

# *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East.*

*Edited by : Chatty, Dawn and Annika Rabo.  
Oxford Internatianol Publishers Ltd. 1997.  
Reviewed by Lina Alameddine*

If you are looking for a light, fictional book that will allow your imagination to meander slowly from chapter to chapter, then perhaps this is not the book for you. Instead, **Organizing Women** offers an in depth exploration of the nature of both formal and informal women's groups in the Middle East. This work aims to reveal the essence of women coming together for a particular cause, whether it is in a formal setting, or simply out of mere social circumstances.

**Organizing Women** begins with a thorough investigation of the basic reasons for which women's groups in the Middle East have been poorly documented. In general, the Middle East as a region has not been welcoming to any First World women initiated projects. There exists a specific antagonism between the Middle East and the West. The latter "sees men from the Middle East as suppressing and secluding their women and the Middle Easterner underlines the immorality of women in the West." This lack of communication and understanding on both sides has rendered it more difficult for groups in the Middle Eastern region to receive international recognition and funding.

Dawn Chatty, one of the editors of **Organizing Women**, asserts that the purpose of this book is "to explore the multiplicity of issues and constraints that women face when trying to organize themselves in the Middle East." (p.8). The issues touched upon are addressed, analyzed, and interpreted in different ways in each chapter. The contributors of **Organizing Women** make no claim to present a homogenous uniform view on the historical, current, and future possibilities of Middle Eastern women's groups. While each researcher differs in her mode of question and analysis, the contributions emerge as "united in their commitment to present women in the Middle East as active agents." (p.8). Hence, another purpose of this book "is to document case studies from the Middle East showing that despite constraints women do form groups or act collectively for their interests." (p8).

In a culture where women have been perceived first and foremost as wives and mothers, their formation into groups can only be perceived as acceptable when they conform to the social and cultural codes. However, this book attests to the fact that women have been forming into groups despite the constraints of state and culture, and gives us thorough and detailed information of both formal and informal women's groups throughout the Middle Eastern region. It also touches upon the rise and role of NGO's and PVO's, and the quality of female activity within these groups, and from all socio-economic perspectives.

Egypt is a specific example of a country where the contemporary economic order has little need for female participation in the public sphere. As a consequence, women face greater and more powerful opposition and constraints from the State when forming into groups. Furthermore, despite the urgent need for women to organize themselves for their cause, prospects remain limited in face of the law "which restricts the freedom of citizens (male and female), to form independent organizations." (p.164) The law grants the government a controlling hold over establishing, managing, financing, and/or terminating any Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO's), which do not abide by detailed regulations of the Ministry of Social Affairs. In the chapter entitled "Women's Group Formation in Egypt," Shahida El-Baz goes through and analyses all the stifling conditions facing women groups, which range from rural/urban disparities to legal constraints.

The contributors of **Organizing Women** are sensitive and thorough in highlighting many existing differences among the broad social category of Middle Eastern women. One can base these essential differences on religious, political or class affiliation, as well as the unequal access to social, economic, and political opportunities. In addition, the rural-urban disparity is of consequential importance. It is impossible to discuss Middle Eastern women as one homogeneous category, and the contributors of **Organizing Women** have managed to deal with these various differences.

The contributing authors of **Organizing Women** take the reader on an adventurous joy ride through the intricate weaving of female groupings in the Middle Eastern region. Just as you begin to feel comfortable with the situation of female group activity in Oman, you are thrown into the adverse situation of Egyptian women, and soon after that, you are comparing "Female Associational Patterns in Senegal and Morocco". However, despite the variety of themes and issues addressed, **Organizing Women** achieves its central objective of informing the reader of the nature of the relationship between both women and the state, as well as men and the state, and how they, in turn affect women groups.