it a certain level of protection. After realizing my perception was false, I started asking many questions about feminist organizations, including WCLAC. Specifically, I was curious about how far these organizations were willing to go to achieve their goals of advancing women's rights. At what point would their commitment to

activism end if it jeopardized their relationship with the Palestinian government? What degree of control does the Palestinian government exert over Palestinian feminist NGOs? Are Palestinian feminist NGOs autonomous? Did this relationship ever interfere with the feminist movement, and how? And what does this relationship mean for the Palestinian feminist movement?

The dependence of feminist NGOs on the current President leads to a significant power imbalance. The authoritarian nature of the Palestinian government further compounds this discrepancy. As a result, feminists in Palestine face substantial challenges in achieving their goals of advancing women's rights. As a foreign-funded local Palestinian feminist non-governmental organization, WCLAC serves as a great example through which one can study the NGOization of the Palestinian feminist movement. This is due to their position as the most prominent Palestinian feminist NGO and their visible potential susceptibility to some of the effects of NGOization, such as foreign donor-influenced agendas and co-option by the government.

#### WCLAC in focus:

To better understand WCLAC's contribution to NGOization, I will first provide a detailed analysis of the organization, its goals, structure, operations, and evolution. According to their website, WCLAC is an "independent Palestinian, not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation that seeks to develop a democratic Palestinian society based on the principles of gender equality and social justice"(*About Us - WCLAC*, n.d.). Established in 1991, towards the end of the first Palestinian Intifada, WCLAC's strategic goals are laid out on its website as

“Enhanced protection of women suffering from discrimination and violence in Palestine. Strengthened women’s right to access to justice and elimination of discriminatory policies against them. Increased social responsibility of the Palestinian community towards women rights and elimination of discrimination against them. [And] enhanced effective institutional and human capacity development at WCLAC” (*About Us - WCLAC*, n.d.).

The goals of WCLAC indicate a strong commitment to protect women's rights and combat discrimination and violence and further develop the organization’s institutional and human capacity to carry out its mission more efficiently. These strategic goals were only recently adopted by WCLAC in 2021. Prior to that, WCLAC’s strategic goals were relatively the same between 2005 and 2020. In 2020 their goals were:

“Contribute to the protection and empowerment of women suffering discrimination and violence. Promote women's rights to access justice and eliminate discriminatory policies against them. And develop institutional and human capacity in order to ensure the sustainability, effectiveness and efficiency of WCLAC” (*WCLAC Annual Report, 2020*, p. 5).

The most notable difference between the newer and older versions of their strategic goals is the adoption of the third goal in 2021, which aims to encourage the Palestinian community to be more socially responsible regarding women's rights and to work towards eradicating discrimination against them. Although it may seem like the recent adoption of this goal in WCLAC’s newest strategic goals represents a shift in policy and a new focus on engaging with

the community, through an examination of WCLAC's previous strategic plans and annual reports, one comes to understand that the engagement of Palestinian society has always been an essential part of WCLAC's operations. WCLAC has continuously worked on raising awareness in Palestinian society and providing support and training sessions in legal aid and counseling since its inception (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 33). According to their strategic plans, WCLAC focuses on addressing the impact of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian society in general and women in particular, violence against women, economic violence on women (*2016-2020 Strategic Plan*, 2016, pp. 5–10), patriarchy, institutionalized male dominance, and discriminatory laws (*2021-2025 Strategic Plan*, 2021, pp. 27–40). WCLAC aims to create positive change by enhancing the protection of women who suffer from discrimination and violence by providing quality social, legal, and protection services. They also aim to increase social responsibility within the Palestinian community and empower women to become active in their families, communities, and in decision-making positions by raising awareness on eliminating discrimination and violence against women. They strive to empower women victims of gender based violence (GBV), support women's access to justice, and continue providing immediate protection to women whose lives are under threat. They believe reaching out to duty bearers more effectively is crucial to initiate systemic change. They plan to achieve that by mobilizing active local leadership, networks, and partners to support their advocacy and lobbying efforts (*2021-2025 Strategic Plan*, 2021, pp. 63–65).

Regarding the organization's structure, WCLAC has a board of directors elected annually by members of the general assembly. The organization is led by WCLAC's general director, Ms. Randa Siniora, with the support of the director of programs and the director of administration

and finance. The majority of WCLAC's work is implemented through two units. The advocacy unit influences policy and legislative reforms to comply with international conventions the PA acceded to and advocates for women's advancement in Palestinian society as well as the services and social empowerment unit, which provides social and legal services to women victims of violence, including pro-bono legal aid, social counseling, and shelter (*About Us - WCLAC*, n.d.). During my time at WCLAC, I came to understand that the service and social empowerment unit was the primary focus of the organization and had more of the organization's resources and capacity allocated to it, in comparison to the advocacy unit, which was only assigned 30% of the organization's resources and capacity. The advocacy unit is also split into two sections, national and international, that often collaborate.

This allocation of resources reflects the organization's priorities; it demonstrates that the primary goal is to provide services to women who cannot afford them. Furthermore, allocating only 30% of the organization's capacity for advocacy efforts implies that advocating for changing the status quo is a secondary goal. This is clear when looking at the history of the organization. Maha Abu Dayyeh, co-founder and former general director of WCLAC, discusses its beginnings in *Palestinian Model Parliament (PMP)*, where she explains the importance of pursuing a legal strategy to guarantee women's rights. Abu Dayyeh highlights how, in its early days, WCLAC primarily focused on the legal dimension of women's issues in Palestine. This included providing pro-bono legal aid, counseling services, and legal literacy programs for Palestinian women. She explains how WCLAC used to operate, stating that "In its first years, it focused on gender-based violence and women's rights in the private sphere ... WCLAC's focus was on the protection of women's human rights and bodily integrity within the family" (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 21). Here

we gain insight into how WCLAC operated differently without directly focusing on societal and political advocacy, assisting women, and protecting their rights individually. While extremely important, the services provided by WCLAC do not ensure the advancement of women's rights on a larger national scale. At the time, WCLAC was helping women by offering services that could significantly impact the lives of those who seek them and have access to these services. However, their work didn't go beyond those individual cases, it didn't influence policy changes, nor did it impact society towards advancing women's rights, and it didn't raise awareness about women's issues on a larger scale. WCLAC's approach in its early years is explained by the fact that the feminist NGOs in Palestine did not arise by readily creating new professionalized NGOs from within a larger social movement. NGOization in Palestine occurred primarily through the professionalization of already existing organizations. In fact, according to Abu Dayyeh, "WCLAC was established ... by a small group of women leaders from left-wing parties, as well as professional women and human rights activists" (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 19). The historical pattern of transitioning from grassroots organizing activism to NGO advocacy, observed as a global trend, is not mirrored by this group of women (Lang, 2012, p. 91). While the trend is typically characterized by a shift towards institutionalized NGO advocacy, WCLAC's initial phase, steered by founders mainly experienced in political organizing, did not prominently feature conventional advocacy strategies. While other organizations were addressing political violence against women by Israelis at the time, WCLAC focused on protecting women's human rights and bodily integrity within the family. They took on this role due to the absence of an accountable state and Israel's direct control of the OPT, which extended to every aspect of Palestinian life. WCLAC was able to focus on this specific issue because religious courts



handled family law matters, and Israel had left that system intact (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 21). However, this approach didn't last for long, as Abu Dayyeh affirms that WCLAC and other NGOs saw the opportunity to develop a strategy to advocate for gender-sensitive Palestinian legislation in the post-Oslo transition period (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 23). These circumstances of major political transformation at that time brought to life a comprehensive advocacy campaign to achieve the goals of Palestinian feminists towards gender-sensitive post-Oslo legislation, which solidified the advocacy aspect of WCLAC's work. However, It is crucial to understand that WCLAC's commitment to providing free legal services to women who need them, although important, reveals some of the significant issues that NGOization causes such as fragmentation, reinforcing neoliberalism, and reliance on donors. Therefore, I will investigate these issues and the other ways in which WCLAC has contributed to the impacts of NGOization to better understand its role in this phenomenon.

#### Fragmentation of Palestinian Feminists:

WCLAC's services are almost entirely inaccessible for over 60% of Palestinian women in the West Bank, ultimately leading to the movement's fragmentation. To elaborate further, Cheryl Rubenberg, sheds light on the social and economic relations, cultural practices, and power dynamics among Palestinian women living in West Bank rural villages and refugee camps (2001). She emphasizes that, despite making up 60% of the population. Rubenberg highlights how rural Palestinian women are often disregarded by urban Palestinian women that are politically involved. Further, Rubenberg highlights the rural women's experience, or lack thereof, with different foreign-funded NGOs, including WCLAC: "Not more than a handful of the 175 women I worked with in the camps and villages had ever heard of the urban women's

organizations . . . , and fewer still had made use of their services” (Rubenberg, 2001, p. 21). Here, Rubenberg shows that a large segment of the population, comprising 60% of Palestinian women, have no access to WCLAC's services or other similar services. This inaccessibility leads to the fragmentation of the Palestinian feminist movement on this issue. That is because urban women with access to such services may not exert as much pressure on the government to pass the necessary legislation to ensure universal access to these services across the country. This lack of pressure from a significant, more visible portion of the population would contribute to the fracturing of the movement.

In reality, the fragmentation regarding this matter has already been accomplished. As early as 2001, Rubenberg observed, "The social distance between urban women, on the one hand, and village and camp women, on the other, is enormous” (Rubenberg, 2001, p. 21). During my internship, I attended a protest with the advocacy unit that was organized by various women's organizations in Ramallah to urge the government to pass the family protection and personal status bills, which, among other things, would enable universal access to legal aid services like the ones provided by WCLAC, from the government (Jamal Atamneh & Hamdan, 2020, p. 33). We were disappointed by the relatively low turnout, particularly from urban women whom we expected to participate in more significant numbers than their rural counterparts. Notably, most attendees were rural women, while urban women were primarily represented by those employed in organizations affiliated with this issue in urban areas. Despite the protest, the status of the Family Protection Law (FPL) remains the same, and the government faces little pressure from urban women on this matter. This instance is a clear example of how WCLAC has contributed to the fragmentation and demobilization of the movement as a result of NGOization, regardless of

benefit or intent. By providing the services instead of the government, those who have access to them did not need to fight for them, so they didn't.

WCLAC has been working continuously on the Family Protection Law (FPL) since 2004; The advocacy unit has advocated for its ratification since drafting it (*WCLAC 1991 -2021*, 2021, p. 16). It contains 52 articles and tackles various social issues, including gender-based violence, domestic violence, divorce, gender inequality in inheritance, and the legal age for marriage, that impact vulnerable communities in the West Bank. In 2020, after much effort by advocates, attorneys, government officials, as well as local and International organizations, the law was submitted for ratification, and it passed the first reading in November of that year (Mahamid et al., 2023, p. 3). Before being sent to the president for approval, the bill must go through three separate readings. Yet no more readings have been held since, and progress on the bill has been halted. Studies show that the main reason this bill is yet to pass is the negative perception of it by the general public, as some believe that the FPL is not following Palestinian culture and Islamic values. Fayez Mahamid, Muayad Hattab, and Denise Berte, authors of the article *Palestinian Law to Protect Family and Prevent Violence: Challenges With Public Opinion*, take on the challenge to understand how the Palestinian population perceives this bill through a study of 285 Palestinian adults living in the West Bank. In March 2023, a study was published that sheds light on the prevailing public opinion regarding the FPL in Palestine. The authors discovered a significant disparity between the viewpoints of human rights advocates and NGOs compared to those of the general population (Mahamid et al., 2023, p. 1). The authors make it clear that the Palestinian population of the West Bank perceives the FPL negatively. However, it is worth noting that although there is a wide gap between those that advocate for this bill and the general

public, the indispensability of WCLAC's services vindicates the need for this law to pass, which confirms just how negatively influenced and manipulated the general public is regarding the Family Protection Law. The need for WCLAC's services is proved in the external evaluation report of the program funded by the UN Trust Fund to support WCLAC's legal aid and counseling operations over three years (2017- 2020). The evaluation reports that 1215 women benefited from WCLAC's services over the three years, including 450 women who benefitted from legal and social services and 225 women who received consultations through various means (Jamal Atamneh & Hamdan, 2020, p. 18). Contrary to what the public opinion study might be used to suggest, these findings of the number of people who benefited from WCLAC's services assert that the NGOs' work for the FPL is anything but irrelevant because it proves the large societal need for universal access of these services, which the FPL would provide.

#### Reinforcing Neoliberalism:

I previously described WCLAC's strategy of providing free legal aid and counseling services as neoliberal. That is because dependence on organizations like WCLAC to provide such services alleviates the pressure from the government to provide them; this position furthers the notion of the privatization of services that the government should provide. Further, I mentioned that the FPL's ratification would enable universal access to those services from the government, which would resolve this issue. This is evident in articles 7-11 of the Family Protection Law, which require the Ministry of Social Development to appoint Family Protection Counselors (FPCs) who provide similar programs to WCLAC's counseling support, which are the most sought-after in their services unit because all those who benefit from WCLAC's legal and social assistance are also provided with at least three counseling sessions. The FPC's main

role is to implement the law, act as bailiffs, and enforce judicial orders. They also investigate potential domestic violence cases, keep records, testify in court, offer support and information to victims and families, mediate disputes, and take measures to prevent harm of family members (Mahamid et al., 2023, p. 4). These articles signify that WCLAC has long been aware of the issues concerning its strategy and made sure to address them when drafting the Family Protection Law in 2004, proving its intent to limit and end some of the negative consequences of NGOization.

Looking at WCLAC's Strategic Plans and Annual Reports over the years, it is very noticeable that the organization has continuously led awareness-raising campaigns through various means, including different forms of media such as social media, radio, and television, as well as hosting awareness raising sessions in local communities throughout the West Bank and East-Jerusalem (*WCLAC Annual Report, 2020*, p. 64 ). In 2020 alone, their efforts reached over 30000 people, mostly from social media (*WCLAC Annual Report, 2020*, p. 71). Despite their hard work to raise awareness against violence against women, we can see from the recent study conducted by Mahamid, Hattab, and Berte that their efforts have not been met with the intended results of raising awareness towards advancing women's rights. WCLAC is very well aware of this status quo, and the evaluators of the UN trust-funded program observe that as they relay,

“WCLAC has conveyed their perception as to the inability of awareness-raising initiatives solely to empower victims and unveil the systemic function of violence against women as a social mechanism by which women are forced into and kept in a subordinated position compared with men”(Jamal Atamneh & Hamdan, 2020, p. 27).

This quote articulates that WCLAC understands that its awareness-raising initiatives may not effectively achieve their intended goals. This implies that they believe other approaches may be more suitable or necessary to address the issues they are working on. It also indicates, along with other initiatives that WCLAC has worked on, like drafting the FPL, that WCLAC is constantly evaluating the work that they do to figure out the best way to move forward.

#### Donor Dependency:

WCLAC's model of providing free services as well as its entire continued operation, is unsustainable because it is ultimately donor dependent. It means that it depends entirely on the continued cash flow into the organization from its funders. Not only is this a problem of non-sustainability in the long term, but WCLAC's operation is also unsustainable as of now. According to their strategic plans publication, WCLAC lacks the sufficient sustainable and self-financing capacity to endure funding downturns and limitations caused by political and economic turbulence and uncertainty (*2021-2025 Strategic Plan*, 2021, p. 45). The significance of WCLAC's donor dependency is articulated through the UN Trust Fund's Final Evaluation, as a large number of key informants pointed to

“the heavy reliance which exists currently on availability of funds from international donors and experts for the design and delivery of training. One said, “We are 100% dependent on donors for training”. Another emphasized that “local experts/ judges/ academics will only share their knowledge if a donor pays them”

This level of reliance for operation on funding is one of the most dangerous consequences of NGOization. Not only is WCLAC already reliant on the government for their goals to be achieved, but they are also dependent upon donors for their continued operation. This creates a huge power imbalance for the organization, threatening its agenda and authenticity. Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor observe this phenomenon as relations of dependence that influence the NGOs' agendas, resulting in upward, as opposed to downward, accountability (Carmody, 2014). Specifically, the authors define upward accountability as relating to the government and donors, while downward accountability pertains to the organization's constituencies. The power imbalances with subjects that WCLAC relies on could leave the organization in a vulnerable position that exposes them to cooptation. Thus, transforming the feminist movement into an accountable one due to NGOization (Jamal Atamneh & Hamdan, 2020, p. 33).

To further understand how donor dependency could interfere with WCLAC's agenda, I will investigate their two largest donors, as well as the aims and outcomes of their donorship and how it affects WCLAC's operation. According to WCLAC's 2021 financial statements, all but three of their nineteen donors are foreign institutions (*WCLAC 2021 Financial Statements*, 2022, p. 2). Their top three donors are, The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Norway, and Warchild, in that order. The SDC provided WCLAC with over \$360 thousand dollars, Norway with over \$300 thousand dollars, and Warchild with over \$270 thousand dollars. Due to the lack of publicly accessible information on the partnership between Warchild and WCLAC, I will not be investigating their relationship.

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is a governmental agency of Switzerland and is part of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. According to their website, Switzerland, through SDC, aims to

“support Palestinian and Israeli human rights and humanitarian law organizations active in the oPt as part of its engagement to contribute to a just and lasting peace and to the establishment of an independent, viable and democratic State of Palestine. The promotion of HR and IHL is a major concern in the oPt and a goal of Switzerland’s foreign policy”  
(*SDC Support to Israeli and Palestinian HR/IHL CSOs*, n.d.).

This represents their overall concept, and it includes WCLAC under the umbrella of human rights organizations, with the aim of contributing to peace, which leads one to question what form of peace the Swiss government legitimizes. Things get more detailed when the SDC lists its objectives for providing monetary aid, as well as its Medium-Term outcomes, which value the promotion, and protection, of human rights and the reporting and monitoring of human rights and International humanitarian law violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (*SDC Support to Israeli and Palestinian HR/IHL CSOs*, n.d.).

With the SDC objectives and outcomes in mind, we come to understand how they resonate with WCLAC’s international advocacy unit’s focus on international law operations like documentation and reporting. Further, we can see the direct relationship between the SDC and WCLAC. As the largest donor to WCLAC, the organization’s operational achievements provide a pivotal role in the overall outcomes of the SDC. Despite being one of the eight local organizations that SDC provides assistance to, the significant impact of WCLAC's efforts on the



SDC's initiatives is apparent. Although WCLAC significantly contributes to the outcomes of the SDC, the SDC's focus on international advocacy may not seem to have a direct influence on WCLAC's agenda since the organization has been engaged in international advocacy from its inception. However, it is important to remember that the funding provided by the SDC creates upward accountability for WCLAC, which may cause the organization to prioritize delivering results for its funders over its movement and constituencies. Which is a direct effect of NGOization. To address this issue, WCLAC has established a clear division between its international and local advocacy units. The former produces reports on human rights and international humanitarian law violations, while the latter focuses on creating change locally. While this operational division helps WCLAC meet the demands of foreign donors without impeding its efforts to advance Palestinian women's rights locally, it may also result in less attention being paid to local change. Specifically, with only 30% of the organization's operational capacity dedicated to advocacy work and the advocacy unit split between international and local, WCLAC basically only allocates 15% of its operational capacity to local change.

As for WCLAC's second-largest donor, Norway, their goals and outcomes are a lot more accessible for the general public's viewing and are clear in detail throughout their annual reports. They state,

“our window of opportunity within the WPS agenda in Palestine concerns leveling the field for an inclusive and sustainable peace process and continuing Norway's support for institution building in preparation for a negotiated two-state solution: increasing the capacity of Palestinian women and women's networks; promoting meaningful increased

female participation, and securing women's rights, needs and priorities”

(*Norway-Annual-Report-Wps-2019-2022-Final.Pdf*, n.d., p. 53).

Here aid is given to organizations like WCLAC to establish the foundations and infrastructure for a two-state solution. It feels very sinister, pushing a clear agenda over women's rights in Palestine. This agenda confines support for women's rights in Palestine with the status of Palestine-Israel relations. Additionally, this position bears the question of whether or not it means that WCLAC would have to push for a two-state solution as part of its agenda in influencing society. From an analysis of WCLAC's publications and my time at WCLAC, I have not found this to be the case. With that in mind, one is still filled with uncertainties about how such conditional aid could affect women's rights agendas of NGOs in the future, especially with continued uncertainty over even the mere existence of a two-state solution.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, WCLAC has successfully maintained a degree of autonomy despite its donors' influence. Although WCLAC's top donors are foreign institutions, the organization has established clear operational divisions to ensure that its international advocacy work does not impede its efforts to advance Palestinian women's rights locally. However, it is important to remember that the funding provided by foreign donors always creates upward accountability, and WCLAC is no exception. Overall, while WCLAC has been successful in balancing its international advocacy work and local advocacy for women's rights, the potential influence of foreign donors on the organization's agenda remains a concern.

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<sup>1</sup> Read Barnett, M., Brown, N., Lynch, M., & Telhami, S. (2023, April 18). *Israel's one-state reality*. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/israel-palestine-one-state-solution>

Professionalization: from WCLAC's impact to its impact on WCLAC:

One of WCLAC's most visible advocacy strategies in their plans and annual reports across the years has been their work with grassroots organizations, and although they have been active for over 30 years, WCLAC only works with four grassroots organizations (*WCLAC Annual Report 2021*, n.d., p. 37). Their work with grassroots is usually referred to in WCLAC's reports in terms of "strengthening partnerships" and "capacity building," where WCLAC takes the role of providing workshops and training sessions. WCLAC's advocacy unit usually leads these capacity-building programs. As professionals, they are regarded as better versed in developing organizations to advance their cause over others who have been a part of these grassroots campaigns for a longer period of time, causing fragmentation. This is not just a WCLAC issue. It is an NGOization issue, especially in Palestine. In the previous chapter, we see Rema Hamami and Jad Islah, co-founders of the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University, both agree that the professionals from NGOs treated the grassroots in a condescending and patronizing manner. In Rubenberg's *Palestinian Women*, we read about the fragmentation of the movement as a result of this phenomenon when rural women talk about their experience with urban women from political organizations in political spheres, describing them as "those who always looked down on us and treated us as inferiors, anyway" (Rubenberg, 2001, p. 226). This first-hand experience demonstrates what could be the case for NGOs organizing capacity-building workshops for grassroots organizations. It also demonstrates one of the consequences of professionalization: grassroots are now at the lowest level of the decision-making pyramid even though they hold the most impact. To be fair, WCLAC's late executive director, Maha Abu Dayyeh, highlights the good practices of her organization in this

regard when mentioning some of the reactions of the women's group participants in capacity-building workshops. In her view,

“Women's engagement with the process was impressive and there was a hunger for more information and more and more training materials amongst grassroots women's groups” (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 28).

Here Abu Dayyeh is demonstrating the positive experience of the grassroots organizations with WCLAC. In addition to that, when discussing Palestinian legal reform, she emphasizes that

“WCLAC did not wish to impose its vision on others [regional committees] and considered the lively debates as part of a healthy democratic process that should be ongoing” (Abu-Dayyeh, 2015, p. 28).

With this statement, she is demonstrating how WCLAC does not take over the political space of others and how WCLAC treats other women groups as equals. Nevertheless, Abu-Dayyeh's position as executive director at the time of this book's writing makes her a biased narrator. This bias is demonstrated by Cheryl Rubenberg's personal experience at the Palestinian Model Parliament, a feminist conference organized by WCLAC under Abu-Dayyeh's leadership in 1998. According to Rubenberg,

“[The Palestinian Model Parliament] neither included nor reached rural or camp women ... I was present at the Model Parliament and can attest, firsthand, that among the 100 or so attendees, there were no women from the rural villages and no more than a handful

from the nearby camps. Indeed, only a few of my respondents were even aware of the Model Parliament” (Rubenberg, 2001, p. 227).

This statement doesn't only capture the widening gap between rural and urban women and their organizations; it also captures how WCLAC also played a part in further widening that gap, excluding rural feminists from this event and contributing to the effects of professionalization leading to fragmentation.

Most of what we have been discussing has been the work for the advocacy unit of WCLAC, which demonstrates the enormous amount of work that has been and continues to be done on their behalf, whether it has been leading to good or bad outcomes. Interestingly though, although the advocacy unit at WCLAC is the main catalyst for working on and achieving the organization's goals for advancing women's rights, they are not the organization's primary unit. It was revealed to me over the summer that the advocacy unit only makes up 30% of the organization's resource allocations. With WCLAC's refusal to expand the capacity of the advocacy unit by restructuring the organization's resource allocation, employees of the unit have had to pay the price with an excessive workload. This has caused a high turnover rate of junior experts in that unit, who often view their job as a means to gain employment in a better-paying, less restless position, usually in a foreign organization, hindering institutional memory. From experience at other local NGOs in Palestine, I have noticed that this case is not exclusive to WCLAC. Local NGOs often struggle to maintain talent when foreign NGOs generally offer better working conditions and benefits that local NGOs cannot afford (*2021-2025 Strategic Plan*, n.d., p. 45). This state of affairs is another consequence of professionalization that WCLAC has had to deal with.

It should be emphasized that NGOization and the work of the professionalized actors bring greater visibility and legitimacy to parts of the movement, which can help them access further resources, build partnerships with other organizations, and advocate for their causes in a manner that had not been previously available to the Palestinian feminist movement. WCLAC greatly benefits from this state of affairs. The UN Trust Fund's Evaluation even references this advantage as part of the methods they regularly use to reach women victims of GBV. WCLAC's management effectively uses its institutional reputation, connections, and signed agreements with relevant authorities. By utilizing their professional networks and official agreements with the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), they were able to gain formal and efficient access to courts, shelters, law enforcement authorities, and other service providers for these women (Jamal Atamneh & Hamdan, 2020, p. 30). This means the Palestinian government recognizes WCLAC as a legitimate partner and can access resources and services more efficiently than independent actors. WCLAC here proves that they intend to tackle feminist issues in the most efficient way possible and that they intend to maximize the benefit of their position to contribute to the success of the Palestinian feminist movement.

#### Co-option:

Co-option is crucial to understanding WCLAC's approach to advocating for women's rights in Palestine. WCLAC's dependence on the Palestinian government for enacting change and their reliance on Abbas, the current president, further strengthens the co-option allegations. This section sheds light on how parts of co-option do not necessarily have to be a negative aspect of NGOization in Palestine. Still, it may also be used to the advantage of the movement as a

strategy to achieve the goals of NGOs. This is one of the ways WCLAC does not conform to conventional practices associated with the process of NGOization. Although co-option is typically regarded negatively, we will observe how WCLAC has been able to challenge this notion.

One of the main reasons WCLAC's awareness campaigns continue to fail is the lack of support from local leadership and official duty-bearers. This is why, in recognizing the impact of this issue on feminist actors all over Palestine, WCLAC is now actively working on gaining active and public support of leadership (*2021-2025 Strategic Plan*, 2021, p. 65). This strategy was adopted following the huge amount of backlash that WCLAC and numerous other Palestinian feminist organizations, as well as Palestinian feminists, had to deal with after November 2020, when the first reading of the FPL was conducted. It is now one of WCLAC's new strategies for the current strategic plan of 2021-2025 to

“mobilize active local leadership, networks, and partners to support all advocacy and lobbying efforts of WCLAC ... to [be able to] reach out to duty bearers more effectively, which is a crucial condition to initiate systemic change, increase WCLAC's resilience in the shrinking space as well as enhancing its ability to influence policies” (*2021-2025 Strategic Plan*, 2021, p. 65).

It is important to note this was not one of WCLAC's primary concerns in their previous Strategic Plan 2016 - 2020, and their adoption of this strategy is directly related to the events following November 2020. This strategy can also be interpreted as one of their new efforts to work on passing the legislation. All of these efforts are operated through WCLAC's advocacy unit.

Despite having noticed the continued failure of their awareness-raising campaigns, WCLAC has continued to launch new campaigns through different means and measures as one of their main strategies to implement change because they understand that systemic structural change in favor of women's rights is dependent on the change of society's patriarchal ideology (Jamal Atamneh & Hamdan, 2020, p. 27). Because they are aware of their inability to influence significant societal change promptly, feminist organizations decided to adopt a different approach to the Family Protection Law. They adopted a top-down strategy to enact the FPL, which involves the government, NGOs, and civil society taking the lead in creating policies and implementing programs to address women's issues instead of relying on social movements that require enormous public support.

This case sheds light on two significant things. On the one hand, this approach is explained by the current state of affairs in Palestine and the negative public opinion despite a clear need for this legislation. On the other hand, it demonstrates another layer to the phenomena of NGOs' governmental reliance, which provides details into the story I began this chapter with, justifying the concerns of representatives from Palestinian feminist organizations who feared their work would be jeopardized in the event of Abbas's death. Here, we understand that feminist organizations rely heavily on the Palestinian government to advance women's rights in Palestinian society, especially due to their inability to acquire public support. Feminist NGOs' relationship with the government is what allowed them to draft the FPL, continue amending it over the years, and push for its passing. For organizations like WCLAC, their relationship with the government is not weakening their feminist agenda, it is further advancing it. All of this explains why feminist organizations are dependent on Abbas and why a new president might be



catastrophic for them. Knowing that they are not able to depend on public support to achieve their goals forced them to depend on the Palestinian government to enact change. Due to WCLAC's connection and dependence on the government, many authors that I previously discussed, like Sonia Alvarez, Shahrzad Mojab, and Sangeeta Kamat, would perceive this situation as co-option in a negative manner. While this interpretation is not entirely inaccurate, as WCLAC still only operates by virtue of the Palestinian government, it is crucial to recognize that co-option, in this scenario, is not necessarily negative since it is being utilized for the greater good of advancing women's rights.

#### Conclusion:

In conclusion, NGOization has had a significant impact on the Palestinian feminist movement, as exemplified by the case of the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC). The professionalization of feminist activism has brought both positive and negative consequences for WCLAC and other feminist organizations. While it has increased their visibility, legitimacy, and access to resources, it has also resulted in the co-option of their agendas by the Palestinian government and the depoliticization of their work. WCLAC's approach to advocacy for women's rights in Palestine has been shaped by the challenges they face in a highly patriarchal and conservative society, where public support for feminist causes is limited. Thus, WCLAC has had to rely on a top-down approach to enact change, which involves working closely with the government and official duty-bearers to pass legislation and implement policies. Despite the concerns of co-option, this approach may prove to be effective in advancing the feminist agenda in Palestine. Ultimately, the impact of NGOization on the Palestinian

feminist movement is a complex and ongoing process that requires careful consideration of its benefits and drawbacks.

## **Conclusion**

The impact of NGOization on social movements and civil society has been a topic of debate for many years, with scholars and activists alike questioning the consequences of this trend. This paper has explored the impact of NGOization on the Palestinian feminist movement through a case study of the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC). My research has shown that NGOization has led to significant transformations in the Palestinian feminist movement's agenda and approach and has resulted in negative consequences, such as the depoliticization and demobilization of social movements, as well as some positive consequences, such as newer channels for creating change. WCLAC's efforts to challenge the negative outcomes demonstrate a critical stance toward NGOization and highlight their critical engagement with this phenomenon and their position.

The first chapter of this paper provided an overview of NGOization and its impact on social movements globally. It showed that while NGOization can lead to more measurable outcomes and increased compliance with bureaucratic requirements, it can also result in the loss of connection between NGOs and local communities. This can lead to the depoliticization and demobilization of social movements, as well as the co-optation of their agendas by NGOs. Additionally, the paper highlighted the shrinking space for civil society resulting from NGOization, which limits the ability of social movements to effect change. The second chapter of this paper focused on the impact of NGOization on the Palestinian feminist movement, using the case of WCLAC to illustrate both the positive and negative outcomes. Despite not always conforming to conventional practices associated with NGOization, WCLAC has undoubtedly played a role in reproducing its effects. However, it has made efforts to address specific negative

outcomes related to NGOization, thus demonstrating a critical stance toward this phenomenon. Specifically, WCLAC has attempted to challenge its co-optation allegations through critical engagement with donors and government, as well as benefiting the community from these partnerships.

My research contributes to developing more effective and sustainable strategies for creating social change in several ways. First, by highlighting the negative and positive consequences of NGOization on social movements and the need for critical engagement, my research calls for a more nuanced and balanced approach to understanding the role of NGOs in promoting social and political change. This approach helps avoid simplistic and binary arguments for or against NGOization and encourages a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Second, by examining the case of WCLAC and its efforts to challenge the negative outcomes of NGOization, my research provides valuable insights into practical strategies for addressing the negative consequences of NGOization and promoting sustainable social change. These insights can be used by other feminist NGOs in Palestine and elsewhere to develop more effective and sustainable strategies for promoting women's rights. Third, by adopting a well-rounded approach to my research that incorporates a wide range of sources with diverse perspectives, my research helps to ensure that the strategies developed based on its findings are inclusive and informed by the perspectives and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders. This can help to avoid potential blind spots or biases and promote more effective and sustainable strategies for creating social change. Overall, my work contributes to the development of a more effective and sustainable system for creating social change by

providing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of NGOs in promoting social and political change, highlighting a practical strategy for addressing the negative consequences of NGOization, and promoting an inclusive and informed approach to developing strategies for creating social change.

The debate around NGOization and its impact on social movements is far from over. As we continue to grapple with this phenomenon, it is essential to question and challenge our assumptions about the role of NGOs in promoting social and political change. My research offers a critical reflection on the positive and negative outcomes of NGOization and highlights the need for more nuanced and balanced approaches to this complex issue. By engaging in critical reflection and adopting inclusive and informed approaches, we can develop more effective and sustainable strategies for creating social change that genuinely empowers communities and promotes social justice. The challenge now is to translate these insights into concrete action and create a more equitable and just world.

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