

Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Palestinian Cooperatives: Reality and Challenges

"Cooperatives are a reminder to the international community that it is possible to pursue both economic viability and social responsibility. *“United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon*¹

Women’s participation in the economy is important for equality of opportunity, improved human capability, and access to and control of resources, and therefore their empowerment in both the public and private spheres. Despite the relatively long history of the Palestinian cooperative movement, women’s participation in cooperatives is relatively nascent. Most women cooperatives have been established after 2000 as a result of externally motivated factors including donors’ policies and strategies to fund the development sector. Awareness is therefore still limited regarding local communities’ own self-interest, governance and cooperation principles as well as cooperative project ideas susceptible to display the productive capacities of women on a large scale. Although there is growing acknowledgment of the role of women in the Palestinian cooperative movement, women are still unable to release their ample potentials due to the existence of numerous socio-economic, cultural and institutional challenges. These challenges hinder their extensive participation and integration in the overall cooperative movement. Thus tackling such challenges is considered crucial when considering mainstreaming gender equality in Palestinian cooperatives.

¹ <http://social.un.org/coopsyear/>

This research project aims to examine the gender dynamics in Palestinian cooperatives in the West Bank and therefore the extent these cooperatives empower women economically and socially at community level. It will also further determine the challenges to women's participation in the existing Palestinian cooperatives, identifying concrete recommendations and strategies. How do these processes play out in looking at community-based gender development cooperatives in Palestine? This will be carried out through a qualitative research on the efforts of Palestinian cooperatives, whose mission is to improve the economic, social and political conditions of rural Palestinian women. In-depth interviews and semi structured interviews have been held with feminist activists; practitioners; policy makers and cooperatives members at community level.

This paper is then intended to contribute to the literature on gender empowerment through community development. Additionally, we are critically exploring how the features of the cooperative business model enhance these community development initiatives.

Further, the paper is also intended to assist the goals of the 2012 UN International Year of Cooperatives, namely by raising awareness of cooperative's empowerment features, and inform policymakers of the efficacy in utilizing cooperatives in their policymaking to impact lasting social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past experience confirmed the importance and the possibility of women's involvement in the productive process through their own cooperatives. Institutions such as cooperatives contribute to build civil society and the capacity for sustained social struggle against women's

marginalization. They have been linked to empowering marginalized populations, particularly women within patriarchal systems. In other words, cooperatives are seen as institutions which can challenge existing social structures. Cooperatives, by this interpretation, are community development institutions. My analysis is located in community development frameworks. It also builds upon theoretical developments within the gender and development (GAD) movement.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN PATRIARCHICAL

Community is the smallest emanation of a complete social system (Wilkinson, 1991). Whereas a religious group or a circle of business developers is indeed a social field or system, it is incomplete in that the interests of the group members are narrow and their resources tied to that narrow interest. A social field alone cannot provide for the broad needs of a rooted, local population.

A community or community-social field is a complete social system of interconnect social fields spanning a broad array of interests but come together spontaneously in order to meet the everyday needs of people locally through overlapping, ordered interactions. While the concept of community has been challenged in the literature (Christenson, 1989), there is no doubt that people continue to be rooted to a locality due to the necessities of everyday life (need for stable shelter, employment, food, and human interaction).

Community is in and of itself *not* a panacea; community can be a nurturing, collective experience, but can also reproduce cultural prejudices, oppression, and bolster an elite class. In this manner, community can become monocentric (hegemonic), fostering centralizing tendencies that allow for elite capture or the crowding out of alternatives to the status quo; Pierre Bourdieu called this cultural reproduction process “cultural inculcation,” a process in which forms of

capital (social, symbolic and economic capital) interact reproduce themselves, reinforcing the status quo.

Development of the community is then an intentional endeavor to change the existing social structure. Community development is a deliberate effort to create the necessary conditions for alternative institutional arrangements to flourish and challenge the dominant system (the public choice line of thinking refers to this counter-hegemony as polycentrism, or the tendency of a system to allow for multiple centers of power). Even if a community development initiative does not meet its purported ends, the mere act of *trying* to change the system through development is itself a success; the other option is to leave the existing system unchallenged and in power, a non-started for advocates of social change and justice.

COOPERATIVES AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Cooperatives, theoretically, institutionalize *community development*, inculcating those who participate in the cooperative's operations and governance with socially oriented (as opposed to materially) values.² Cooperatives are predicated on the seven cooperative principles. Principles one through five institutionalize democratic governance, voluntary participation, autonomy, and an orientation toward the needs of the membership (the membership being those who use and own the cooperative). In community development terms, this describes an institution with a solidarity or mutual aid emphasis amongst its member-ownership, creating strong bonds amongst the central stakeholders.

² whereas Bourdieu saw the interactive process amongst the forms of capital as strengthening the elite classes in a downward spiral of cultural inculcation, community development scholars from Iowa State University (Emery & Flora) see the desired process of development as capturing the cultural inculcation process into an empowering spiraling up process .

From a social movement perspective, principles six and seven are critical to understanding to movement orientation of cooperatives. Principle six, cooperation amongst cooperatives, ascertains that it is the duty of every cooperative to understand its strength is in working with other cooperatives to pool resources, build additional and complimentary cooperatives, and foster a larger counter-economy. In the United State, Britain, Canada, Italy and Spain, cooperatives oftentimes federate to share best practices in terms of governance and operations, but also to pool resources to enhance cooperative business development and stave off threats to the cooperative business model (credit union associations claim they are oftentimes under attack by investor-owned banks who seek to use government regulation to stifle the positive social impacts of cooperative banking model).

Principle seven, concern for community, again orients the cooperative membership to look outside the boundaries of the institution itself. Cooperatives are engaged in strengthening their autonomous institutions first through working within the membership and the cooperative sector at large. But with this institutional capacity in order, they further strengthen themselves and their community through voluntary community interaction. In social networking terms, the cooperative is, at least in theory, bridging network clusters to build a complete counter-economy that has the capacity to challenge the status quo.

Taken as a whole, the cooperative principles tie the member-designated *outcomes* of the cooperative to the operations, making cooperatives undecidedly anti-Machiavellian institutions in that the means *are not* separable from the ends. Cooperatives are then inherently designed to avoid a narrow focus, and are indeed meant to sustain social struggle and bring about lasting change through this social systems orientation.

Cooperatives then avoid many of the monocentric tendencies of neo-liberal enterprise, such as transnational corporations and even oppressive government.

The cooperative orientation is one in which values are not captured for capital accumulation, but social empowerment. While cooperatives have been assessed broadly from an economy perspective, a robust socio-institutional analytical perspective has yet to be undertaken. Yes, the principled orientation and its polycentric features (the fostering of multiple centers of power) appear egalitarian and community-oriented, but what does the literature tell us about the cooperative business model? How do cooperatives vary across cultural contexts? What do we know about the market influence on cooperatives across their diverse industrial sectors (finance, agrifoods, utilities, etc.) and the regulatory impacts of extra-local institutions such as federations, associations, government, and other political pressure groups? Indeed the literature is relatively scant on these questions, particularly from a community development or public economic perspective.

This paper is intended to contribute to the literature on cooperative entrepreneurship and its capacity to impact lasting social change.

Gender and Development:

My research also builds upon theoretical developments within the gender and development (GAD) movement which has focused on gender power relations. (Kabeer 1994) argues that Gender is not just about women and men, but about their power relations and that a relational analysis of gender inequalities within the socio- economic development process has far reaching implications. A gender analysis can be used to understand and address the problems of women's subordination by looking at the institutionalized basis of male power and privilege.

Kandiyoti (1996) describes gender theory in the Middle East as having been intensely local, grappling with regionally based histories and specificities. She suggests that feminist thought and scholarship in the Middle East has gone through three phases: first, post-colonial state formation where the issues of women's position were articulated through nationalism; second, modernization and development, which led to a conflict between traditional and modern views of the role of women in society; and third, dialogues within feminism, with selective and uneven incorporation of concepts of feminist theory into Middle Eastern Studies.

Finally, the geographical isolation of some rural communities, the unavailability of efficient and effective transportation systems between them as well as Israeli movement restriction measures (checkpoints, the Wall, and curfews) limit women's access to many places, key resources, business support programmes as well as market opportunities. Altogether, these factors negatively impact cooperative women's ability to market their products, network with other organizations and use available capacity building tools. Such geographical fragmentation and inaccessibility of a number of areas thus make it difficult to venture into efficient market integration and economic development.

Molyneux (1985) describes how women, while sharing common interests, do not share a consensus about the scope and goal of gender interests. She suggests that movements for women's development and gender equity are constructed around practical and strategic interests. There are different focuses to development depending on which of these interests is emphasized.

There has been a comprehensive treatment of the issue of women's participation in the employment, which has looked at both the formal labor market (Hammami, 1997; UNCTAD 1993, Siniora, 1989, Rockwell 1984) and in the informal sector (Lang & Mohanna, 1992, Abdo,

1995). The connection of my project is how PARC, PAWC contribute to empower rural women in rural areas economically and socially through their women's cooperatives and their activities.

METHODOLOGY

A familiar argument within gender research literature is that academic work has a strong male bias. Hammersley (1992) admits gender is a crucial issue in all areas of social life and must be taken into account in any analysis and stresses the need to address women's lives and experiences in their own terms to create a theory grounded in the actual experience and language of women. Kabeer (1994) also contributes to this debate. She points out that our knowledge of the world is constructed rather than discovered. Therefore, it is more likely to be shaped and limited by the location of the knower in the world. According to Kabeer (1994), our current methodologies have helped to produce the skewed development practices of the past decades. Knowledge generated by excluded groups would help to transform development through extending it to take account of what has hitherto been excluded.

Our research methodology, therefore, should allow for a gender focus. Kabeer (1994), and Crawley (1998) argue that qualitative methods (such as ethnography and participant observation) will allow the researcher to better engage with the research subjects, allowing them to analyze their own condition with the help of the researcher. Thus, the researcher to give voice to the excluded groups thus allows her to express different ways of knowing.

Thus, I conducted a six-month ethnographic case study of two prominent and well established Palestinian grassroots NGOs that have been working in the agriculture sector for more than 20 years in West Bank: PARC (Palestinian Agriculture Relief Committees); and PAWC (Palestinian Agriculture Working Committees). The mission of these grassroots NGOs is to enhance the economic, social and political conditions of Palestinian women living in the countryside through women's cooperatives and community based organizations (BBOs), and to assist in building their capacity to rights and interests at variety of levels.

This case study involved the following specific actions: reviews and content analysis of these organization's annual reports; literature review also entail the revision of published reports about the situation of women in cooperative movement at local, regional, and international level; secondary sources of information reflecting on the specific situation of women in Palestinian cooperatives as it relates to the overall socio-economic and cultural challenges and opportunities they face in their society; in depth individual interviews with policy makers, practitioners and cooperatives members; group discussion; and participant observation at local community levels- at cooperatives such as greenhouse cooperative, food processing cooperative at " South side of West Bank" and credit and savings cooperative in Saida (North side of West Bank).

I gathered reports and documents about cooperatives written by employees at PARC's, and PAWC's headquarters in Ramallah. I also additionally, conducted semi-structured interviews with women activists who are experts in gender issues and Palestinian Cooperatives in Palestine.

I engaged in participant observation at the women's cooperatives. I attended two main activities that were hosted by the research subjects. The first one was a general meeting at one of women's cooperative at "food processing cooperative" and a demonstration at "greenhouse cooperative"

in Soreef” South side of West Banks”. I also conducted individual in-depth interviews with mid-level PARC, PAWC practitioners who work directly with women’s cooperatives in different districts of Tulkarim, (the northern West Bank), Ramallah (the middle of West bank), and Hebron, (the southern side of West bank). My interviews focused on the practitioner’s conceptualization of their methods at the local community level, what guides them in these methods, their approaches and attitudes, and to gain a deeper understanding of how these practitioners can transmit the grassroots organization policies and strategies through community activities and actions.

I also interviewed community members at three different women’s cooperatives. I engaged in participant observation attending their meetings and activities at three women’s cooperatives in two different villages at two districts in West- Bank. One was a women cooperative in Soreef in Hebron and the other was in Saida in Tulkarim. My interviews in these cooperatives focused on what capacities cooperatives have, and to what extent they can be employed, transmitting these capacities into actions at community level.

The Institutional Analysis and Development framework orients researchers toward a systems approach.

Three levels of inductive, iterative analysis.

DISCUSSION

Although there is growing acknowledgment of the role of women in the Palestinian cooperative movement, women are still unable to release their ample potentials due to the existence of numerous socio-economic, cultural and institutional challenges. These challenges hinder their extensive participation and integration in the overall cooperative movement, and tackling such challenges is considered crucial when considering mainstreaming gender equality in Palestinian cooperatives.

Numerous cultural, socio-economic and organizational challenges impede effective mainstreaming of gender equality in Palestinian cooperatives. Women have low educational attainment, minimal income levels, as well as less access and control over their savings and assets. The fact that laws, in particular legislation on inheritance, are not protective of the rights of women to own land and in some areas prohibit women inheritance of land make it extremely difficult to independently sustain agricultural economic enterprises. In women's cooperatives, women would generally lack the growth-enhancing financial and physical resources to contribute to their cooperatives on the long run. In the end, a low education level and lack of common resources remain key impediments to the development of women cooperatives and to women's economic advancement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGS). This situation is worsened by patriarchal norms and rigid gender stereotypes regarding the role of women that hinders gender mainstreaming approaches in Palestinian cooperatives as well as women's full participation in cooperatives and ability to provide efficient contributions.

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