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# Global discourses, local applications. Debating issues around transformative and relational impacts of gender-concerned development projects

Blandine Destremau

► **To cite this version:**

Blandine Destremau. Global discourses, local applications. Debating issues around transformative and relational impacts of gender-concerned development projects. Society Capacity Building in Yemen: a Research Perspective on Development, 2012. hal-03175569

**HAL Id: hal-03175569**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03175569>**

Submitted on 20 Mar 2021

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# Global discourses, local applications.

## Debating issues around transformative and relational impacts of gender- concerned development projects

Blandine Destremau  
CNRS / Iris / EHESS<sup>1</sup>

**NOTE:** this document is extracted from a book published under the reference:

**Grabundzija, Maggy and Destremau, Blandine *Women and Civil Society Capacity Building in Yemen: a Research Perspective on Development* (avec Maggy Grabundzija), Centre français d'archéologie et de sciences sociales (CEFAS) / CNRS, Sana'a, Yémen, 2012**

With the support of The French Centre for Archaeology and Social Sciences in Sana'a and the French Embassy (Republic of Yemen)/FSD II

Publisher: Centre français d'archéologie et de sciences sociales

Year of publication: 2011

Published on OpenEdition

Books: 21 April 2017 Serie:

Histoire et société de la

péninsule Arabique Electronic

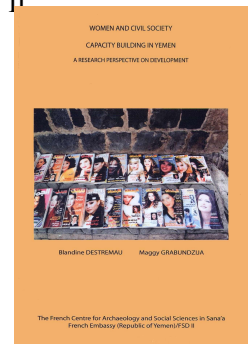
ISBN: 9782909194585

<http://books.openedition.org>

Printed version

ISBN: 9782909194318

Number of pages: 180



Electronic reference

GRABUNDZIJA, Maggy ; DESTREMAU, Blandine. *Women and Civil Society: Capacity Building in Yemen: A Research Perspective on Development*. New edition [online]. Sanaa: Centre français d'archéologie et de sciences sociales, 2011 (generated 14 December 2020). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/cefas/1667>>. ISBN: 9782909194585. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cefas.1667>.

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***The present excerpt contains only Blandine Destremau's***

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<sup>1</sup> At that time, the author belonged to another research team (Lise / Cnam)

**contribution, as well as the preface and introduction of the book.**

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## *Preface*

This work is first of all the result of fruitful collaboration between the department of cooperation in the French Embassy in Sana'a and CEFAS (French Center for Archaeology and Social Sciences in Sanaa). In January 2010, Mr. Benoit Deslandes, who was at the time in charge of cooperation and cultural activities in Sana'a, called on CEFAS to perform an evaluation of the impact of development projects targeting women, conducted by Yemeni NGOs, and receiving financial support from the Fonds Social de Développement (French social development fund). I was at once in favour of this initiative, and contacted different people liable to become involved in this task: Maggy Grabundzija for the evaluation as such, Blandine Destremau and Stéphanie Latte for the scientific supervision of the work. From the outset, it was assumed that we would not restrict ourselves to the publication of a mere technical report, and that we would use the opportunity to launch a wider scientific debate on issues of gender and development, not only in Yemen, but in the Arabian Peninsula as a whole.

This initiative fitted very well into reflection underway on the development of civil society in Yemen. Indeed, in July 2006 CEFAS and FES (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung), with the support of the cooperation department of our Embassy, organized a round table concerning relationships between “civil society, associations and local authorities in Yemen”.

The acts of these events were published in 2008 in the form of two works, one gathering contributions in French and English, and the other the contributions in Arabic, with a substantial summary of those published in the first volume. For the present work, we resolved to publish solely in English with a complete translation into Arabic so as to make it accessible to as wide a public as possible, not only actors in the field, but also decision-makers and researchers. The report drawn up by Maggy Grabundzija and published herein is put into perspective by way of a substantial theoretical presentation by Blandine Destremau. By this means we hope to provide a significant contribution to ongoing debate on issues of gender and development.

The initial aim of a wider scientific debate has already materialized in a conference organized on the 16th and 17th of November 2011 in Cairo, after it proved impossible to organize it in Yemen in the previous July. Over two days, some 30 researchers working on the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa debated on “changes

occurring in gender issues”. They broached numerous themes in this respect: public policies, professionalization, labour markets, mobility patterns, and care, or again moral issues, privacy and changes in subjectivity, not only in reference to women, but also to men and masculinity patterns. The acts of this two-day event are to be published in 2012 in the CEFAS journal, to be reformatted by the same occasion.

While our initiative finds its place in reflection on civil society that has been underway for some years in CEFAS, it is also a continuation of a much older tradition of interest in women in Yemen and their relationships with the masculine world. In her book *Une Française médecin au Yemen*, published in French in 1955 and later in numerous languages including Arabic, Claudie Fayein had a lot to say about the Yemeni women she had observed, frequented and cared for in the course of her first stay in the country from 1951 to 1952. Subsequently she was to return to Yemen in the 1970s, in particular with the task of developing the ethnographic part of the Yemen National Museum. In the collections of objects gathered at that time, the world of women occupies a central place. It can be hoped that this part of the Museum, which has been closed for several years, will soon be accessible again to the public.

Cairo, November 25th,

2011 Michel

tuchscherer

*Director of  
CEFAS*

## *A joint reflection to share our experience*

In 1994, France created the Social Development Fund, to promote local developmental action, close to the population, thus becoming French cooperation's main tool for supporting civil society initiatives.

The first FSD, or FSD I, began in Yemen in 2005, and lasted four years, aiming to strengthen civil society and to contribute to the country's social-economic development, and to reducing poverty. As poverty especially affects women in rural areas, projects helping them were made a priority. With €1,000,000 in budget, the first Social Development Fund sponsored 18 projects involving over 90 NGO's in Yemen.

At the end of 2008, a French-Yemeni team of experts conducted an evaluation of the program overseen by sociologist Blandine Destremau<sup>2</sup>. The point of this was to give an appraisal of the projects funded within the framework of this first FSD, in order to prepare for its second phase, FSD 2, launched in February 2010, with a new budget of €700,000. Its conclusions helped, first of all, shape an outline, regarding the new FSD, on how to strengthen non-governmental Organizations, by increasing senior NGO training, and by accompanying their partnering up with junior partners<sup>3</sup>. But, in between the lines, what the evaluation really brought up was the question of the FSD's capacity to help bring about social change, especially with regards to women's situation, the main beneficiaries targeted by the program. What type of change had it helped create? How had it affected, both directly and indirectly, its beneficiaries? It quickly became clear to the French embassy it had to look further into this issue, in order to help its partners, particularly NGO's on the ground, reflect upon the matter themselves, and stand back to reassess the way they conduct work, and their strategies.

This theme clearly came within the purview of the French Centre in Sana'a for Archaeology and Social Sciences (CEFAS), already conducting research on civil society organizations in Yemen<sup>4</sup> as

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<sup>2</sup> Blandine Destremau (coordinator), Safa'a Rawiah, Antelak al-Mutawakel and Gabool al-Mutawakel, (YLDF), "FSD Evaluation/ Civil Society" ([Évaluation du FSD/Société Civile] in French), #2003/84, February 2010, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2009.

<sup>3</sup> A capacity-building program for the senior & junior NGO beneficiaries of FSD II was developed in 2010 in association with the Yemeni Social Fund for Development which funded it entirely.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija et Jean Lambert, *Société civile, associations et pouvoir local au Yémen : actes de la Table Ronde « Société civile, citoyenneté et pouvoir local »* [Civil Society, Associations and Local Power in Yemen: Proceedings of the Round Table]

well as along the theme of “Gender transformations in the Arabian Peninsula & the Horn of Africa”: the French embassy therefore appointed it to conduct such an analysis.

This work is divided up into two parts:

*An introduction written by Blandine Destremau, aiming to provide a sense of perspective to the impact study by replacing it within the context of the various schools of thought on questions of gender and development.*

*An impact assessment carried out in the field by Maggy Grabundzija, an anthropologist, focusing on two of the eighteen projects funded by the Social Development Fund: the project for the “promotion of girls’ education via a program reinforcing the capacities of local junior NGO’s” carried out by the Society for Development & Children – SOUL and the project for the “improvement of girls’ education in rural areas in Yemen, a community-based approach” developed by ONG SADA Society for Women. These two projects were chosen for their respective work in the area of girls’ education in rural areas.*

We will take the opportunity afforded by this preface to heartily thank SOUL and SADA NGO’s which accepted their work and the results attained by both projects be analysed within this study. Their involvement in such an approach shows their maturity and their capacity to adopt a critical stance regarding on their own way of conducting work.

This publication is the result of such a process, bringing together sponsors and NGO’s wishing to improve, with the help of researchers, the impact of their work. This isn’t as much a manual on how to run a «successful» project in gender and development, as it is a joint reflection by partners wanting to share their experience, and to learn from them.

Dominique Anouilh

*Cooperation  
attaché Cooperation and Cultural Action  
Section (SCAC) The French Embassy in the  
Republic of Yemen*

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Discussion on “Civil Society, Citizenship and Local Power”], Sana’a, 1–3 July 2006, Sana’a, CEFAS- FES, 2008 (one volume in French and English, 332 p. and one volume in Arabic, 394 p.) and Anaïs Casanova, Guillaume Jeu, *La liberté d’association au Yémen : une compilation de la législation relative aux associations et aux fondations* [Freedom of Association in Yemen: a compilation of legislation relative to associations and foundations], Sana’a, CEFAS, 2007, 202 p., (Cahiers du CEFAS n° 5), in French and in English.



# First Section

GLOBAL DISCOURSES, LOCAL APPLICATIONS  
DEBATING ISSUES AROUND TRANSFORMATIVE  
AND RELATIONAL IMPACTS OF  
GENDER-CONCERNED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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<sup>5</sup> At the time, the author belonged to another research team (Lise / Cnam)

## Introduction

When Michel Tuchscherer, head of the CEFAS, and Dominique Anouilh, the cooperation attaché at the French embassy in Sana'a, asked me to write an introduction to this book, which would contextualize Maggy Grabundzija's impact study of two French-backed development initiatives as part of the larger "Civil society" FSD project<sup>6</sup>, I thought I had merely two options. One would be to focus on the situation in Yemen, its social and economic profile, its four decade-long history of development, and propose a bird's eye view of the place and role of women in that process, what has changed for them. This option would have allowed me to reflect upon the dramatic changes Yemen has undergone since the 1960s, using not only the literature and studies at hand, but also my own experience and knowledge of this country. After a first visit in Aden in 1977, I discovered in 1983 what was then North Yemen, and decided to write my Master's thesis on the migrations there, and then to go on to a PhD thesis. Majoring in Development economics, focusing on changes in rural areas and the agrarian system, I planned to spend time for extensive fieldwork in a rural town in the West of Yemen, from 1985 to 1987. I not only wrote my thesis about the time spent there, but also a book on this feminine world I had discovered when I was the only Westerner and one of the first to stay among this small urban population (Destremau 1990).

It is only in 1999, twelve years after having left, that I went back to Yemen, staying in Sana'a this time, as part of a research project centred on development processes and institutions, NGOs and international organizations, all mobilized in the struggle against poverty. Having first-hand knowledge of a significant chunk of the

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<sup>6</sup> As will be explained later in the text, FSD stands for "Social Fund for Development". The project is called "Civil society/Yemen" and aims to strengthen the capacities for action and lobbying of the Yemeni NGOs involved in the field of women empowerment and foster networking (In French, however, the initial language in which the project was written, it reads "improving women's situation in Yemen". The word "empowerment" is not used.) and to implement through this NGO network concrete actions to reducing poverty, especially in favour of women, and within the framework of the domains of prior Yemeni-French cooperation. The impact assessment bears on two initiatives backed within this project.

country's history, I could appreciate the dramatic economic, social, political and institutional changes that had occurred since the country had opened to the world.

In this essay, I will not take a stand on whether or not these changes could or should be labelled as “development”. I will not even make an attempt at trying to define the term “development”. For the sake of simplicity, let us define “development” as any endeavour or intervention relating to an explicit will to transform social and economic structures in a direction deemed as “progress” at a given time. The word “development” in such a mindset points to a deliberate set of actions (discourse, knowledge, policies, justifications, etc.) which follow strongly normative goals and procedures (improving health, education, nutrition, life expectancy, material and personal wellbeing, democracy, participation, etc.). “Development” justifies itself by its intention to “do good onto others”. Its legitimacy rests upon the relation bridging ethical and rational values, turned into instrumental goals, and implemented through technical tools. On the other hand, given the effects of contextual changes, such as state-building, opening up to the international goods, services and labour markets, circulation of ideas, images and patterns, etc., and rather than taking a stand as to whether these actually, pertain to “development”, and whether they are actually good or bad, I will simply refer to them as “transformations” or “changes”.

Both development and contextual change have profoundly affected human experience in Yemen. In particular, as statistics clearly show, and as my own personal experience can ascertain, women's lives in Yemen have been deeply transformed over the last three generations. Whatever is left of “tradition” in their representations, their daily life, legal status, beliefs, etc., and however deep inequalities remain between what are mainly rural and urban women, they are far from being left out of the social and material transformations the country has undergone. Access to health services, to school and higher education, to the labour market, to social services and public institutions, using manufactured goods, electricity and bottled gas, urbanization, television, roads and cars, have contributed to turning the life of new generations into a very different adventure from that of their mothers and grandmothers (Destremau 1990, Paluch 2001, Colburn 2002, Vom Bruck 2005, Farhan 2009, Molyneux 1982, 1985 a and b, 1995 and others).

Had I opted for this narrative and analytical framework, it would have been difficult to decide what part development interventions actually played in this overall thrust for change in

Yemen. Development has accelerated the penetration of new ideas, but these have been also spread by migrant workers, the advent of television, the multiplication of foreigners as well as studies. The spheres of development increasingly came to be employment magnets, and attracted educated men and women who strived to learn English and integrate its modernity. Development has also been about technical skills, money being invested, and its effects were certainly two-sided.

However, I decided not to focus the following pages on a monograph of Yemeni development history, or history alongside development, thinking it had been done in many different monographs and academic studies. Taking a step back, I chose to integrate the review of the French FSD project into an analysis of the discourses and practices that have been attempting, for almost forty years, to make women a part of development, then to transform gender relations and underlying gendered social structures in developing countries. This history of ideas and action, institutionalization and involvement, is reflected in Yemen's development history, and its history with development, either explicitly, when projects target women and/or gender relations directly (which the French FSD project does); or implicitly, in terms of attitudes and norms, even denegation, gender neutrality or blindness.

Relating my contribution to this wider framework, I thought, would be a way of doing justice to the French FSD project I had evaluated in November 2008 (Destremau *et alii.* 2009). It might contribute to formulating and spreading word of the scope of its innovative stand. It could show how difficult it is to implement "progressive" or transformative ideas within specific contexts, from the outside, but also caught up in routines, practical norms, professional identities, systems of representations and language that have left their mark on the way the projects are implemented, and thus become *normal ways of doing things*. Thus, shedding light on this project, its ideological and methodological backdrop, could also help explain some of its shortcomings and the constraints it has faced, while not giving in to putting all of it down to cultural factors only.

Projecting Western good intentions and ethical values (e.g. freedom, democracy, human rights) onto societies that have followed different historical paths inevitably means coming to grips with of the other's *alterity*, and their diversity. Development

is one of the many components of social transformation, but not its

deciding factor. Change does not always take place in the targeted or expected direction. The history of development shows it has had to deal with opposition, resistance, inertia, manipulation, often triggering unexpected social changes, even undesirable effects, only marginally related to the desired impact. It has caused unexpected changes, at times regarded as “perverse effects”, while at other times they have been considered part of the process bringing about social transformation.

As will appear in the following pages, the history of the endeavours to integrate women in development and transform gender relations in a developing context has been marked by considerable gaps between, on the one hand, ideas that went from women’s integration within existing social structures to a will to change these structures in order to curb the production of inequalities; and, on the other hand, practical arrangements within development projects and organizations. Hence the issue of *effectiveness*, which should be tackled in an impact assessment, and which should reach far beyond the scope of a single project: what has changed in women’s position vis-à-vis social transformation, after several decades of development intervention? To what extent have these attempts to change things had an impact?

Clearly, neither this essay nor the impact assessment which follows are able to answer such a wide-ranging question, to embrace the considerable literature on the issue, or account for the breadth of debates and controversies that have arisen around it. What I will attempt to do is simply explore the way women’s movements and international organizations (intergovernmental or non-governmental) came to conceive the necessary changes that would bring more justice to women in developing contexts, as a backdrop to the initial intentions behind the French “Civil society” FSD project in Yemen. I will attempt to show how various strands of thought, activism and policy orientations impacted the conception of the project and the tools it called upon, namely civil society organizations (CSOs), capacity building, access to education and literacy, micro-credit and awareness raising. The issues I selected are not only core to the structuring of the field of research and action concerned with women/gender and development in terms of positions, debates, conflicting views... They are directly meaningful for the analysis of the project and its main assumptions.

My essay is divided up into seven parts. It starts with a brief overview of the history of concepts concerning women and gender in development as it has unfolded in Western activism as well as in

research and development circles since the 1960s, and some critical lines which have emerged from other feminist strands of thought in the South (1). I will then show how these strands of thought were incorporated and institutionalized in the orientations and programs of international organizations (specifically the UN) concerned with the gender dimension of development (2). The third part will be devoted to two core global procedures that emerged after the 1995 Beijing Conference: gender mainstreaming and transformative policy (3). Moving on to a more operational level, I will then shed light on some of the key instruments development programs have mobilized in developing contexts: promoting civil society, empowerment and capacity building (4) as well as education (5). After which, I will highlight some of the criticism raised by activists and women's movements from both North and South against the thrust for institutionalization, as well as the techniques used to implement development in a gender perspective (6). Finally, the last — and the longest — section of this essay will then shed light on some of the main components of the French FSD project — strengthening civil society, articulating improvements in literacy and income-generating activities, awareness raising, advocacy for rights and women empowerment — and examine how the various “senior NGOs” involved in the project interpreted them (7). I will conclude by suggesting how transformative actions and relationships implemented by the project can be analysed.

### **1- WID, WAD, GAD: three perspectives for gender-concerned development... among many more**

Strands of thought associating women and development emerged in the 1960s, driven by two main factors: the advent of mass feminism; and theoretical criticism of the paradigm of modernization, the denunciation of its male bias and its shortcomings in achieving women's emancipation (Degavre 2000 and 2011). Mass feminism contributed to the development of a “systemic critical strand” directed at capitalism, development, and modernization. One of the features characteristic of the world in the 60's was the advent of the cold war and a large independence movement in the former colonies. Development policies were clearly shaping international relations between former colonial powers, the Eastern block and the “rest of the world”. The pressing need to reduce the gap between “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries,

on the one hand, and that to give women in the South special attention, their condition having worsened, on the other hand, became issues of mutual concern. In 1962, the Un set up a “women’s” commission in order to highlight the role of women in development. Starting in the 1970s, and since then, an explicit concern for women has been incorporated into development initiatives and analyses, discourses and actions and which took three main directions, which remained identified by specific acronyms.

### *Women in development (WID)*

In her paper “WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice”, Eva M. Rathgeber (1990) shows how the “Women in Development” (WID) perspective became current among researchers in academic institutions and organizations involved in development actions. Similar analyses may be found in other seminal and state-of-the-arts papers, such as Degavre 2000 and 2011, Dagenais and Piché 1994, Verschuur 2009a.

The term WID came into use in the early 1970s, after Esther Boserup published an article entitled “Women’s Role in Economic Development”, in which she analysed changes brought on by modernizing agriculture and their impact on the division of labour between men and women. She showed how colonialism and development policies had degraded women’s social status: development aid was not only biased towards Western values, but also towards male values. Women were being left out of development efforts; work, power, access to land, were all conceived in favour of men. Boserup pointed out how technological changes, just as much as improving schooling and education, benefited men rather than women.

This baseline of development initiatives was embedded in a general belief that development equated modernization, as well as a shift from agrarian rural societies to industrialized urban societies, where educated and trained manpower would boost productivity. By virtue of a trickle down effect, economic growth would result in better living conditions, health services, living arrangements, and education attainments spreading to the whole society.

However, after women’s marginalization in modernization policies was brought to light, and their specific perceptions and experience acknowledged, a specific effort was to be made to integrate them into the general move towards well being: what Degavre (2000) calls

“modernization revisited”. The main focus of the WID approach, which was then carried by American liberal feminists, was to integrate women in development strategies and processes, and more generally in economic systems. Discrimination against women was called to end within these programs, their disadvantages in the productive sector minimized. Specific programs were developed to support women’s income, health conditions, literacy, etc.

To a large extent, one could say that the WID framework had influenced most ongoing development projects and become “mainstreamed”. It is part of the backdrop to the FSD project, as well as to many more projects in Yemen. Critics however pointed to the fact that the WID framework was embedded in a basic need approach that overlooked the fact that “many of the so-called women’s needs arise from their subordinate position to men” and that, rather than having special or additional needs, their “primary need is for freedom from subordination to men” (Facio 1994, p. 17). WID perspective also justifies involvement in participatory approaches, possibly having a transformative capacity when participation allows a change in relations of power, but all too often end up being mainly token or symbolic (see, among many others, Cornwall 2000, Cornwall and Brock 2005, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001).

### *Women and development (WAD)*

In parallel, in the course of the 1970s, a critical trend rose in feminist social science research, that put under further scrutiny and challenged several assumptions of what was then mainstream development and modernization theory. Mainly, this theory and the WID approach that stemmed from it started to be seen as eluding

an analysis of the sources and the nature of women’s subordination and oppression, particularly when linked with race (or ethnicity), class and culture. Beginning in the 1980s, a feminist sociological theory known as “Intersectionality” would develop, focusing on the study of the various patterns and relationships that interlocked to produce women’s domination or matrix of oppression<sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, authors advocating a change of paradigm insisted on the need to deconstruct the dichotomies embedded in the very theory of modernization, which focused on oppositional differences: those

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, among many more, the founding works of Crenshaw (1989 and 1991), as well as Collins (1998) and Andersen and Collins (1992, sixth edition 2007).



associating tradition, households, domestic production, non-market economy, and the private realm, with women and passivity; notions which were then opposed to change, economic production, markets, the public sphere, associated with men and activity. Based on North American black women's experience, expanded on by developing countries' women movements, it was shown how these views negated women's contributions to development, society, wellbeing, production as well as reproduction, and how they depended on gender conceptions which devalued whatever was perceived as being "feminine".

WID was also criticized for focusing solely on the productive sphere, and for ignoring or minimizing the reproductive aspect of women's activities. The shortcomings of income-generating projects, the mainstay of WID programs, were highlighted: their ambiguity between economic and human capital and their welfare objectives, the confinement of women to traditionally feminine activities and spheres, their fragile economic viability, the fact women were overburdened with tasks and responsibilities and yet often couldn't dispose of the income generated by the said project, or remain in control of it.

A second approach thus emerged in the second half of the 1970s: WAD, standing for Women and Development. Articulated by neo-Marxist feminists, it was rooted in the dependency theory and emphasized the importance of social class and the exploitation of the Third World. This strand of thought developed a relatively radical criticism of modernization theories and of modernization as a path to development. It challenged the basic social relation of gender as well as the relationships between women and historical development processes.

WAD established a relationship between the articulation of productive and reproductive work, how societies reproduce, and their integration into international structures of inequality and division of power and labour. According to Rathgeber (1990), however, although WAD took a strong stand linking various modes of exploitation, it remained mainly focused on their international structures and the productive aspect of women's work and lives, at the expense of their reproductive role. It also had a strong institutional slant and failed to give enough attention to gender relations within social classes as well as the ideology of patriarchy.

### *Gender and development (GAD)*

Building on the awareness raised by WAD analyses, a third approach, called GAD, for Gender and Development, emerged in the 1980s. It departed from the vision of a world partitioned into two equivalent groups — men and women — and built on analyses of *relationships* of domination and exploitation not only between men and women, but also classes and races (or ethnicities). The GAD approach adopted a holistic perspective on social organization, social life and economic structures. It asserted that, as part of an intersectional dynamic, race, class and sex relations combine into producing social, economic and political inequalities in any given society. Not focusing on women *per se*, it rejected some socially constructed dichotomies, attempting to integrate commodity and non-commodity production, private and public spheres, market and family, showing that these constructions make up the foundation of the division of roles, responsibilities, expectations as well as the social values of men and women.

Theoretically rooted in socialist feminism, GAD has attempted to put forward an alternative vision of modernization. Questioning the role of markets in development and the relevance of striving for equal access to them (the labour market, credit market, goods market, etc.), it has highlighted the social construction of gender relations and the articulation between production and reproduction relations, identified as the basis of women's oppression. In a context of state retrenchment and public expenses curtailment imposed by structural adjustment programs, GAD has put a particular emphasis on the role of the state and sound institutions in providing social and economic services and employment opportunities aimed at achieving full equality of women and men. It has endeavoured to acknowledge women as agents of change, not just passive recipients of development services.

Furthermore, the expansion of the GAD framework in development contributed to a switch from a basic need to that of a basic right approach. "A human-right approach to development would mean that women will no longer be seen as 'beneficiaries' of development policies, but as persons entitled to the benefits of development" (Facio 1995, p. 17). It also opened up to concerns towards improving the environmental sustainability of development, as well as justice and equality, embodied in a WED approach: Women, Environment and (sustainable) Development.

In Yemen, the extension and growing dominance of the GAD approach has led donors to develop awareness-raising activities within their programs, directed at male, institutional or professional environments, aiming at making them more aware of the contours and

effects of gender bias. Overall, a “gender debate” is now taking place in various forums around the country. However, the radical and political contents of the GAD framework appear to be better suited for research rather than development practice. As a guideline for action, it tends to be diluted to a mere WID scope, the mainstay of a large share of development projects, particularly in “sensitive” environments such as Yemen<sup>8</sup>.

### *Alternative, contesting and postcolonial strands of thought: looking into Islamic feminisms*

But the intellectual and activist strands of thought and action presented above are not the only ones concerned with the place of women in development as a historical process and in an international political intervention system working in countries regarded as “underdeveloped”, “developing”, or “less advanced”, etc. The three-fold framework presented by Rathgeber in 1990 was expanded upon by authors involved in developing countries contexts, or in the study of the diversity of women’s movements (e.g. Sweet 2003, Verschuur 2009b and 2010, Molyneux 2007a, Basu 2001, Degavre 2011, and many others). In “the periphery”, for decades, women’s groups or movements have been voicing positions, taking stands and fighting, demonstrating the existence of alternative grounds. Many different “local” feminisms have grown and voiced contradictory, opposed, and divided positions, founded on various interpretations of equality and the ways of attaining it. To a wide extent, they have been marginalized, ignored or contempted by “mainstream” feminists from the North that assumed transnational uniformity of women’s experience with oppression (Basu 2001).

Some “local feminisms” developed anti- then postcolonial analyses of international relations. They have criticised Western feminists’ tendency to universalize women’s issues, in a culture-blind perspective, speaking on behalf of Third world women in the best case, and ignoring them altogether in the worst case. They have insisted on the need to deconstruct intertwined domination patterns, particularly those inherited from colonial settings. Radical postcolonial feminists (especially in India and Latin America) have

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<sup>8</sup> This is explicitly stated in the World Bank “Gender and development” Evaluation report (2010), which explains : “to mitigate local sensitivities, the Bank was able to adapt and ‘package’ its support for gender in the Republic of Yemen using a social inclusion approach” (p. 6)

also criticized the collusion of institutionalized development interventions with global capitalism. More and more are strongly reacting against a liberation struggle that could only be fulfilled by “feminine capitalism” or forms of development mainly based on individual opportunities to attain autonomy and favouring individualism over subjectivity, which tend to dominate women-targeted development projects (especially micro-finance).

Many publications reflect these critical and alternative strands of thought, which are being increasingly represented in international forums and debated in the West, and the global North as well (e.g. Latte-Abdallah 2010b, c and d for Islamist feminisms, Verschuur 2009b and 2010 for anti-and postcolonial women’s movements).

To take a snapshot of some of them, let us summarize, in a nutshell, some of the positions articulated around Islamic and Middle Eastern feminisms. In a seminal paper, Margot Badran “reflect[s] on the two modes of feminism in the Middle East, secular feminism and Islamic feminism and consider[s] what makes them distinct and how they intersect” (2005: 6). Secular feminism first arose in the late nineteenth century in areas which were “variously confronting western imperialism and colonialism [and] experiencing uneven socioeconomic and technological transformation”. It was then borne by relatively educated urban women from the middle and upper social strata, within a nationalist discourse that paired “their own liberation and advance and that of the nation” (*ibid.* p. 8). Over time, various trends within secular feminism, including “gendered secular nationalist and Islamic modernist (as well as more generic humanitarian/human rights and democratic) strands”, have tended to develop a “progressive narrative of gender and nation” (p. 11-12).

By the end of the twentieth century, a new feminist discourse emerged, “at a moment of late postcoloniality and a time of deep disaffection over the inability of Middle Eastern nation-states to deliver democracy and foster economic prosperity” (p. 8). It was also a time when “new groups and classes — mainly the recently urbanized entering the middle class — experiencing the pushes and pulls of modernity [...] and an accompanying cultural anomie, were attracted to Islamism with its simultaneous critique of state and society [...] (*ibid.*). The various strands of Islamic feminism whether more modernist, or more religious and conservative have tended to depart from “the ascendant gender-conservative Islamist narrative, offering in its stead a progressive Islamic discourse” (p. 11). They also adopted critical postures towards the more secular nationalist movements and towards those influenced by or claiming

humanitarian and human rights positions.

Badran shows how “the birth places of Islamic feminism [...] is not the liberal, democratic West”, and how “Middle Eastern feminism/s in the Middle East, whether secular or Islamic [...] originate in the Middle East. [...]. They are not borrowed, derivative or “second-hand”. Yet, feminism/s in the Middle East, as in other places, may and do intersect with, amplify, and push in new directions, elements of feminisms found elsewhere” (pp. 12-13). Nonetheless, they “generated a critique of western “imperial feminism/s” as they brought insights and activist modes of their own secular / national feminisms to the table of (Western-dominated) international feminism during the twentieth century” (p. 12). They have challenged the commonplace idea that “Muslims cannot possibly generate feminism” (p. 15). They have reappropriated and rehabilitated the term “gender” in their internal struggles for gender justice (p. 16). They have been receptive to discourses regarding it and have staked claims to rights, equality and justice for all (Badran 2010).

Simultaneously, however, some of the most modernist and secular strands, inspired by radical, humanitarian or human rights ideology, have been accused of acting as Trojan horses for Western influence. On the other hand, the most religious and fundamentalist movements have been suspected of serving the interests of foreign Islamic movements or countries. National Arab states have attempted to use women’s and feminist demands, particularly when they were carried by opposing parties or dissident civil society organizations (Latte-Abdallah 2010a). The main goal justifying and fostering the emergence, debates, competition and political strategies of these movements, actors and discourses are certainly not development in the narrow sense of the word, but rather politics of policies, transformation, power and resources. Women, and gender relations, seem to occupy a core and central place in these intertwined stakes.

## **2- Women, development and the United Nations: an institutional narrative**

The history of the growing interest for women in development discourses and practices could be told from another point of view, that of the international institutions and organizations. As early as 1946, the Women’s Condition Commission of the UN had taken initiatives leading to the adoption of several declarations and conventions

promoting equality between men and women. The UN also adopted several social welfare programs aimed at or integrating women (Mestrum 2003). In the 1970s, however, criticism rose against the dominant pattern of development, particularly concerning women and the environment. The United Nations then came up with new paradigms of development and started taking the “women issue” seriously in 1975. Over the past three and a half decades, a series of global conferences have been organized to attract the attention of global policy makers to the fate of women in developing countries and forge tools aimed at changing gender relations and the place of women in society and in the economy. The 1995 Beijing Conference turned out to be particularly significant in that regard. Yemen has been a recipient of this creeping global thrust. Being both very poor and very religious, it ranks high on the priority list of gender-inclined development organizations.

### *1975–1995: the first stage of international institutionalization for gender in development*

What is referred to as “the first period” of UN-led institutionalization of women/gender concerns in development saw the organization of three world conferences: Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, and Beijing in 1995. The United Nations describe the path towards taking “the Advancement of Women” in Development into account in the following terms<sup>9</sup>:

The first international Conference, organised on the issue of women in developing countries in Mexico coincided with the 1975 International Women’s Year, observed to remind the international community that discrimination against women continued to be a persistent problem in much of the world. The Conference, along with the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985) proclaimed by the General Assembly five months later at the urging of the Conference, launched a new era in global efforts to promote the advancement of women by opening a worldwide dialogue on gender equality. The General Assembly identified three key objectives that would become the basis for the work of the United Nations on behalf of women:

- Full gender equality and the elimination of gender discrimination;
- The integration and full participation of women in development;

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<sup>9</sup> Most of the paragraphs that follow are borrowed from the website of the UN Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economics and Social Affairs, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/>

- An increased contribution by women in the strengthening of world peace.

The Conference responded by adopting a World Plan of Action, a document that offered guidelines for governments and the international community to follow for the next ten years in pursuit of the three key objectives set by the General Assembly. The Plan of Action set minimum targets, to be met by 1980, that focused on securing equal access for women to resources such as education, employment opportunities, political participation, health services, housing, nutrition and family planning.

This approach marked a change, which had started to take shape in the early 1970s, in the way that women were perceived. Whereas previously women had been seen as passive recipients of support and assistance, they were now viewed as full and equal partners with men, with equal rights to resources and opportunities. A similar transformation was taking place in the approach to development, with a shift from an earlier belief that development served to advance women, to a new consensus that development was not possible without the full participation of women.

[...]

Within the United Nations system, in addition to the already existing Branch (now Division) for the Advancement of Women, the Mexico City Conference led to the establishment of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to provide the institutional framework for research, training and operational activities in the area of women and development.

An important facet of the meeting in Mexico City was that women themselves played an instrumental role in shaping the discussion. Of the 133 Member State delegations gathered there, 113 were headed by women. Women also organised a parallel NGO Forum, the International Women's Year Tribune, which attracted approximately 4,000 participants.

[...]

An important milestone had been the adoption by the General Assembly in December 1979 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, one of the most powerful instruments for women's equality.

[...]

The movement for gender equality had gained true global recognition as the third world conference on women, The World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, was convened in Nairobi in 1985. With 15,000

representatives of non-governmental organizations attending the parallel NGO Forum, many referred to the Conference as the “birth of global feminism”. The women’s movement, divided by world politics and economic realities at the Mexico Conference, had now become an international force unified under the banner of equality, development and peace. Behind this milestone lay a decade of work. A lot of information, knowledge and experience had been gathered through the process of discussion, negotiation and revision.

At the same time, delegates were confronted with shocking reports. Data gathered by the United Nations revealed that improvements in the status of women and efforts to reduce discrimination had benefited only a small minority of women.

Improvements in the situation of women in the developing world had been marginal at best. In short, the objectives of the second half of the United Nations Decade for Women had not been met.

[...]

While the efforts of the previous two decades, starting with the Mexico City Conference in 1975, had helped to improve women’s conditions and access to resources, they had not been able to change the basic structure of inequality in the relationship between men and women. Decisions that affected all people’s lives were still being made mostly by men. Ways had to be sought to empower women so that they could bring their own priorities and values as equal partners with men in decision-making processes at all levels.

Recognition of the need to involve women in decision-making had begun to emerge during the course of the series of global conferences held by the United Nations in the early 1990s on various aspects of development: the environment, human rights, population and social development. All the conferences had stressed the importance of women’s full participation in decision-making, and women’s perspectives were incorporated into the deliberations and the documents that were adopted.

However, it was with the next in the series of conferences, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, that a new chapter in the struggle for gender equality can truly be said to have begun.

### *The turning point of the 1995 Beijing Conference*

The fundamental transformation that took place in Beijing was the recognition of the need to shift the focus from women to the concept of gender, recognizing that the entire structure of society, and all relations between men and women within it, had to be



re-evaluated. Only by such a fundamental restructuring of society and its institutions could women be fully empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners with men in all aspects of life. This change represented a strong reaffirmation that women's rights were human rights and that gender equality was an issue of universal concern, benefiting all.

The legacy of the Beijing Conference was to be that it sparked a renewed global commitment to the empowerment of women everywhere and drew unprecedented international attention. [...]

By adopting the Beijing Platform for Action, governments committed themselves to the effective inclusion of a gender dimension throughout all their institutions, policies, planning and decision-making. What this in effect meant was that before decisions were to be made or plans to be implemented, an analysis should always be made of the effects on, and needs of, both women and men. [...]

The introduction of gender mainstreaming called for the re-examination of society in its entirety and its basic structure of inequality. The focus was, therefore, no longer limited to women and their status in society but was committed to restructuring institutions and political and economic decision-making in society as a whole.

In endorsing the Platform for Action, the United Nations General Assembly called upon all States, the UN system and other international organizations, as well as NGOs and the private sector to take action to implement its recommendations. [...]

The presence and influence of NGOs, one of the most active forces in the drive for gender equality, had increased dramatically since the Mexico City Conference in 1975. In Beijing, NGOs had directly influenced the content of the Platform for Action and they would play an important role in holding their national leaders accountable for the commitments they had made to implement the Platform.

United Nations Conferences are quite powerful in disseminating new concepts, instruments, and terminology. Mainstreaming, empowerment, capacity/capability, are just some of the terms that have been coined by activists and social movements, and have subsequently entered the mainstreamed UN vocabulary, with a paradoxical effect of both planetary dissemination and substantive weakening (Destremau *et alii* 2009b).

Bessis (2004) acknowledges that “the Beijing conference — which convened no fewer than thirty thousands women — brought to a close two decades of UN reflections on women and development, announcing a new international strategy and an action plan focused

on gender and the effects of the economic, social and cultural divisions of both productive and reproductive work. In so doing, the United Nations Organization has responded to the profound conceptual evolution of ‘feminology’ over the last decades of the twentieth century, and has demonstrated the impact of the many and varied feminist discourses and campaigns that have expanded across the globe over the past quarter century” (p. 633).

This impact has, to a large extent, translated into the diffusion of a terminology and of policy instruments all over the world and throughout major institutions and organizations. All UN agencies have endeavoured to “mainstream” gender and to develop specific women-targeted programs. The World Bank appointed a women and development advisor in 1997, and established its own gender action plan in 2007 after a gender mainstreaming strategy paper was adopted in 2001<sup>10</sup>. As for the ILO, equality between men and women lies at the core of its Decent Work concept (publicized at the end of the 1990s). The ILO has adopted the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) among its normative tools, and grounds its mandate in this regard in four conventions, two of them quite some time before CEDAW<sup>11</sup>. The Bureau for Gender Equality coordinates the whole ILO gender network and oversees gender equality mainstreaming in all ILO work. Mainstreaming, to which we now turn, has surely become a global motto.

International organizations and regional institutions (such as the European Union, OECD) and bilateral cooperation services influence what happens in Yemen, not only by way of direct international conventions, development initiatives, country programs and policy framework; but also through funding of programs, reports, research, etc., conducted by other bodies, such as foundations, universities, NGOs<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> In 2010, the World Bank requested a 2002-2008 evaluation of its “Gender and Development” strategy, based on its 2001 commitment (The World Bank 2010).

<sup>11</sup> The ILO’s mandate on gender equality is to promote equality between all women and men in the working world. This mandate is grounded in International Labour Conventions of particular relevance to gender equality — especially the four key equality Conventions. These are the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100), Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156) and the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183). The mandate is also informed by Resolutions of the International Labour Conference — the highest policy-making entity in the ILO — in 1975, 1985, 1991 and the June 2004 Resolution on Gender Equality, Pay Equity and Maternity Protection (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/gender.htm>).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance the website “Gender equality in Yemen” ([http://www.wikigender.org/index.php/Gender\\_Equality\\_in\\_Yemen](http://www.wikigender.org/index.php/Gender_Equality_in_Yemen)) as well as, among others, the

Experts, consulting offices have been emerging, research centres and public offices specializing, to respond to a soaring institutional international demand for intermediation, knowledge, studies and dissemination. They all contribute to spreading and “normalizing” global thinking about women/gender and development, at least in development and institutionalized language and action plans.

### **3- Gender mainstreaming as a lever for transformative policies**

Development policies, and more broadly social policies implemented in the developing world, have recently adopted a posture of “transformative action”. Transformation is expected to take place both at the level of access to resources and well-being, and at the level of structures of organization, power, production, relationships etc. It aims for “active” citizenship, a balance between rights and responsibilities, as well as individual initiatives and social accountability. Integration and participation thus become transformative (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001).

Gender-transformative policies should provide women with enabling resources which allow them to take greater control of their lives, influence and frame policies which will help them reach their goals and promote equality. The gender advisory board, established in 1995 to provide advice to the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD), identifies seven key areas for gender-transformative actions<sup>13</sup>. One of the most important and innovative elements of the Beijing platform was a provision calling on the UN and its signatory states to “mainstream” gender issues across the policy process, “so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made on the effects on women and men, respectively.”

What appears to be a *consensus* thus emerged after the Beijing Conference: a change in gender-biased social, institutional and

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national Report on the Implementation of Beijing Plan of Action +15, the Report on the State of Women in Yemen in 2008 and the The 7th report of CEDAW.

<sup>13</sup> Gender equity in science and technology education ; Providing enabling measures for addressing gender inequalities in scientific and technological careers ; Making science responsive to the needs of society: the gender dimension ; Making the science and technology decision-making process more “gender aware” ; Relating better with “local knowledge systems” ; Addressing ethical issues in science and technology: the gender dimension ; Improving the collection of gender disaggregated data for policy makers (<http://gab.wigsat.org/transfom.htm#1>).

budgetary structures and a decisive step forward in gender equality were to be reached through *mainstreaming*.

### ***Transformative action and gender mainstreaming to promote gender equality***

In the field of gender, transformative action takes on the task of transforming unequal gender relations and promote shared power, control of resources and decision-making, as well as support for women's empowerment. Gender-transformative policies advocate and work towards changing and transforming existing inequalities. They differ from gender specific policies, which favour one gender over another in order to achieve gender goals, or gender-neutral policies, which dismiss gender differences and do not advocate any change on the gender division of labour and resources<sup>14</sup>. In its WID Gender overview course, the USAID thus states: "the overall objective of gender integration is to move toward gender transformative programs/policies, thus gradually challenging existing gender inequities and promoting positive changes in gender roles, norms, and power dynamics."<sup>15</sup>.

As opposed to gender-blind, gender-aware, gender-exploitative and gender-accommodating perspectives, gender-transformative approaches

"actively strive to examine, question, and change rigid gender norms and imbalance of power *as a means* of reaching [health as well as] gender equality objectives. Gender transformative approaches encourage critical awareness among men and women of gender roles and norms; promote the position of women; challenge the distribution of resources and allocation of duties between men and women; and/or address the power relationships between women and others in the community, such as service providers and traditional leaders. [Examples: income generation activities; projects to secure property rights for women; education programs that work with young men and young women to challenge rigid gender roles]. Projects may not fall neatly under one type of approach. They may include, for example, both accommodating and transformative elements. Also, while the continuum focuses on goals, it can also be used to monitor and evaluate program *outcomes*, since sometimes

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.apcwomen.org/gemkit/en/understanding\\_gem/genderanalysis.htm](http://www.apcwomen.org/gemkit/en/understanding_gem/genderanalysis.htm)

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/cross-cutting\\_programs/wid/gender/gender\\_overview\\_course.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/gender/gender_overview_course.html)

programs result in unintended consequences. For instance, an accommodating approach may contribute to a transformative outcome, even if not the explicit objective. Conversely, a transformative approach may produce a reaction that exacerbates gender inequities. Monitoring gender outcomes allows for revision of interventions” (*ibid.*).

Since the Beijing Conference, transformation towards gender equality is expected to occur through many different types of policy intervention, including mainstreaming. Although the notion of mainstreaming gender issues across the policy process had had antecedents in the previous two decades, the official recognition and endorsement of mainstreaming as a formal goal for all UN member states provided a global mandate for change, and a template against which to judge both national and international policies. Mainstreaming is meant as an “institutional innovation [that] leads to gender being included in policy making as a given” (Woodward 2003, p. 1).

As a procedure, mainstreaming involves policy and decision-making actors in a given society, overlooking to some extent their different interests or points of view, almost as though gender issues were *beyond* politics, one may argue: “Gender mainstreaming aims to enable the state to deliver gender-sensitive policy and transform gender relations. Its point of departure is an acknowledgement of the differences between men and women. It claims that the sources of policy injustice are found in the fact that existing structures are not gender neutral” (Rees 1998). Mainstreaming suggests that equal opportunities for women and men should no longer be achieved solely through equal opportunity earmarked policies. A multi-stranded and total approach is necessary. The various policy-making fields should be imbued with gender awareness to incorporate equality goals into traditional policy areas (European Commission 1996; Sensi 1996)” (Woodward 2003, p. 3).

For the United Nations, mainstreaming a gender perspective is “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”<sup>16</sup> The World Bank has narrower, more practical

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations. Report of the Economic and Social Council A/52/3, 18 September 1997.

ambitions (reaffirmed in the 2012 WDR on *Gender equality and Development*). Its mainstreaming strategy is summarized as follows:

Despite the progress to date in gender mainstreaming, the Bank's effectiveness can be improved by paying more systematic and widespread attention to gender issues in the context of its poverty reduction mandate. The opportunities for improving the development impact of the Bank's work through gender mainstreaming include making Bank interventions more responsive to country gender conditions and commitments; making these interventions more strategic; and improving the alignment of Bank policies, processes, and resources to support such interventions.

In the strategy described in this paper, the World Bank will work with governments and civil society in client countries, and with other donors, to diagnose the gender-related barriers to and opportunities for poverty reduction and sustainable development; and will then identify and support appropriate actions to reduce these barriers and capitalize on the opportunities.

The strategy is intended to establish an enabling environment that will foster country-led, country-specific strategies for changing the gender patterns that are costly to growth, poverty reduction, and human well-being. (2002, p. xii, Executive summary)

Commenting on the changes gender mainstreaming both requires and is likely to bring about, Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2000) asserted in a paper presented at the Workshop on Mainstreaming Gender in the European Union, University of Wisconsin, Madison, in October 2000:

The concept of gender mainstreaming promises a revolutionary change in the international and domestic policy process, in which gender issues become a core consideration not simply for specific departments or ministries dealing with women, but rather for all actors across a range of issue-areas and at all stages in the policy process from conception and legislation to implementation and evaluation. Equally clear, however, are the extraordinary changes required in the mentalities and organizations of both domestic and international actors in order for the principle of gender mainstreaming to be implemented fully [...].

*What* actually is mainstreamed, however, to what extent it bears transformative power, and the way in which transformation happens, remain open. Mainstreaming procedures may bear more or less transformative power: "There are two ways in which gender equality concerns can be mainstreamed. Integration aims to ensure that such

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<http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/docs/1997/e1997-66.htm>

concerns are integrated in the analysis of obstacles to development, and that these concerns inform the formulation of policy, programs, and projects. [...] By contrast, the transformation approach aims to move beyond integrating women's concerns relating to the demands of their daily lives, to focus on improving women's position (status), and thereby transforming the agenda" (Mukhopadhyay 2003, p. 45). It is the only way, the author goes on, to promote citizenship and substantive, as opposed to formal, equality for women.

### *Mainstreaming: institutionalizing and depoliticizing gender?*

Many reviews of the successes and pitfalls of gender mainstreaming since Beijing have been produced by various institutions and organizations. One central issue lies in the fact that categories that may have been conceived as radical or politically engaged inevitably lose strength or become diluted as they become institutionalized. As worded by Woodward (2003):

To what extent is it possible to merely insert gender concerns in an organizational setting designed with man in mind? When activists move inside, in the guise of bureaucrats with a feminist agenda (femocrats), politicians, or consultants, there are necessary compromises". Heikkinen (1999) is not alone in remembering that "mainstream" in Anglo-Saxon feminist terms used to mean "malestream" or dominant culture. Thus, mainstreaming implicitly means accepting that there is a dominant culture. However, any review of the definitions of gender mainstreaming indicates that compromises in the language of gender have been necessitated. The further one gets from an environment that has taken gender on board through a sophisticated and broadly based recognition of the problem, the more compromises in the tools that are meant to challenge and transform gender perception. In practice, it seems that organizations adapt definitions of mainstreaming that are amenable to their institutional cultures, but these are actually sometimes far from the original UN ambitions. The amount of change seems to depend on how mainstreaming is introduced, by whom, the historical context, and the presence of opposition.

Much thought has been devoted to this process of institutionalization, and its correlations, not only in terms of political compromises necessary to turn an *idea*, a concept, or a political target into a *policy* objective, but also later when it is implemented in practical, effective steps, particularly when a *consensus* is proclaimed and expected to hold as such. The effect of spreading this *discourse*, of turning this idea into a *buzzword*, used by whole ranges of different

actors, of enforcing it as a linguistic norm by making it an absolute ethical norm, leads to its valence being diluted and to depoliticizing its thrust (see for example Verschuur 2009a, Lautier 2009 and 2011 and more generally Destremau *et alii* (eds), 2009). Molyneux has written about the “chimera of success” and “gender ennui” (2007a).

In an OXFAM-sponsored publication, Moser (2005) confirms:

Categorising progress into three stages - adoption of terminology, putting a policy into place, and implementation - the article argues that while most institutions have put gender mainstreaming policies in place, implementation remains inconsistent. Most important of all, the outcomes and impact of the implementation of gender mainstreaming in terms of gender equality remain largely unknown, with implications for the next decade’s strategies.

With similar conclusions, Lyons, T. *et al.* (2004) assert that:

Gender mainstreaming has become the dominant development discourse for achieving gender equity in developing regions. It is the most recent in a series of strategies that have had varying success in delivering the feminist goals of women’s emancipation and gender equity in developing regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Gender mainstreaming is arguably a depoliticised and toned-down version of its predecessors, which attempts to avoid direct feminist confrontations while ultimately aiming not to exclude or threaten stakeholders in the development process. Experience indicates that as a result, gender mainstreaming is in danger of becoming yet another ineffective tool to promote gender equity.

One may say that, in Yemen, the process of gender mainstreaming has definitely started at institutional level. Yemen participated in the Beijing Conference, after a general directorate on women and children had been established within the Ministry of Social Affairs and “played a significant role in preparing for participation in Beijing Conference in the fall of 1995, where the Yemen delegation to the Conference was headed by the Minister of Social Affairs” (Republic of Yemen and Women National Committee 2010, p. 4). In 1996, the Yemen Women National Committee was set up by Cabinet decision “as the national mechanism concerned with the advancement of women, [which] reflects the constitutional obligation in this respect” (*idem*, p. 3). The WNC “was restructured in March 2000 with the establishment of the Supreme Council for Women (SCW), under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister and the membership of 7 deputy ministers from the line ministries and prominent women leaders. [...] In 2003, Republican Decree No. 25 was enacted to enhance the SCW membership with 7 ministers, deputy minister, the head of Trade



Union, 5 prominent women leaders, the heads of WNC branches in the governorates, in addition to the WNC Chairperson and Deputy. The WNC enhanced its partnership and membership to include CSOs concerned with women issues and heads of women sectors in the political parties.” (*idem*).

A National Women Development strategy was designed, based on six key issues (education, health, poverty, decision-making, combating violence against women and media), in response to the Beijing plan of Action, CEDAW and Millennium Development Goals. This strategy along with “gender needs” were integrated into the National Plan for Development and Poverty Alleviation, and a specific component on “Women Empowerment” (focused on combating violence, promoting political participation, economic empowerment and legal amendments to discriminatory laws) was formulated. A “gender component” was further integrated into the state’s investment programme and into the framework of donor programs and projects. A revision of “laws that included discriminatory provisions against women (Personal Status Law, Penalty Code, Securities and Pensions Law, Labour Law)” is under way, as well as various initiatives concerned with the financial system and the establishment of a “gender-sensitive” budget, as well as better integration of women and gender concerns into government administration and sectorial policies at a national and at governorate levels (*idem*, p. 5).

According to Huriya Mashhur, in a publication of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and the Arab NGO Network for Development (2005, p. 43),

[The Women National Committee...] expressed the government’s commitment in direct response to the call of the 1995 Fourth International Conference on Women in Beijing for national institutional mechanisms to be created to improve the condition of women. To improve its effectiveness, it was later reconstituted by a decision of the prime minister (no. 68 of 2000). A Higher Committee for Women, chaired by the Prime Minister, was created, with all the directors of women-related government institutions as members. Some representatives of civil society groups active in the field of women’s development were also included on the committee. These include the Women’s Studies Center at the University of Sana’a, the Federation of Yemeni Women, the Educational Research and Development Center, the General Organization for Insurance and Salaries, the Bar Association, the National Development Fund, the Yemeni Association of Family Care, the Association for Challenging Disabilities, the Popular Charitable Association,

the Charitable Association of Social Reform, the Scouting Association, the Association of Business women, the General Federation of Workers' Unions, and the Agricultural Cooperative Federation. The committee has branches in all the governorates, run by female coordinators, in order to follow up women's development issues at the level of the governorate and represent the committee in the governorates' executive bureaus. Its work involves cooperation with national and regional government institutions, inter national inter governmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working for the development of women and improving their conditions in different political, economic, educational and health areas.

[ ...] The National Gender Strategy endorsed by the Cabinet was one of the committee's most important achievements. It represents a development tool and a vision for women which could bring together partners for development in government, civil society and the donor community, and on the basis of which they could adopt plans and programs. In addition, the Second National Conference on Women of March 2003 produced recommendations that expressed a consensus by Yemeni women from all parts of the political and social spectrum regarding increasing female participation in public life in general and politics in particular (pp. 43-44).

Undeniably, the institutionalization of gender concerns, as well as the development of tools (legal, statistical, administrative...) to improve awareness of gender effects in public policies and existing social, political and economic structures have all contributed to building a climate of reinforced consciousness regarding women and gender in Yemen. Compared to the situation that prevailed forty years ago — that is, two generations — in North Yemen, these steps represent undeniable progress. Looking back to what was then South Yemen, however, is quite instructive on how the institutionalization of global norms in policy settings differs from implementing a political will promoting gender. Mainstreaming was not the key word then, but legislative action had attempted to redefine family relations, and managed to reduce personal status and human rights gaps between men and women (Farhan 2009, Molyneux 1982, 1985 a and b, 1995).

The Report on the Status of Women written out in 2008 (WNC 2008) accounts for the “challenges” that remain ahead, and the huge gender gap that continues to prevail in all fields. Beside formal “mainstreaming”, gender is surely becoming part of the mental picture associated with development and a certain type of modernity, but changing gender relations incorporated into social, economic and

political structures is not only a matter of awareness: it clearly involves power and political relationships. Whatever “consensus” is stated by multilateral organizations, gender remains a contentious issue...

#### **4- Tools for the promotion of gender equality in development programs: civil society organizations, empowerment and capacity building**

The growing global concern for the place and role of women in development processes did result in programs and projects, that have contributed to raising awareness, changing legal environments, and to some women claiming their rights, developing capacities and organizing themselves<sup>17</sup>. In many cases, these trends generate *windows of opportunity* that pave the way for actors and groups to take stands, raise claims, acquire legitimacy and obtain funding to promote new paths for the participation of women in development, more equality and more justice.

Three interrelated methodological and operational tools occupy a central place in what is meant as a transformative policy in a gender and development perspective: the general promotion of civil society organizations, mainstreaming of the capability approach, and the general objective of empowerment. Based on an assumption of similar contexts, similar recipes, aiming at similar transformative action, these global normative tools have been criticized for their content, the gap between discourse and action, their inefficiency to make changes favourable for women, but also the fact they take little notice of the variety of situations and of women’s expectations in different contexts. Overall, however, one may note that even women’s movements that criticize these tools as weakened generalizations or distorted concepts tend to come around to using them.

#### ***Promoting “civil society”***

Civil society in developing countries has been invested with various expectations and ideologies since the 1960’s. As Haubert (2000) points out, a functionalist and evolutionist vision then

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<sup>17</sup> They have become normative instruments used in developing contexts, including in the emergent countries of the ex-Eastern Europe and central Asia (see Atlani-Duault and Lautier 2008)

considered it was to be produced by the generalization of a Western-type state and the reduction of local traditional loyalties and solidarities. Over the 1970s, critics from the dependency school of thought then doubted the constitution of a civil society would be possible, since integration in the capitalist world system would cause the dismantlement and subordination of local societies. Later in the decade, questioning both developmentalist and dependentist approaches, political sociologists insisted that developing countries could only invent original models of civil society, influenced by the nature of the state and the nature of their social relationships.

Three factors then contributed to making civil society a central concept: fighting soviet totalitarianism, grounded in a claim for freedom identified with civil society; the democratization thrust in Third World countries where the state has proven unable to assume development and nation-building; and a growing resistance against both the state and the market in Western countries, in the

name of individualism and subjectivity. Whichever its definition and delineation, civil society is always defined as non-state in the first place. It is often invested with moral virtues, proximity with populations, autonomy and a capacity to compensate for the failures of both the market and the state. During the 1980s, as the state institution became more and more contested politically and economically, civil society rose as the main agent of both development and democratization in development discourse.

Since the end of the Cold war, encouraging the development of civil society organizations has been a constant preoccupation of development agencies. Its policy frame pertains to an orientation that has been implemented more generally for the reform of public action and the campaign for “good governance”: people ought to be put in a position of responsibility and partnership with public authorities, and become partners of the state and institutions in providing resources, conceiving, and implementing a whole range of policies, particularly in the social field. According to what has been labelled a “neo-tocquevillian perspective”, civil society is increasingly seen as instrumental in transforming existing structures, unleashing popular energies and freeing them from an overpowering state. Maxime Haubert (2000) underlines that the virtues attributed to civil society in developing countries turned it into an essential agent in four fields: development, democracy, good governance and humanitarian assistance (p. 22).

A very large body of literature criticizes such idealistic visions, that

turned out not only largely ineffective for development, democracy and the improvement of women's predicament alike; but also, to some extent, have contributed to worsen the most vulnerable women's plight, among other things by contributing to the weakening and privatizing of public services (see for instance Centre Tricontinental 1997 and 1998). Authors such as Dema (2008) pointed to the fact that gender inequalities in the structure and internal functioning of development NGOs, while being generally considered "gender-neutral", lead to the "invisibility of gender issues within NGOs" (p. 441). Furthermore, civil society organizations often only represent themselves, are not legitimately elected by a constituency, and keep their "beneficiaries" outside political decisions, voiceless, when they do not actually speak in their name. Competition among them for visibility, funding and political influence has muted the voice of local women's movements

and their diversity, to the benefit of mainstream discourses and recipes that only carry Western values and defend the interests of dominant social groups. Marked dependency on foreign donors who have "the power to promote and exclude" (Challand 2009) threatens to turn CSOs into docile instruments of policy lines decided elsewhere.

The reinforced intrusion of global social policies in Yemen since the beginning of the 1990s has intensified the enhancement of civil society organizations, in line with international orientations. The Constitution promulgated in 1994, following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 (and subsequent political tensions) guarantees the right to form associations. In 2001, the Law on Civil Institutions and Associations was issued. It is not easy however to make a global assessment of the progressive building of civil society in Yemen. In 2009, around 6,000 organizations were registered in Yemen. Their number has soared since the beginning of the 1990s, the unification of the two Yemen and the promulgation of a new constitution. But no one knows how many are effectively active, or how many only have a charitable engagement at times of religious celebrations and Ramadan (informal evaluations have it that around 5,000 of them are "Ramadan associations"<sup>18</sup>).

According to Social Watch, in Yemen<sup>19</sup>,

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<sup>18</sup> In 2007, civil society organizations would provide 17.4% of the poor family income (without further detail on definitions) according to the Saba News Agency (<http://www.sabanews.net/en/news134627.htm>).

<sup>19</sup> Social Watch. Poverty Eradication and Social Justice, "Civil Society Gaining shape", <http://www.socialwatch.org/node/11112>

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Work, which has responsibility for authorizing civil society organizations, lists around 6,000; more than 75% of them are charities established to offer a variety of services to poor families. Organizations involved in human rights activities are few, and have a broad focus. A single organization might work on women's rights and children's rights, or civil, political and economic rights. Despite their small numbers and lack of specialization, these organizations have provided a considerable number of training sessions for different sectors of society, as well as talks, activities and discussions on human rights issues. Their activities have generated a sort of movement, albeit one limited to the intellectual class — human rights issues are not yet part of the public discourse.

Despite its small size, this movement influences state decision-making institutions, such as Parliament and the Executive; their members have begun discussing human rights issues and problems. So far, successes of this effort have been limited to a few reforms related to women, children and the disabled, along with legislation to promote transparency and combat corruption. Recently, groups working in the political, civil, social, economic and intellectual fields have begun forming alliances and activist networks, which could lead to greater civil society influence on human rights concerns in the future”.

In Yemen as in most other developing countries, development policies addressing women have relied extensively on support provided to their organizing into what has been termed CBOs, CSOs, associations and the likes. The number of formal women's associations, and the representation of women in positions of responsibility in wider-scope associations, however, remains limited. According to a private interview, in 2009 around 170 of the registered associations were concerned with women, 95% of them in urban contexts. These figures are consistent with the results of a survey conducted by the organization SOUL (2002) in 2002 which established the tangible existence of 69 “local NGOs” for women in the eight governorates covered by the survey. One third, however, lacked the most basic elements of existence, and a further 44% faced serious constraints in terms of human and financial resources. Only 15 out of the 69 thus possessed good to acceptable standards for existence and performance. Women's representation on NGOs administrative board was, however, very small (13%). I can quote a third survey, conducted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in 2001, at the time the law was passed. It covered 1,692 associations, of which 87 specialized

in women's issues. Women representation in general assemblies, on administrative boards, in monitoring and supervising committees, heads of administrative boards, general secretaries or financial officers ranked between 11.1% and 16.3% (quoted by Mashhur 2005, p. 39).

Local associations outside urban centres contribute to giving substance to decentralization, provided they generate mediations between society and the authorities, and do not only consist of "one-man/woman shows". CSO experience and capacities differ depending on whether they have to deal with donors, especially foreign donors. Because the prevailing view is that CSOs are independent from both the state and patriarchal/paternalist traditional social relationships, organizing into a CSO is considered both as a substantive goal — giving women a voice, a basis for participating in society and visibility as citizens — and an instrumental tool — opening avenues for participation, acknowledgment, capacity building, and empowerment. CSOs, but only the ones recently set up as NGOs, and with the exception of "old-fashioned" organizations such as unions, are thus seen as the best promoters of democracy, equality and development, and the best guarantors of women's empowerment, integration and participation.

Several studies have related the "new" Yemeni civil society to older modes of social organizations (e.g. Carapico 1998) and I have analysed the architecture of development CSOs (Destremau 2005). Civil society in Yemen has been criticized for its lack of efficiency towards development, improving governance, democracy and transforming gender relations. Civil society in Yemen would suffer from a lack of shared democratic values, the predominance of patronage in the Yemeni political system, and generally entrenched patrimonialism (Kalkman 2009). It would be preoccupied with private economic interests and be heavily dependent on funding, which makes it vulnerable to pressures. CSOs further tend to reproduce dominant gender relations. However, the legal chance to organize has allowed some pluralism and advocacy within society: civil society organizations are factors of social change, and have become political actors, as the ongoing political upheaval tends to show.

### *Individual or collective empowerment? Dissent over microfinance*

As a very large body of literature on the subject shows, the term “empowerment” covers a vast landscape of meanings, interpretations, definitions and disciplines ranging from psychology and philosophy to the highly commercialized self-help industry and motivational sciences. It has become a “buzzword” (Cornwall and Brock 2005, Cornwall 2000). There is no universal definition of empowerment, “even if everyone agrees that the concept refers to notions of choice, of power and of change” (Guérin and Palier 2005, p. 29).

On the one hand, empowerment has served as a matrix to reverse the classic relationships of domination between state and

civil society, by transferring capacities for political decision to the latter, to the point where it has been criticized as being in favour of state disengagement (see, among many others, Gagnon and May, 2010). In the development field, it has been mobilized to reconsider the relationships of marginalized groups towards power structures. More specifically even, empowerment has been developed by feminist groups to question the dominant gender relation system in a given society (cf. Calvès 1999, Guérin *et alii.* 2009). It has been considered a tool to rebalance gender relations and promote substantive equality between men and women.

On the other hand, however, it has been turned into a methodology or a tool to develop individual capacities and skills to integrate a process of development, to access employment markets, technology, decision-making processes at a local level, as well as reducing poverty. The risk is then to overburden the individual, summoned to activation, responsibility, self-development, participation, training, etc. In this perspective, empowerment goes with an injunction to autonomy, which has underscored many income-generating projects addressing women.

On an intermediary scale, empowerment has led to encouraging women, and other members of marginalized or vulnerable groups, to develop their own organizations, in order to share responsibilities and decision-making capacity, to become collective agents of development in such fields as health, income-generating, agriculture, social protection, access to resources, as well as advocacy for more general reforms. In Yemen, the word has almost become a buzzword as well. Often, it is equated to capacity-building, not to changing structures. That is, it is understood on a relatively individual level, in a WID rather than a GAD perspective.

Microfinance has become both the panacea of empowerment tools promoted the world over by hundreds of thousands of large and small



development organizations, and the target of numerous fierce critics. To take only a few of these, Peemans-Pouillet (2000) shows how microfinance illustrates the complicity between various international organizations and private concerns, at the expense of women. Inequality towards credit access has been raised to constitute an intolerable injustice against women, overlooking the fact that women have always organized many different means of borrowing and lending funds as needed. The author puts forward that indebtedness has been promoted to populations of all parts of the globe, and particularly to poor women in developing countries. Presented as a powerful instrument against poverty, by giving them access to the market economy, and allowing them to improve their material standard of living, general indebtedness, albeit at a micro-level, has also aimed to integrate these dormant savings into banking circuits.

It is often argued that microfinance does not seem to have improved women's condition on the whole, nor in their relationships to men. As one of the authors of Guérin and Palier's book justly states (2005), "Just because microfinance interventions are routed through women, it does not necessarily imply that gender concerns have been addressed. The mere presence of women does not guarantee that issues of gender are in focus" (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005, p. 120). Guérin and many of her colleagues have also pointed out the individual and commodified vision of empowerment that prevails in micro-credit schemes. As the title of one of their books shows (2005), they even wonder whether it does not, in the end, contribute to disempowering the poor. Far from being a collective empowerment instrument, microfinance is likely to have contributed to evicting mutualized social protection mechanisms, to the benefit of private micro-insurance schemes promoted to facilitate poor people's access to growingly privatized health supply (Peemans-Pouillet 2000). However, in order to deconstruct domination mechanisms, their reproduction and reinforcement through microfinance institutions, more detailed scrutiny needs to be paid to the relationships between the various actors involved in the microfinance machinery at local and national levels.

Critiques towards micro-credit can be considered as symptomatic of stands against the liberal vision, presented as unavoidable (Hirschman 1991), whereby only integration into the market will save the poor from poverty, the vulnerable from their risks, and women from male domination. Moreover, whatever empowerment actions were initially contemplated, implemented, and activated as accompanying measures to pure income-generating activities, they

rank lower on the priority list. As may often be recorded, in Yemen as elsewhere, transformation of gender relations is often left up to collateral effects of a micro-credit project, and remains totally outside any evaluation or impact assessment. Micro-credit schemes are certainly not able to compensate for the global impoverishment and rise of inequalities, especially since

the 1990s. They cannot provide profitable employment for trained women, particularly in rural areas (De Regt 2007). They may however contribute to making them participate in decision-making, gaining some measure of independence, getting recognition and acknowledgment.

### *Capacity building and strengthening*

Consolidating women's capacities has been adopted as an instrument for their empowerment. Initially put forward by Amartya Sen, later developed by many scholars, the capability or capacity approach has been progressively incorporated into development agency discourses and instruments starting in the 1990s. In his book *Development as Freedom* (1999), Amartya Sen defends a conception of development equating it with fundamental freedom and making freedom a goal in itself, as well as an enabling instrument to reach other dimensions of well-being.

In 1999 and 2000, two seminal books and several articles by Martha Nussbaum laid out fruitful research strands into linking capabilities and women's situation and rights. Nussbaum also discusses universalism and relativism in this regard, and establishes a set of cross-cultural norms of justice, equality and rights, valid for all contexts while remaining sensitive to local particularities. She determines indivisible and interrelated capacities, designed as human rights, which offer a direction for the adoption of political principles as well as development policies towards correcting asymmetrical relations of power and social inequities. A quick search into academic and institutional production shows how diverse and widespread the articulations have become since then. Capabilities are related to the promotion of human rights and social justice, changing institutions (e.g. Gilardone, Guérin and Palier 2002), developing access to education (e.g. Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2001) and to health services (e.g. Harcourt 2001), attaining better justice (e.g. Knobloch 2002) and more freedom for women, eradicating women's poverty (e.g. Alkire 2007), etc.

One positive aspect of the capacity/capability approach is that it lends itself relatively easily to operationalization, although the issue is still debated at theoretical and philosophical levels. Authors such as Alkire (e.g. 2002) and organizations such as OXFAM have contributed to turning the capacity approach into a protocol for

action. Capacity building and reinforcement (for women, but also for the poor, the vulnerable, etc.) readily translate into programs for education, health, training, participation, employment, which have become the mainstay of most development projects nowadays.

Some researchers and analysts have wondered to which extent these projects and programs have actually departed from the Basic Need approach (BNA) that had been adopted by the ILO in the 1970s. The BNA had also aimed to enable women (and men) to provide more effectively for their family, to reduce insecurities resulting from poverty, under-nutrition, bad health, illiteracy, etc., and to have better control over their lives. But BNA approaches did not discuss existing patterns of inequalities and power relations, nor question distribution and redistribution patterns. Incorporated into the WID framework, “this narrow concept of ‘basic needs’ was the governing principle in development work for many years, and continues to be a strong influence today” (Facio 1995, p. 17). One may argue that the difference resulting from introducing the capability approach into what may seem to be a rather out-dated system of thought and action resides in the general perspective of empowerment that prevails. Coupled with rights and with the reform of institutions (good governance, gender mainstreaming, anti-poverty mainstreaming mainly), consolidating women’s capacities is supposed to lead to a change of balance of power, namely empowerment.

In Yemen, mobilizing the “capacity building” tool has spread as a motto for most development and reform initiatives. It targets individuals and organizations or institutions alike, as in the case of the French FSD project. My fieldwork shows however that which capacities exactly are at stake is often taken for granted. Significantly, the scope of individual capacity building tends to boil down to measures aiming to reinforce human capital and economic entrepreneurship, coupled with maternal capacities where women are concerned. On the other hand, though, capacities to become involved in CSOs, to play a role in politics, to integrate public offices, are also targeted goals of foreign interventions. For CSOs, however, capacity building would tend to stress reinforcing the ability to address, negotiate with and be accountable to donors over implementing change and delivering services in their community (Destremau 2005).

## **5- Education and literacy, levers for development and empowerment in a gender perspective**

In the 1970s, education became a major component of development projects as human capital theories gained more salience. Education was then considered as a major factor in easing the transition from agricultural, rural, traditional, low productivity economies to modern, industrial, urban and productive ones. Education was supposed to build the technological capacities necessary for modernization, to bring about modern and democratic patterns of political organization, and contribute to the construction of modern states administration, citizenship and national social cohesion (Hugon 2005). Along with freedom to participate and to express oneself, free access to education is also one of the basic freedoms spelled out by Sen, opening the way to other capacities, individual liberties and to economic development. It enhances both efficiency and equity (Kabeer 2003, 2005).

Concerning women in particular, education has clearly been related, in the first place, to their integration in development according to the WID and human capital frameworks. It has also been at the heart of empowerment and capacity building initiatives. As long as schooling does not cover the whole child population, either for previous or present generations, whole cohorts of adults or would-be adults remain illiterate. Literacy programs are then expected to compensate for these deficiencies, and possibly lead to reschooling. Literacy programs, as incorporated into development initiatives, tend to be gender-based, in favour of women, whereas alternative non-formal education initiatives, motivated by political or community-based scopes, are more inclusive.

Literacy and education programs incorporated into development frameworks also intend to influence women's reproductive decisions. The Mexico International Conference held in 1975 pointed to the relationship between women education, marital practices and fertility behaviour. This link was oftentimes reiterated, particularly at the 1994 Cairo Population Conference. Human development, and especially promoting girls' education, has become a means, less coercive and antagonizing than direct family planning, to act as a lever for population growth reduction.

***Harnessing women's education and literacy for***

### *development and population control*

Women's education and literacy are still at the core of many development policies, and poorly performing indicators in terms of girls' schooling and women's literacy weigh heavily in countries' rankings on the development index. Lack of education and literacy skills is considered a major deprivation of basic rights and capabilities, the main root of women's poverty, and one of the grounds for overall poor performance in development, since it keeps half the labour force excluded from efforts to boost productivity. Women are marginalized from development and modernization, and their marginalization from schooling and education is both the reason for it and an obstacle to this situation changing.

Another main argument for raising the level of women's education and literacy was strongly highlighted at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) organized in Cairo in 1994. The Conference placed an emphasis on the indissoluble relationship between population and development and expressed acute concern regarding population growth, especially in developing countries with still soaring birth rates, seeing it as a major factor impeding development<sup>20</sup>.

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At a micro level, giving birth to many children forces women to remain at home taking care of their family and makes it difficult for them to join the labour force. Seref Akin (2005) shows that female education at secondary and primary educational levels, labour force participation and urbanization in the Middle East are significantly and negatively correlated with fertility rates. He concludes that even in regions where traditional values abound in society, enhancing female status may change fertility decisions. Women's education is also positively correlated with reduced infant mortality, children in better health and nutrition, more dedicated and successful school attendance, etc. Fargues (2000) has brought to light various family patterns in Arab countries, showing that two-breadwinner families, especially when the wife is educated and occupies a qualified position, go along with a reduced number of children. Education appears as the single most determining factor of age of marriage and age at first birth

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<sup>20</sup> As is well known, the Cairo Conference raised strong controversy and galvanized popular reaction in the Middle East. The debate moved from one of demographics to a battle over cultural values, as it was felt that the Western organizations and institutions aimed at reducing the demographic dynamism of Muslims and dictating their behaviour regarding family planning and contraception.

for Arab women. Fargues however notes that urbanization and schooling are not enough to explain fertility contrasts from one Arab country to the other, let alone between some Arab countries and other areas of the world. Women status and future professional perspective play a crucial role as well.

At the macro level, high population increases feed dramatic rises in social needs such as schooling, health and housing, making it almost impossible for poor states to catch up, let alone improve service providing. Unrestrained population growth is the principal cause of poverty, malnutrition, environmental disruption, and other social problems. Correlations can easily be established between income and development levels, on the one hand, and population growth, on the other. In the past decade, these views have been connected to policies aiming at reducing migration pressure from developing to developed countries.

One of the goals advocated by the ICPD was thus universal education, especially for girls, arguing that, as women become more educated, their aspirations get directed towards joining the labour force and becoming more independent, while putting the family on hold, delaying marriage and bearing less children. Furthermore, an educated woman will take better care of her children's education, and insist that her daughters attend school, thus securing sustainability in development. These maternal roles and their anti-poverty potential have been emphasized within the framework of conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America and increasingly elsewhere. Such a "family welfare" perspective on women's education has been criticized as a drawback in women's advancement, since it leads to a "rematernalization" of women and a "renaturalization" of gender relations and division of labour between productive and reproductive labour, as well as between private and public spheres. In contexts where women are *also* expected to join the labour force and participate in political and civic life, it contributes to their overburdening, without redesigning co-responsibility towards child and elderly care (see among others Jenson 1997, Marques Pereira 1998, Molyneux 2007b).

Impediments to tightening links between education and social transformation also have to do with the economic context and its structures. They are rooted in the fact that economic reforms have tended to decrease state employment and foster growth in private employment in delocalized firms that offer only poor working conditions and income. This framework can be fruitfully used in the Arab region. On the one hand, whereas women employment tended to be highly concentrated in the public sector, the dramatic rise in

women's education since the 1960s has struggled to translate into effective employment opportunities, in a context where states employ less and less educated youth, and where preferences still favour boys over girls employment. On the other hand, when female private sector employment grows mainly thanks to foreign investments, it tends to offer unstable, little valued and low-pay jobs, hiring women far beneath their qualifications, with the result that working may be linked to an almost degrading economic need, albeit resulting in autonomy, rather than an aspiration to increased acknowledgement and social value (see for example El Abed and Hasselknappe 2009).

The relationships between economic development, population control and women's education has been a mainstay of development efforts since the 1970s in Yemen. Despite the fact that general schooling rates and particularly girls schooling rates have soared at all levels, the gender gap has also recently increased, along with dropout rates. Official gross enrolment rates in 2000 are of 61% for girls and 96% for boys in primary schools, and 25% and 69% respectively in secondary schools (Population Reference Bureau). Studies (e.g. SOUL 2004) show how much attitudes but also shortfalls in facilities and equipment, availability of female teachers as well as child work (either for income, but also mainly at home for girls) contribute to the gender gap, which conceals a large rural/urban gap as well.

The literacy situation in Yemen is quite appalling, in spite of the growth of schooling. In 2006, the Yemeni Department of literacy evaluates illiteracy at 29.8% for boys and 62.1% for girls (above 15 years). Illiteracy occurs not only because of non schooling, but also because of girls dropping-out early: 49% of them between 15 and 24 years, as opposed to 16% of boys the same age, are illiterate. These figures also demonstrate a considerable gender gap. As long as schools do not perform their proper functions, it seems difficult for literacy courses to fill the gap to such a considerable extent. Around five million women and men above 15 years are concerned and literacy also includes re-schooling programs for the under 15. According to the head of the Department for Erasing Illiteracy, in 2006 128,000 people attended literacy classes nation-wide (from 66,000 in 2001)<sup>21</sup>. Literacy centres, although belonging to the public sector, lack funding, furniture, supplies and qualified teachers.

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<sup>21</sup> IRIN Humanitarian news and analysis, "Yemen : illiteracy rate is falling, specialists say", Sana'a 21 January 2007, <http://www.Irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=64511>

Women activity rates have also increased dramatically, although the construction of statistical data conceals engagement in informal or agricultural activities (Destremau and Abi Yaghi, 2008). In 2000, 29% of women above the age of 15 were officially a part of the labour force (above the regional average of 20%) and women represented 27% of the active population (Population Reference Bureau). Fertility rates have also tended to decline dramatically, albeit more in towns than in rural areas. Statistics however show that fertility remains one of the highest in the world: 6.2 in 2005, down from over 8 in the 1950s. The population's natural growth remains around 3%; in that regard, Yemen ranks eighth among all the countries in the world. Confirming many studies on the issue, my own fieldwork hints to the fact that reduced opportunities for employment (since state expenses have been curtailed) affects women's schooling, especially when families have to choose between sending their boys or girls to school. And shorter schooling affects marriage age.

### *Education to change power relations or to reproduce dominant social and gender order?*

The field of education for development and gender equality is not devoid of controversy. Many scholars and activists have pointed to the fact that school curricula and settings are contributing to the reproduction of gender inequalities. Promoting gender equality thus goes far beyond just promoting access to schools for girls and reducing the gender gap. As Longwe (1998, p. 19) points out, in agreement with the GAD framework, "education and training for

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women's empowerment needs to reverse the values and beliefs which have been inculcated within the conventional school system". She argues that "the conservative definition [of education and training] overlooks the extent to which the unequal division of labour and women's limited access to resources are entrenched elements within the patriarchal structure of society" (p. 20). It is "confined to a merely technical and economic approach to gender issues, overlooking [...] political dimension" (p. 21).

This conservative view, she further argues, goes along with a purely economic and individual version of empowerment that equates it with self-reliance and a women's capacity to make the best of her own life. "From this point of view, a woman is empowered when she is literate, educated, and has productive skills, access to capital, confidence in herself, and so on. The model for this 'empowered'



woman seems to be the individual female entrepreneur or professional, who has got ahead of her sisters by her improved access to resources, and utilisation of these resources” (p. 22). This boils down to individual advancement, within the present society, rather than transforming its structures, dominant power relationships and discrimination patterns. It relies on the belief that space for more gender equality will naturally and almost automatically emerge from her increased capacity. This naïve vision overlooks other structural obstacles to women’s advancement, without tackling political aspects. It also overlooks the fact that a woman’s individual promotion may occur at the expense of other women, who may happen to be exploited in the process (such as workers, care givers, domestic workers, etc.). Or that it may reinforce class difference and domination, over poor and less educated women, discriminating oral cultures and traditions, minority values or customs.

Out-of-school or non-formal literacy and learning has historically been developed to get around the rigidity of school institutions and their implicit social and political values. In their review on the issue of out-of-school literacy, Hull and Schultz (2001) acknowledge that comparing school to other institutions and contexts for learning may merely turn out to reveal a particular kind of learning associated with schooling. However, out-of-school learning has allowed to develop radical curricula that have questioned the dominant social patterns and attempted to lay the foundation for new, different and sometimes revolutionary social

and political orders. Whether associated with workers’, peasants’ or minorities’ liberation movements, popular education is highly significant of attempts to raise the consciousness of its participants, transform their social position and empower them to take control over their own learning and to act towards effecting change on the problems that affect them.

From a gender perspective, though, Leach shows that “much non-formal education for women has taken the form of literacy training, often combined with information on health and family planning, or with income-generating activities. These programs have usually been run by NGOs; on the whole, the evidence is that they have had a very low level of success for both men and women, all too often continuing to reflect the same gender biases that prevail in formal education by reinforcing women’s traditional domestic, reproductive and community helper role”. She further states, taking evidence from other studies, that “even when literacy is part of a broad programme of support which includes income generation, the two sets of activities

were kept separate, so opportunities to use the one to enhance the other were missed” (1998, p. 15). Against this pervasive bias, several organizations (e.g. OXFAM and UNESCO), have developed alternative training for teachers, such as citizenship training and empowerment education.

In Yemen, dropping out of school has often been interpreted as a sign that parents are reluctant for their girls to attend school, because it may make them less “honourable”. However, the school system reproduces the dominant value system to a large extent, and dropping out seems to have more to do with material and physical constraints (long walks, no toilets, problems with wearing glasses, lack of labour power at home) than with a fear of the schools’ subversive potential. As a matter of fact, education is becoming part of a “normalized modernization”, and a modernized image of the good mother — good wife — good Muslim image is definitely emerging. She is educated, has three to five children, she educates them carefully, tends to their schooling and helps them do their homework. In this regard, promoting girls’ education, while related to a WID perspective, turns out resolutely transformative, at least in this very early stage of generalizing education, and as long as it does not convey the very elements that may deter girls from remaining in school...

## **6- The long and narrow path: criticism, constraints and shortcomings in implementing development in a gender perspective**

Critics of practical results of women in/gender and development approaches and intervention techniques have followed several lines that weave a complex enmeshment of postures. Although a variety of visions, values, ideologies run through any given body of feminist thought, it seems significant to underline two sources of ideological and practical criticism.

On the one hand, radical feminist movements, mainly of Western inspiration, have criticized women and development institutionalization approaches for being too “soft”, having made compromises with institutional rigidities and power settings at the expense of ambitious scopes of social and gender transformation. As a result, a large gap exists between objectives and impact, effectiveness is hindered, the reproduction of development institutions takes over transformation in targeted societies, gender relations remain unchanged, including within development

organizations themselves.

On the other hand, feminisms in the South also tend to criticize the gradual incorporation of the development thrust into normative institutions and intervention techniques, and its claim to represent a consensual voice and “the only way to do things”. As mentioned earlier, many women’s movements in developing countries have been drawing attention to the overlapping domination of race (or ethnicity), class and gender on a transnational scale. They have pointed to the fact that international organizations and NGOs are instruments of expanding capitalism, commodification of public goods and services, social protection, land, water and other natural resources, and a means of reinforcing alienation and indebtedness of the most vulnerable. They have also highlighted the double standards of organizations that support structural adjustment and free international trade that have considerably affected women’s wellbeing, while pretending to foster women’s emancipation.

All critics seem to share doubts as to the legitimacy, and the possibility, for this or that organized social agent to alter gender relations — or any social relationship — in a foreign setting, while showing respect for local movements, institutions, voices, and

cultures. Such doubts fuel a roaring debate opposing universalism to more differentialist positions, hedging on the debate conflicting the right to self-determination to the right to intervention, or the responsibility to protect<sup>22</sup>.

Two main lines of argument seem to delineate prevailing debates: one touches upon the *legitimacy* of intervention: *who* decides what is good for women in the developing world, *who* is associated to decisions, on the basis of *which values*, *how* it is implemented, etc. It argues that prevailing patterns of domination are reproduced by the development process itself: domination either of men over women, or of the West over the rest of the world, of international institutions over national sovereign states and peoples, of groups that capture the benefits of development business over the would-be beneficiaries, of town over rural areas, etc.

The second line of argument focuses more on *what changes*. For some voices, development is inefficient, because it does not take stands that are consistent or radical enough; for others, it does change social structures, but in a negative way, by reinforcing capitalist and market

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<sup>22</sup> To relate to what Alvarez (2008) names “the Schizophrenia of R2P”, although in a different context.

domination, and generating a rentier-type social sphere and economy, at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. The setting of *the project* itself is often questioned as encapsulating targeted change in a place and time frame that is blind to the multiple interrelations and articulations of various place and time scales ruling social transformation. Often, change would be short-lived and opportunistic, and the situation would revert to “business as usual” as soon as the project ended. The systematic gap between what development policy plans and what actually takes place leads to various interpretations, some pragmatic and determined, others more ironic or denigrating.

Attempting to decipher this permanent feature of development, David Mosse (2004) analyses the gap between development policy and development practice, by deciding to change his focus from the gap and its two common explanations (in short, lack of sufficient control over the development process, or hidden agendas aiming at other goals than what is officially admitted), to look at what policy actually produces. He finds that what is actually produced aims at bridging the gap by rationalizing practice, rather than changing practice itself. Even more so, what is being produced is *social*: relationships between the stakeholders, unifying representations:

Professional identities, alliances, divisions within projects, consultant and donors agencies, are structured around the making and interpretation of policy, and policy provides the idioms of speech and reporting. [...]. However, this does not mean that policy is implemented. Practices and events are too obviously shaped by the logic and demands of institutional relations (and incentives). Indeed, during the ‘implementation phase’ all the diverse and contradictory interests that were enrolled in the framing of an ambiguous policy model and project design, all the contests and contradictions that are embedded in policy texts, are brought to life and replayed. But at the same time, development workers and managers are unable (or unwilling) on the basis of this experience to contradict the models in terms of which they are busy framing and validating their enterprises and identities; that make them successful, ensure coalitions of support and justify the flow of resources. So, while the coherence of design unravels in the practical unfolding of a project, everybody is particularly concerned with making, protecting, elaborating and promoting models with the power to organise authoritative interpretations, concealing operational realities, re-enforcing given models and limiting institutional learning (p. 664).

I will come back to this relational framework in the concluding

section of this essay, arguing that it does constitute a heuristic tool for the assessment of development projects.

***Promoting soft power: NGOization, institutionalization, and the weakening of women's movements***

Along with several other scholars, authors such as Verschuur, Marques-Pereira or Falquet talk about the “NGOization”, the bureaucratization and institutionalization of women movements. The UN system, in particular, has succeeded in becoming a central actor of women and development dynamics, to absorb part of the more politicized organizations, to produce a depoliticized globalized product, embodied in a diluted and weakened “gender” concept, and finally to neutralize most of the subversive capacity of the women and feminist movement.

On the one hand, most scholars have recognized that the positions adopted by the UN system and the penetration of

“gender” agendas in public policies have led many countries to setting up ministries or state secretariats for women, that many legislative changes have been made in favour of women in national and international arenas, that budgets have been granted to promote gender equality. On the other hand, however, authors often investigate how recuperation by international organizations of the work and legitimacy of feminist and feminine movements has taken place. The first step occurred when movements registered as NGOs or CSOs and became a part of the powerful flooding of civil society discourse. Then the progressive absorption of NGOs within the UN sphere of influence happened via the erection of civil society participation mechanisms. Through these mechanisms, at national and international levels, civil society organizations had to get closer to their governments and official delegations. The UN and major NGOs then imposed a “consensual” development discourse and process, actually opposed both to the interest of women as a whole and to the radically transformative analyses of feminism.

The rules of the game of “integration into civil society” have forced women and feminist groups to struggle against each other for access to funds and various resources, with the result of power and visibility being concentrated in the hands of several large NGOs, without the mediation of democratic representation mechanisms. These consortium-like CSOs end up being closer to the nexus of international administration and bureaucracy than to grassroots

mobilization, capture most of these resources and contribute to imposing the funding and orientations priorities of UN agencies (e.g. Pouligny 2001). In order to reach apparent consensus and not antagonize conservative forces, objectives are euphemized and weakened.

On its way from *politics* to *policy*, “gender” loses substance and strength. Today, the international feminist movement may appear a vast field of professionalized NGOs, organized into specialized networks and tightly dependent upon foreign donors; including also academic and para-academic research centres, government consultancies and institutes, and experts of various origins, all “gender elites” attempting to make a living out of what has become a lucrative issue. NGOs become sub-contractors to global policy orientations. Radical movements are losing access to political arenas and visibility. Meanwhile, the fate of women is getting worse, under the effects of neo-liberal globalization. Reaching a central

position in the global government systems has a price. Falquet then wonders: would gender be a way to depoliticize feminism?

One of the main issues remains that of the operationalization of a gender approach in development initiatives and dynamic. The institutionalization of gender ought not to be an objective in itself, but a means to attain more equality and more justice towards women, to guide the modernization of institutions and to foster reform of power structures, to guarantee adequate social services and to promote the integration of women in labour markets in positions protected by labour laws, social protection schemes and equitable family arrangements. Nevertheless, a large gap continues to prevail in most contexts, between intentions, formulated in discourses and declarations, and concrete steps and actions that face practical, financial and political constraints.

### ***Remaining within existing structures or changing them? Constraints and compromises***

Several authors point to the gaps or even the contradictions that prevail between discourses on women, or gender, in development, and actual implementation patterns. Compared to the diversity of theories and approaches of women/gender in development, development programs and projects appear quite conservative, and rather uniform in their scopes and instruments. Adopting a pragmatic view, opting for “soft power” in order to disseminate western-type

values, most institutions involved in women/gender and development attempt to find solution and implement action that may transform the state of affairs progressively, without hurting the prevailing order or dominant interest groups. In such a context, democratization only occurs as a façade, social change is slow, civil society efficiency in development less than certain.

Rathgeber (1990) points out that, “the general notion of focusing on women separate from men in at least some projects had been accepted by a considerable number of Third World governments, national and international development agencies, and many non-governmental organizations” (p. 495) for reasons of political expediency rather than as a sign of fundamental commitment to the improvement of the situation of women. She notes that the analysis of stands taken by development agencies<sup>23</sup> tends to confirm the tendency to identify

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problems and propose solutions within the existing socio-economic structures, by offering various services and facilities (education, extension, credit, information, etc.) that would amount to affirmative action strategies to ensure that women are better integrated into ongoing development efforts. None, she says, “[question] the fundamental inequities of an international system that perpetuates the dependency of the South on the North, and none question the social construction of gender that has relegated women to the domestic realm in both the North and the South” (p. 496).

Bessis (2004) highlights that, whatever the intentions carried by organizations, their actions often reproduce the dominant sexual division of labour and a traditional view on women’s roles. Most income-generating activities aimed at women focus on typically feminine activities, that women often perform at home, that have little economic sustainability and transformative potential. Micro-credit, as a model of the kind, contributes to striving for the economic promotion of women, without altering or threatening pre-existing exploitation relationships. Most development programs or projects belong to the WID type, and have only incorporated timid elements of gender analysis.

Despite an inflation of discourses, well-intended protests and the multiplication of women — or gender — oriented projects, she wonders whether the fate of women in developing areas has really

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<sup>23</sup> She refers to a study conducted by Patricia Maguire in 1984 on the publications of various international development agencies that were beginning to focus on women.

improved, and how these discourses have influenced action. She points to the differences between UN and World Bank approaches, the former being more left-wing inspired, while the latter rather abides by neo-classic economic paradigms. The UN would be more engaged in equality between men and women and women's claim to legal and positive right, trying to influence the sexual division of public, private, economic and social spheres, and to modify the mechanisms and dynamics of sexual differentiation.

As for the World Bank, it mainly considers women as one of the categories needing anti-discrimination policies and special attention as one of the "vulnerable groups", towards full integration into the market economy. This may be exemplified by the justification given from the start to gender mainstreaming, in the Bank's strategy paper issued in 2002: "Several major World Bank reports provide strong

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empirical evidence that the gender-based division of labour and the inequalities to which it gives rise tend to slow development, economic growth, and poverty reduction. Gender inequalities often lower the productivity of labour, in both the short term and the long term, and create inefficiencies in labour allocation in households and the general economy. They also contribute to poverty and reduce human well-being" (p. xi, Executive summary).

Bessis (2004) acknowledges that the UN played a major role in forging the international norms used in the struggle against women discrimination, violence directed at women, family planning, etc. It has produced important data, and given a voice to women's movements. It has also provided feminist organizations in the global South precious instruments to legitimize their existence and activities, to build international networks, and to raise their voice, often towards other Western movements. Nevertheless, the UN has also shown to be unable to overcome the resistance of states, social conservatism, and to reform the internal logic of its agencies. As for the World Bank, it has adopted a much more instrumental perspective. Women are considered mainly as dynamic economic agents, constrained by discriminatory and rigid social and economic systems. Were their dynamism unleashed, they could become major components in the anti-poverty struggle and market development. Furthermore, any progress in women's life has immediate consequences on their fertility rate, a constant preoccupation of the Bank. Similar arguments underlie the 2012 World Development report on *Gender and Development*.

Cornwall (2000) also shows that "amidst rhetoric about 'full



participation’ and the involvement of ‘the community’ or ‘all stakeholders’, evidence from some contexts suggests that the very projects and processes that appear so inclusive and transformative may turn out to be supportive of a status quo that is highly inequitable for women. A number of potent challenges arise once a closer look is taken at participatory development and questions are asked about who participates, in what and on what basis, who benefits and who loses out” (p. 1). Research further tends to show that development adopts and reproduces a social structure where urban, educated (white) upper-class women occupy the top strata of the decision-making and executive hierarchy and talk on an almost equal footing with international partners, while rural, uneducated, lower-class women are assigned merely to a place of *beneficiaries*.

Contradictions become dramatic when the same institutions promote policies that hurt population well-being — as is the case for structural adjustment programs — and particularly that of women, and policies supposed to compensate for the degradation of general living conditions. The reduction of public budgets destined to education, health, infrastructures and public employment has hurt women’s conditions to a considerable extent. Local small-scale production activities, and especially agriculture, have suffered from the promotion of exports and the opening of borders to importations, from the favourable conditions offered to multinational firms to tap into labour, land and water in the name of “employment creation”. Many women have been deprived of their subsistence activities, and forced to join the workers’ labour market, or to depend on micro-credit institutions and the likes to develop alternative income-generating activities. Even women’s access to income-generating activities has become more difficult, and more dependent upon development agencies, while more care and reproduction tasks have been transferred to the domestic sphere. More and more women from the South and the East migrate to the North to perform care activities at the expense of their own children. Targeting of women in social safety nets, micro-credit or new social assistance systems do not compensate for the overall deterioration of their condition during the 1980s and 1990s.

Reflecting upon the general orientation of gender-orientated development interventions in Yemen in light of what has been presented in the previous section confirms the major assertions it contains. In spite of radical feminist positions in the West and global North about the veil, early marriage of Muslim girls, *shari’a* ruling family status law, appalling gender gaps, etc., the actual ingredients of gender-oriented development policies are smooth and relatively consensual. A very wide range of

organizations of different political and religious affiliations, including government agencies and “Islamic” NGOs, rally to the promotion of micro-credit, income generating activities, literacy, awareness raising and the like. As far as efficiency and effective social transformation are concerned, however, no one could really say what their impact has been. As I will propose after I turn to specific considerations regarding the French FSD programme, *impact* (in the broad meaning of the word) may reside in the mere presence of development actors, with their norms and categories, relations and interactions, more so perhaps than being directly enacted by *projects*. A kind of mainstreaming of representations and referenceframes.

### **7- The FSD project “strengthening civil society and women’s empowerment in Yemen” in light of gender and development approaches**

Yemen has been subjected to, and benefited from the various global waves of trends concerning development. In the 1970s and the 1980s, most development projects aimed at reinforcing the state’s capacity in terms of administration, banking, tapping into workers’ remittances, providing social services and setting up infrastructures. Concerning women, integration scope such as delineated in the WID framework prevailed, and development projects focused on agricultural extension, education to health, literacy and schooling. After unification (1990), Yemen was more deeply incorporated into the realm of global development efforts, with a view to consolidate democracy (Destremau 2005). UN agencies and initiatives flourished, and international NGOs multiplied. Confronted with resilient human poverty, and growing economic poverty and inequalities, development policies progressively turned to orientations mainstreamed at global level: encouraging civil society initiatives, supporting women’s social and political promotion and empowerment, reducing the gender gap, claiming rights, as well as fostering income-generating activities.

#### ***The project in short: an articulation of senior and junior civil society organizations towards a two-pronged objective***

The French Social Fund for Development (FSD) project under study in this publication is quite in tune with the various strands of

thought, procedures, tools, as well as shortcomings that have been identified and presented in the sections above. Globally, the FSD was geared towards supporting civil society initiatives for the development of Yemen and poverty reduction, while strengthening the capacity of civil society actors. Noticing poverty was widespread among women, especially women living in rural areas, the FSD prioritizes projects in favour of women in rural areas. The FSD was also established in line with the DPPR (Development Plan for Poverty Reduction) launched by Yemeni authorities for 2002-2005 and renewed for 2006-2010. The project's objectives are as follow:

Strengthening capacities to act and the lobbying of the Yemeni NGOs involved in the field of women empowerment<sup>24</sup> and fostering networking. The expected results are the following:

- Improving the efficiency of NGOs' to implement projects in the field.
- Urging local NGOs to become projects holders and partners for international donors.
- Strengthening NGO capacity to influence government policies and act as a civil society representative.

Implementing concrete actions for poverty reduction through this NGO network, especially in favour of women and girls in rural areas, and within the framework of the priority sectors of Yemeni-French cooperation:

- Basic education
- Primary health care
- Women's rights
- Water and agriculture

The project was not meant to rely on expatriate personnel. Only one International Volunteer based at the French Embassy's Cooperation Department (SCAC) devoted part of her working time to implementing the FSD. The rest of the Cooperation Department's team of experts, as well as the technical assistant for agriculture and the regional health counsellor (based in Addis Abeba) occasionally provided technical support to the project.

The originality of the project lies in the fact that it worked through local NGOs in a non-prescriptive way. The call for proposals was open

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<sup>24</sup> In French, the original language in which the project was written, it reads "improving women's situation in Yemen". The word "empowerment" is not used.

to NGOs, which would play the role of “senior NGOs”, to bid, on the basis of a loose objective framework, which left open their own interpretation of *how* things were to be done. They were expected to develop action plans that would both work through civil society organizations in rural areas (“junior NGOs”) and fight women’s poverty. The senior NGOs’ specificities are their know-how and experience in the fields of education, health, human rights and agriculture, from a gender (i.e. feminine) perspective. They possess the appropriate infrastructures, skilled staff and balanced accountability. They have implemented previous development projects and have developed (horizontal or vertical) relationships with other associations.

The junior NGOs were selected by their senior partners according to their relations and partnerships with them, their youthfulness, their dynamism, their proximity to the beneficiaries and their location. The rural areas in the governorates of Taz, Sana’a, al-Mahweet, Hodeidah, Sa’ada and Mukallah being a priority. The junior NGOs were supposed to be organizations or community-based structures, well adapted to field work conditions, and sensitive to the needs expressed by women and FSD priorities. They were supervised by senior NGOs in terms of technical and financial follow-up of the projects. Each senior NGO was supporting two to four junior NGOs, sometimes more, depending on their management capacity, the quality of the relationship between the two, the shaping of the project submitted, its financial cost, etc.

The following table presents the various projects registered with the donor in the fall of 2008, when the evaluation took place<sup>25</sup>:

Senior NGOs	Junior NGOs involved	Project description	Location	Duration
CARE Germany	2 + 4 schools	Capacity strengthening and promotion of education through local CSOs	Hajjah and Hodeidah	18 months
CARE Germany	17	Strengthening rural women organizations	al-Mahweet	24 months

<sup>25</sup> My own evaluation work only consisted of interviews with senior NGO representatives. For security reasons, I could not visit the field projects. Some of them were visited by two Yemeni consultants, who contributed to their evaluation. Others were then visited by Maggy Grabundzija, when she carried out fieldwork for her impact assessment, in April 2010.

SADA Women Society	3 + 3	Improving girls' education in rural Yemen : a community effort	al-Mahweet and Hodeidah	24 months
CDF (Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation)	7	Promotion of rural women's rights and economic development	Dhamar, Sa'ada and al-Jawf	15 months
CDF (Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation)		Promotion of women's rights in rural areas, through a process of local development	Dhamar, Sa'ada, al-Jawf, Ibb, Amran	18 months
SOUL (Society for the development of mother and child)	6	Promotion of girls' education through strengthening of local CSO capacity	Hajjah and Hadramawt	25 months
DIA (Dialogue Initiative)	4	Support to marginalized community women in Taez	Taez	18 months
DIA (Dialogue Initiative)	6	Support to local Akhdam community organizations engaged in the promotion of rights and the improvement of living conditions of marginalized communities in Taez	Taez	12 months
CDPF (Cultural Development Programs Foundation)		Strengthening capacities of women's organizations on Soqotra island and health education	Soqotra	15 months

It is not totally surprising that, although the original call for proposals seemed open, the list of funded projects appears as a relatively homogenous set. On one hand, the projects were selected with some implicit framework in mind, and some of the projects proposed were probably found too removed from a certain shared culture, or too experimental, or even too risky in a sensitive cultural environment, to be selected. Conversely, it can be assumed that the bidding NGOs conformed to what they perceived as the donor's expectations or mainstreamed development lines, in order to optimize their chance to be selected. Thus these six main projects<sup>26</sup>, opening to

<sup>26</sup> The beneficiaries of the project in its full breadth as stated in the programme's final report were thus: six senior NGOs, over eighty junior NGOs and thousands of individuals who benefited from the thirteen projects funded thanks to the FSD and implemented in eleven out

dozens of smaller projects in rural areas, may be considered as a significant sample of how Yemeni urban NGOs, with a given experience of relationships with donors and development intervention, may interpret the general frame designed by the French embassy's call for projects, and the result of the selection process that was carried out.

Each organization, however, retains a large degree of agency, and bends the explicit but yet loose framework depending on its specific perspectives, its preferences and the circumstances in which it operates. Action standardization was neither expected nor produced. What I will turn to next is to confront what would seem as homogeneous common wisdom and shared knowledge with some of the interpretations that have come up within the process of implementation, or within the narratives constructed during the evaluation exercise. I will organize the following section around the main components of the projects: strengthening civil society, improving literacy, promoting income-generating activities, support awareness-raising and claiming rights and finally, overall, reinforcing woman empowerment. I will mention the debates they raised, and how they seem to reflect global orientations towards women's development, concessions made to the sensitivity of Yemeni environment, and interpretation by the CSOs involved.

### ***Strengthening civil society as a transformative tool: capacity building and sustainability issues***

One of the core characteristics of the project was that it focused on rural areas, through civil society actors and organizations. On the whole, senior NGOs in the FSD project could be classified into two types: some are strongly centralized around a handful of competent and enlightened persons, often the founders of the organization, have structured relationships with donors, and provide relatively efficient services — and reports of an acceptable quality. Others are more inclusive, perhaps more democratic, are based on a constituency, but are less qualified, less able to participate in the standardized civil society that is being promoted today in countries such as Yemen. In

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of the nineteen Yemeni governorates (among which Soqatra island, administratively attached to Hadramawt governorate). The first projects were launched in June 2005. In September 2008, over ninety-five per cent of the funds were committed. The total number of senior NGOs projects exceed the number of senior NGOs, because some of them proceeded in two phases (see table below).

terms of instrumental development, which with this project translated mainly into promoting education for girls and micro-credit *for* women, the first type of CSO is probably more efficient. In terms of promoting democracy and participation, empowerment, citizenship *within* the organization, though, the second type seems more adequate. The extent to which organizations actually *generate* civil society is not certain, however: often, their relationships are more directed towards their donors than towards their fellow CSOs, and cooperation between them is difficult to build.

The originality of the FSD project probably resides mostly in the relationships it has encouraged and fostered between senior and junior NGOs, although most senior NGOs were already working with, and via, local organizations. Relationships between them were overall hierarchized and structured in ways similar to those prevailing in society at large, *i.e.* interlocking gender with class, education, professionalism, urbanity, etc. It may be argued, as Janine Clark (2004) does in her study of Islamic social institutions, that horizontal networking ties predominate over vertical ones, aiming at social service. She shows that the relational and institutional structure of a development or a social service setting ends up contributing to the reproduction of a professional middle class, while the poor, the peasants, and the illiterate are assigned to the role of “project beneficiaries”.

In some cases there was tension between junior CSOs wishing to emancipate from senior supervision and authority, while senior organization perceived it as competition from which it had to defend itself. In other cases, dependency seemed grounded in the junior organization’s lack of experience, with no clear path for emancipation and autonomy. It was then often coupled with a kind of patronage/paternalizing role, rooted in cultural and social gaps and discrepancies between the urban educated management of the senior NGOs and the less educated, less self-confident or outspoken rural women. In principle, what seems important in order for this relational structure to consolidate civil society is for the relationships not to be frozen in dependency, competition or power relations but to be turned into — or at least open to — effective and equalitarian partnerships whenever possible. To that end, empowerment and capacity building would need to translate also into a process of acknowledging the junior CSOs’ capacity to emancipate and fare their way through relations with donors, local authorities, manage their own budget, etc. In other words, the success of the project ought to *change* the initial relational setting.

Capacity building activities set up within the framework of the

project demonstrated diverse attitudes towards the role of CSOs in Yemen and development, and particularly towards gender relationships. The basic skills the senior NGOs tried to transfer to juniors focused mainly on the acquisition of abilities aimed at obtaining funding from donors, maintaining a satisfactory and sustainable relationship with them, addressing local authorities and executives, keeping accounts as well as writing reports and proposals. These skills actually contribute to the “professionalization” of NGOs as such. They contribute to turning CSOs into *institutions*, integrating them into the normalized, relational and institutional world of development, without necessarily having a precise action in view. Civil society thus appears as a token form, self-justified. In fact, CSOs are also to constitute *structures of opportunities*: they are ready to host and welcome any chance to “get something”, to “receive a project”, as though it were a gift. Receiving funds then boosts the CSO, which may fall back to inactivity after the project has run its course. In some cases it seems that the bureaucratization resulting from too much insistence on structural capacity-building would choke any dynamism in the CSO: a large share of activity time is spent preparing requests, writing out reports, conducting evaluations, keeping accounts for minute amounts of money. Civil society then seems to become entropic, to consume itself up.

In other cases, responding to the practical needs of beneficiaries or would-be beneficiaries — most often identified by the senior NGOs and donors, or thought to exist — actually was the major justification for capacity building. Technical skills aimed at improving the quality of services to the community, such as literacy training, speaking in public, awareness raising campaigns, communication, delivering micro-credit, etc. would then come first. This strategic choice amounted to a professionalization of the services provided by CSOs. In these cases, change is brought about by the services themselves — literacy, micro-credit, etc. — rather than by the CSO as a structure. It is also fostered by the training process itself: often, sessions gather trainees from various areas of Yemen, and generate discussion, dissemination of information, networking, and possibly reinforce collective professional identification.

Furthermore, effective participation, respect, attraction and identification, do produce radiating change among neighbouring or beneficiary population, men or women. It remains that capacity building may lead to building human capital, professionalization and opportunities for a handful of individuals, sucking up whatever chances are offered by their partnerships with senior NGOs, instead of



reinforcing the collective capacity of the organization as such.

As Clark (2004) shows, while such opportunism may be hard to totally avoid, it threatens to divert the prospect of civil society consolidation towards support of individual careers in development. During the Project, one NGO was particularly watchful to avoid concentration of benefits on one person only.

Capacity building is meant to strengthen CSO sustainability. Sustainability was proven to depend on economic dimensions as much as it did on social, institutional and professional factors, and a stable combination of the two. Basing sustainability on purely market activities or on income provided by distributing micro-credit leads to the question of whether it is actually possible to separate social relationships from economic accountability. In the project, some of the training senior NGOs provided junior organizations focused on skills related to communication and linking with institutions. It contributed to strengthen legitimacy, which is a crucial keyword for sustainability. Legitimacy is likely to bring acceptance from men and women in the project as well as around it, support from authorities and partners, readiness of members or beneficiaries to pay memberships — and the leading male's authorisation for the women in the household to do so and join in the activities.

Legitimacy also comes from acknowledgement and articulating donor-funded projects with existing supply of services, especially public services. The issue occurred at several occasions in the FSD project: a health centre in Taez, literacy centres all over the country, vocational training, micro-credit as an instrument to alleviate poverty, all of these needed to be articulated with local public health, education, literacy or social affairs offices and services. This issue, however, questions the place of civil society organizations in the general social development and social service schemes: are they expected to remain separate, so that service suppliers become diversified and state services encouraged to compete with private providers? Or are they meant to act as support to public service schemes? It also expresses a turn in overseas development aid: whereas strategies aimed at reinforcing state capacities in the 1970s and 1980s, they have turned to producing alternative agents, sometimes competing with the state.

Trying to find out how women fared in relation to men is not an easy task without extensive observation and fieldwork. However, it seems that capacity building activities did not manage to reverse existing positions, although they did prove to produce changes in relations

between men and women and social identities. Weaving relations with public offices and local authorities as well as other organizations depends to a large extent on personal social capital, network, social position, etc. For rural women members of CSOs to actually go to a public office and present a request often constitutes a major step in building self-confidence. One gender-biased problem met with CSOs is that women often quit after marriage, which generates a discontinuity, a loss of competencies, and the need to train a replacement.

To set up a CSO both reflects and reinforces someone's position in society, provided it obtains proper financial and political support. It is rare that women alone attain such a degree of acknowledgement and capacity for mobilization. CSOs with both men and women have a better chance to reach out and build stable relationships with public offices and executives in the area. And the extent to which power — voice, authority, claims... — within the CSOs is shared between men and women depends on internal relationships between them : it also represents one of the challenges of the project. Thus, gender separation within CSOs did not seem to be more conducive to a change in gender relations than settings where both sexes displayed at times confrontational attitudes, and at others, on the contrary, cooperated with each other.

### *Articulating literacy and income-generating activities for women's empowerment*

All projects submitted and accepted within the FSD programme had several articulated dimensions to them: education/literacy, micro-credit/income generating activities, awareness raising campaigns, communication and advocacy directed toward public authorities, important persons and partner organizations or public services, etc. Some of the goals pursued were individual (training, literacy, income generating), some aimed at improving service supply conditions (training for trainers or professionals, advocacy towards public services, supply of literacy courses, health services, employment of trained personnel, etc.). Projects also strove to improve response, acknowledgement and support from the —mainly male — institutional environment (government offices, local authorities, ministries, elected local councils, etc.). Each

senior NGO was free to constitute its own combination of action, means and objectives.

As shown on the table above, micro-credit is not an activity performed by all senior NGOs, and not even by most. The first reason *not* to implement micro-credit schemes was that it was found to generate a risk for the organization managing the fund. What was thought as a source of income and sustainability, because of the revenue it could procure the organization, then turns into a risk. The hazard was all the greater when CSOs had little experience in managing such a scheme, when the activities themselves were not well prepared, and the beneficiaries not sufficiently trained. Two NGOs implemented training in management of micro-credit schemes.

Micro-credit institutes a connection between a borrowing individual and a group: her family, the “community”, the NGO, and beyond that the donor. As was shown by many research papers on the issue, this connection turns to tension when a need expressed by a member of the family or the community comes in contradiction with the individual contractual commitment to pay back the loan. Micro-credit relates monetary indebtedness with social indebtedness (see, among others, the work of Guérin). Typically, micro-credit schemes would provide rural women with goats, with the risk they might die. The “beneficiaries” would then remain indebted with the scheme, left with two choices: either borrow the money to pay back, meaning that the debt would be transferred, with no earmarked means to pay it back, with the risk of it generating more dependency towards a man, relative or personality; or to give up paying altogether. The lending CSO itself then ends up with the debt, leading to budgetary difficulties and a problem of accountability.

On the other hand, micro-credit was said to act as a factor of attraction towards NGOs: more and more people in rural areas have heard of it as “a good thing to have” and come to apply for it. Some NGOs decided to act as facilitators, supporting their beneficiaries’ approach of schemes managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and its decentralized offices.

Education and literacy were quite popular among the senior and junior CSOs, depending of course on the general level of schooling and literacy in the targeted areas. It raises a fundamental question: do NGOs not substitute for governmental services when they get involved in literacy, knowing that a Ministry has the same mission, has designed an action plan, and reiterates its commitment towards improving the situation? Does it not create an eviction effect? On the micro level, seen from the project and local actors, the answers would be diverse. Some NGOs had taken the point of view that government services were ineffective in any case, and that literacy ought to come

within the competence of civil society organizations. Others tried to consolidate and assert the role of education offices, coordinate with them, including protests and claims for their rights, demands for facilities, supplies, support.

One issue that came out of the evaluation is the articulation between literacy and micro-credit or the promotion of income generating activities. How, and to what extent should they be linked? Which capacities ought to be consolidated first? When education and literacy were considered mainly as instruments towards economic productivity, they were put as a preparatory phase, a pre-requisite, for further economic projects. The risk would then be that women get bored with literacy leading nowhere concrete, and drop out of the project altogether. When education was considered firstly as a means for self-development, as a value in itself, a milestone towards citizenship, self-confidence, gender equality, it would stand on its own, or separate from income generating activities. It would then be better articulated with awareness raising activities. When economic problems were seen as an impediment for women to engage in other activities, economic projects would come first, whatever the capacity to read or write. Then, it could also be argued, women who fare better economically could be asked to share in the costs of their literacy training, or to pay for their course. They would thus not draw from the family budget, or depend on a man's decision to register for the course. And the demand for literacy could come later, when a woman would become committed enough to the economic activity to decide to upgrade her own skills. What would then be most useful would often be vocational or professional training, associated with literacy (when not completed as a prerequisite), then directed towards a practical application when relevant.

Empowerment, however, remains far beyond mere instrumentalization of either micro-credit, literacy, or both. The evaluation allowed to shed light on the considerable significance of attitudes and relationships. Becoming a project "beneficiary" has grown to be an aspiration shared by large parts of the population in Yemen: in rural settings where not much is expected from the state, accessing the realm of a foreign donor's project means *receiving* something, goods, services, chances, consideration, improvement, jobs, etc., without necessarily contracting a debt because development already pays back a kind of social or human debt. Development, however, comes through relationships, and these are part of social transformation. Where senior NGOs expressed a relative superiority (towards rural or illiterate people), there seemed to be less prospect

for empowerment and for a transformation of identities for the so-called beneficiaries *through the relationship*. Rather, interviews tend to show it might feed dependency and patronizing relationships. What seems transformative is responsible partnership, striving for equality and mutual accountability (Eyben 2008, Cornwall 2000, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001).

### ***Raising awareness, claiming rights and changing social (gender) relations***

As a component of the FSD projects, awareness raising has been directed at several targets. Firstly, to “the institutional environment”, namely public offices, sheikhs, authorities, businessmen, likely to change their attitude, to become more receptive and more supportive towards the CSO and its members as such, and its activities in particular. It also involves training CSO members in communication skills, whether written or oral. Mosque Imams have become targets of these awareness endeavours, owing to their moral authority and their audience through preaching. Businessmen have been called upon not only for the resources they can pour into a micro-credit scheme, a literacy or a health centre, but also for their support in hiring trainees and trained youth, and disseminating values carried by the projects. The growing and increasingly modernized wave of benevolent and patronizing activities is quite favourable to a stronger involvement of the private sector in social development enterprises.

Awareness also aims at being transformative of substantial attitudes towards women’s rights, girls’ schooling, violence against women, early marriage, health and pregnancies, qat chewing,

revenge and retaliation, etc. At times a senior NGO would construct its own programme, but in other cases it resulted from participative discussion groups. In practice, awareness raising takes place either as formally organized sessions or lectures, or through media, brochure dissemination, poster campaigns in health centres and schools, etc. One senior NGO is encouraging parents to organize as parents’ committees in schools, for them to feel more involved in their children’s schooling, more concerned by girls’ schooling around them, and the teachers more accountable to them.

Senior NGOs turned out diversely committed to the promotion of rights. Or rather, when all of them were conscious of the necessity to advocate access to rights such as education services, and forms of citizenships such as being heard by the local authorities, only a few

aimed to turn the women beneficiaries into advocates of their own rights. Their intervention in this case amounted mainly to attending and supporting their own moves to assert needs and claims towards local authorities and surrounding organizations. Others were more in a paternalist position of “we know better”, and favoured traditional interventions, emphasizing more women’s position as beneficiaries than that of participant.

One of the senior NGOs has been organizing Human rights training for some years now. Within the framework of the FSD project, such training sessions were directed at trainers and extension workers, health and education local office representatives, members of local councils, etc. Training contents attempted to be relevant to each of their field of work, and the issue of rights linked to concrete services, as well as to actions likely to integrate a rights-based vision into the provision of these services. Awareness to rights issues leads to requests being addressed to the government or relevant institutions, for example, for the training of midwives in a region that had none.

Another NGO, engaged for some years in supporting empowerment towards reinforcing social justice and eliminating discrimination against what is euphemized as “marginalized groups”, advocates getting their civic, political and social rights in terms of access to identity cards, health, education, economic opportunities, employment and housing. Only then can the spiral of marginalization, discrimination and poverty be broken. It involves awareness work on two levels: individually, and within the CSO, confidence-building actions, support for procedures, relations

with local authorities, negotiations with governmental bureaus, organizing into a political movement, etc. Then, advocacy for republican and human rights can also be directed at Yemeni society in general. The general direction followed is not for the NGO/CSO cooperation to substitute for governmental services and access to due rights, but to aim at integration within fully-fledged Yemeni citizenship. Meetings are organized with local stakeholders in order to establish relationships and mutual respect. Enhancing CSO visibility in national events or networks has also contributed to its integration at the same level as other civil society organizations.

Examining values put forth to support these awareness and advocacy campaigns shows how adaptable NGOs have to be, and how a gap may occur between their own convictions or commitment, and what turns out to be feasible. Dissemination of the referentials, terminology, mental and practical frameworks of development by

government institutions, international organizations and NGOs have engendered a sort of orthodoxy that has become widespread, even in a country where roads are still scarce, and many areas quite isolated. Within this “common world of development”, some ideas, ways of doing things, have become acceptable, others are borderline, others fit so well into the dominant and institutional culture that they do not seem to produce significant change. Themes such as contraception, which was hardly acceptable twenty-five years ago, has become almost mainstreamed today. This is not to say that the world of development is consensual, but merely that it *seems* consensual.

In order to legitimize the idea of girls’ schooling, in the face of conservative fundamentalist propaganda, one of the senior NGOs has been mobilizing religious and social acceptance arguments: being educated turns women into better mothers because they can take care of their children, better spouses because they can be their husband’s partners, and better Muslims because they can read the Koran and educate their children into religion. The main line is that of a “modern Muslim woman”, endowed with specific rights and duties, and able to occupy a proper place in family and society. Modernized maternal and family roles and values are used as vehicles to bring about transformation, without antagonizing rural populations or causing conflict or resistance, which could end up being detrimental to the girls and women. For another NGO, less inclined to conservative concessions, this line is hardly acceptable:

women ought to be promoted in a secular republican perspective, mobilizing notions such as Human rights, international covenants, justice, etc.

Other arguments for change, called upon by most organizations, are pragmatic: women may need to earn money for the household, and ought to be given the means to do so. Furthermore, when girls’ and women’s needs are not satisfied in an area, people risk moving out. Nowadays, these needs are for medical doctors, teachers, midwives, counsellors, etc. Training women for these professions is likely to encourage families to remain, and remote areas to keep their population. And culture needs to adapt to a changing economic reality, while respecting traditions and customs. These lines of argument, in favour of modernization for and by women, today have become acceptable to most social forces in Yemen.

The overall change of values could be appraised by the length of the waiting lines for CSO activities. They have also translated into concrete provision of facilities, equipment and supply by local

authorities, neighbouring businessmen and the like. Social and gender change, however, is difficult to appraise, and even more difficult to attribute to this or that factor. Getting back to the baseline of this paper, it could be said that the project contributed to *integrate* women into development, by targeting them as agents and beneficiaries on several grounds. It has not *directly* addressed gender relationships, however, or any power relationship (except discrimination against the *akhdâm*). In particular, it has not addressed power relationships *between* women, which may well have been reinforced under the effect of selective capacity building, empowerment, and the distribution of roles in such schemes as micro-credit.

The basic assumption of most of the projects that have been conducted under the FSD is that, as women reinforce their capacities and their individual empowerment, change will “necessarily” occur, within the organizations, among the direct beneficiaries, and on a wider scale within society. In that sense, the French FSD programme reflects widely-spread pragmatic postures towards taking the cultural environment into account, and adapting to what is deemed feasible: never mind compromises, as long as the project goes on. The compromises are different, depending on whether the partner organization is rather secular or religious, conservative or modernist, Yemeni or foreign, whether it operates

in a very traditional and remote area or an urban environment. But overall, it reflects what may be considered a basic compromise of the development machinery, especially in sensitive contexts, when the action plan bears on sensitive issues: WID for GAD, soft power, local alliances, transformation through acceptance and integration. Which also means and implies a certain degree of respect for societies where development schemes intervene, and political compromise between local constituencies and societies, on the one hand, and international well-intended heralds of transformation in other contexts than their own societies, on the other.

### **Conclusion: Project impact and transformation of social and gender relations: the potential of a relational approach**

Sociology, as well as gender and development studies, have recently emphasized the potential of relational approaches as analytical and methodological tools. Relational approaches have been developed mainly in the field of organizational sociology and



women/feminist studies. In his seminal review paper, M. Emirbayer (1997) has spelled out the founding principles and major strands of relational sociology. Studying the standard development configuration in such a perspective, R. Eyben (2008) asks: “What additional possibilities become available when we conceptualize aid as a field of interdependent and dynamic relations that are played out in the absence of pre-established consensus or shared vision concerning desired changes”?

Dwelling mainly on issues of power, mutual accountability and responsibility between development institutions and organizations, she proposes changing the focus on development from a substantialist perspective, “one that views the world as a collection of entities” and “reflects a perception of aid as a contract”, to relationalism, which “understands entities as mutable, shaped by their position in relation to others”. She then criticizes the rational choice theory that paves the way for a construction of development relations as a set of contracts:

Relationalism in the social sciences is a tradition that starts from the premise that social actors — be they persons or states — are mutable; they not only shape their social relation but are also shaped by it. Many social anthropologists are relationalists, considering individuals as inseparable from the relational contexts in which they are embedded. Anthropologists objecting to methodological individualism explain the connection between individuals and their social world as a simultaneous process of people making society and of society making people. What Bourdieu and others have described as the relational mode of thinking ‘identifies the real not with substances but with relations’ (Bourdieu 1989: 15). ‘The primacy of attributional categories and other substantives [is rejected] in favour of dynamic observable processes in relations’ (Emirbayer 1997: 298). A relational view of power is not that it is a resource or a substance, one that different individuals or states possess in varying quantities. Power is conceptualised as productive energy that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by social interactions. As I discuss later, this relational understanding of power has implications for the concept of accountability in terms of ‘power holders’.

Thus a relational understanding of international aid would not see it as a thing. Rather, aid would be understood as a particular pattern of social relations shaped by context-specific and historically-derived configurations within the broader fields of power and meaning in global and local politics (p. 22).

This methodological and analytical perspective echoes the position of Irène Théry (2007), who proposes a relational approach of “sex

distinction” where identity borders do not add up, and which allows to escape a conception of society that always places in the centre the male/female dualism. Identities, far from existing *ex ante*, in and for themselves, are produced, altered, confirmed or weakened, through relationships. They are *relative, adaptive*. Furthermore, as postcolonial feminist movements keep reminding us, and as we noted earlier, focusing exclusively on the male/female dualism obstructs the concomitant and interlocked effects of other types of relationships.

With a similar view, Cornwall (2000) also argues in favour of putting an end to essentializing men or women, so that integration and inclusiveness become liable to produce a change in relations of power. He states that “Ironically, ‘gender-sensitive’ interventions may remain profoundly insensitive to the dynamics of difference, precisely because of the assumptions that are made about ‘gender’”, and to the many various forms of social organization and social relations that shape identity. However, he goes on, “ ‘gender’ remains useful, precisely because it signifies an aspect of all social relationships and a relation of power. [...] [A]llowing essentialisms to spill over into the vastly more messy realities of development practice risks overlooking completely those relationships that make more difference to women’s and men’s lives and livelihoods. These are ‘gender relations’, but they extend beyond conventional definitions to embrace relations of power in which gender is but one aspect in a constellation of intersecting differences” (p.28).

In the field of development, the use of a relational approach can have normative uses: it then targets the analysis of domination relationships, institutions that reproduce inequalities or power positions, which turn out to hinder transformative action, generate a cognitive gap, or even create contradictions between the explicit goals of a project and the resources that have been mobilized. A relational approach would thus allow to look into interactions as intrinsic parts of a development intervention, and to attempt to influence relations by promoting desirable ones and correcting non desirable ones. “Good” relationships are then considered a desirable lever for social change (see for example Eyben 2008, Merrifield 2002, Cornwall 2000, or Cornwall and Gaventa 2001).

In a forthcoming paper (Destremau 2011), I have attempted to build a relational analysis of the French FSD project reviewed here, showing how it ambitioned to grant all stakeholders and participants in the project the status of active agents, including of their own transformation. I have attempted to use the relational approach in a non-normative perspective, considering this *situation* of development

intervention as a field of interdependent and dynamic relationships (Eyben 2008, Le Meur 2008, Olivier de Sardan 1995 and 2001). Contrary to many projects implemented in the 1970s and 1980s, and in line with the framework of most development projects today, the FSD project is for the most part immaterial, in the sense that it does not perform material investment (except for chairs and tables for literacy classes), or even rely on contractual employment. It does not either aim at directly influencing or altering structures.

The project happens to be openly and explicitly relational, since it aims at building a chain of responsibility, accountability, and capacity building that is expected to consolidate civil society. The capacities the project aims to transfer or foster are for a good part relational as well: to become accountable, to engage in contracts, to learn, to act as citizens, responsible parents, to claim rights, etc. Some relationships have been emphasized — such as contracts, engagement, participation, communication, etc. — while others have received almost no consideration — such as indebtedness, reciprocity, domination and power.

The FSD project, however, did not happen in a vacuum. As most development projects, it could be described as a time-bound and contextualized *encounter* between the French embassy, its team, including experts and diplomats, with their overall embeddedness in convictions, their own history, etc.; and organizations, CSOs and people, with their own representations, expectation, and history. It took place within a context where, after four decades of foreign interventions, development had been “mainstreamed” as an idea and a *world*, almost a new *cosmogony*: even in the most remote mountainous areas, villagers today have some representation of what “development” means. They relate it to the global sphere, to the state, to Westerners driving around in their SUVs, or to other factors and images. They have developed expectations, attitudes, some kind of practical knowledge about it. The NGOs involved in the French FSD projects — and the individuals who are engaged with them also have their own history, experience and preferences related to the promotion of civil society and the improvement of women’s livelihoods. For some of them, the most stable and determined, French FSD support is merely a small milestone in their thrust and experience. For others, relatively new and dependent upon a few funding sources, it has had more significance.

The project, considered as a specific *setting*, or *stage*, induces the individuals included or in contact with it to act “as” (project director, beneficiary, intermediary...), that is to perform social roles pertaining

to a collective organization endowed with its own referential and language, but related to the other roles and positions the same individuals occupy in other settings of their life. My analysis postulates that the relations generated — or reinforced, institutionalized — by the project transform some of the identities and roles individuals perform in their own environment, while focusing only on the identities and roles that fit into the project. Positions and roles implemented and reinforced through the relational structure of the project, however, interlock with positions and roles borne by individuals and groups in society. Whether it produces social transformation or rather consolidates social inequalities would need a large-scope anthropological study.

Language, as a common referential and as a significant relational tool, thus appears as a major ingredient of continuity and change, brought about by development initiatives. It supplies a framework for unifying representations, categories and norms for action, as well as a sign of mutual recognition for “insiders”, who master English and its development terminology. Through a process of institutionalization and normalization, language provides landmarks for what is desirable across political and ideological divisions. By *naming* positions, it distributes social roles and attributes places that stabilize the relational system of development projects.

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Website: <http://www.cefas.com.ye>

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ISBN 978-2-909194-31-8

Dar al-Kutub, Sanaa, N° 1137/2011

Printing: ○Al-Hibshi for Modern Offset Printing, Sanaa

CENTRE FRANÇAIS  
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