

EMPOWERING JUSTICE FROM BELOW: THE ROLE OF GRASSROOTS CIVIL SOCIETY IN ALGERIA

تعزيز العدالة من القاعدة: دور المجتمع المدني المحلي في الجزائر

Zakia Setti

École des Hautes Études Commerciales, Alger, Algeria

zsetti@gmail.com

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ملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة إسهامات منظمات المجتمع المدني في تحقيق العدالة الاجتماعية في الجزائر، مع التركيز على جمعية نور للمرأة والأسرة والطفل كدراسة حالة. يستند البحث إلى أطر نظرية سوسيولوجية تشمل نظرية رأس المال الاجتماعي، ومقاربة أمارتيا سن للقدرات، والوظيفية البنائية، حيث تعتمد على منهجية كيفية (مقابلات، ملاحظة مشاركة، تحليل وثائق) لتقييم برامج الجمعية في الدعم القانوني، التمكين الاقتصادي، وبناء القدرات المجتمعية. تكشف النتائج أن جمعية نور تمكن النساء المهشّات من خلال التدريب المهني، القروض الصغيرة، والدعم القانوني، مما يعيد تشكيل الأدوار الاقتصادية القائمة على النوع الاجتماعي ويعزز التماسك الاجتماعي. ومع ذلك، تواجه الجمعية تحديات بنيوية مثل عدم استقرار التمويل، القيود القانونية، والمقاومة الثقافية التي تحدّ من فعاليتها. تختتم الدراسة بتوصيات لتعزيز استدامة منظمات المجتمع المدني، تشمل تنويع مصادر التمويل، الدعوة لتعديلات قانونية، وشراكات مع المؤسسات الحكومية. من خلال الجمع بين النظرية والتطبيق، يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على إمكانية التدخلات المحلية للمجتمع المدني في معالجة اللامساواة الهيكلية في ظل القيود السوسيو سياسية الجزائرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

المجتمع المدني، العدالة الاجتماعية، التمكين الاقتصادي، الإدماج الاجتماعي، الجزائر.

Abstract:

This article explores the complex and evolving relationship between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the promotion of social justice values in Algeria, focusing on the Noor Association for Women, Family, and Children as a case study. Grounded in sociological theories—including Social Capital Theory, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, and Structural-Functionalism—the research employs qualitative methods (interviews, participant observation, and document analysis) to evaluate the association's programs in legal aid, economic empowerment, and community capacity-building. Findings reveal that Noor Association empowers vulnerable women through vocational training, microloans, and legal support, thereby reshaping gendered economic roles and strengthening social cohesion. However, structural challenges such as funding instability, restrictive legal frameworks, and cultural resistance hinder its impact. The study concludes with recommendations to enhance CSO sustainability, including diversified funding, legal advocacy, and partnerships with state institutions. By bridging theory and practice, this research underscores the potential of localized civil society interventions to address systemic inequalities while navigating Algeria's socio-political constraints.

Keywords:

Civil Society; Social Justice; Economic Empowerment; Social Inclusion, Algeria

1. INTRODUCTION:

Social justice is a foundational concept in both sociology and political thought, emphasizing fairness, equal opportunities, and the equitable distribution of resources. It plays a vital role in fostering stable and sustainable societies. Achieving social justice requires inclusive economic and political participation, alongside institutional mechanisms that protect rights and promote the inclusion of marginalized groups.

In this context, civil society emerges as a key actor in advancing social justice by complementing state efforts. Through service provision, advocacy, and community mobilization, civil society organizations (CSOs) address policy gaps, empower individuals, and strengthen social cohesion. However, their effectiveness depends on factors such as financial sustainability, autonomy, and their ability to navigate socio-political change.

In Algeria, as in many developing countries, persistent challenges such as unemployment and socioeconomic inequality have driven the growth of CSOs. These organizations play an increasingly important role in development and inclusion efforts, particularly through programs targeting economic empowerment, legal aid, and community resilience. While a growing body of literature highlights the role of CSOs in service provision or democratization, little empirical research investigates how grassroots CSOs operationalize principles of social justice in the Algerian context. This study addresses this gap by examining how a localized association contributes to justice, not only through service delivery but by expanding capabilities, and resisting structural exclusions. In doing so, it builds on empirical studies on Algerian civil society (2006، ليندة، 2019، زروقي، Bouanani & Boualem, 2024) which have primarily focused on policy or organizational dynamics, without analyzing the lived experiences of beneficiaries or theoretical implications.

This study seeks to explore the following research questions:

- 1. *How do civil society organizations contribute to social justice in Algeria?*
- 2. *What structural and socio-political challenges constrain their impact?*

This study aims to:

- a. Analyse the role of civil society in promoting social justice, through relevant sociological theories.
- b. Assess the effectiveness of civil society initiatives via a case study of the Noor Association.
- c. Identify the structural and societal barriers that hinder CSO impact and propose strategies for strengthening their role.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates theoretical analysis with field-based qualitative research, including interviews with staff and beneficiaries. This enables a grounded understanding of how CSOs operate in the Algerian context and how they interact with marginalized populations. By focusing on the *Noor Association for Women, Family, and Children*, whose localized interventions—vocational training, legal support, and artisan cooperatives—, the study contributes to the broader academic debate on civil society’s potential in promoting social justice and sustainable development.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

2.1 - Social Justice: Concept and Theoretical Approaches

Social justice is a multidimensional concept that encompasses economic, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions. It goes beyond mere redistribution of wealth to include equal opportunity, institutional representation, cultural recognition, and active participation in shaping social life (Fraser, 1997; Sen, 2009). While earlier interpretations in the 19th century focused primarily on economic equality, contemporary understandings incorporate identity politics, participatory governance, and recognition of marginalized groups.

Modern scholarship identifies three interrelated dimensions of social justice: First, *redistributive justice*, which addresses the fair allocation of material resources and opportunities. Second, *political empowerment*, ensuring equitable participation and representation in decision-making processes. Finally, *cultural and social recognition*, which affirms diverse identities and challenges systemic discrimination.

Various theoretical approaches have enriched the debate. John Rawls (1971) argued that justice entails equal basic liberties for all and justified social inequalities only when they benefit the least advantaged—a view critiqued for its limited engagement with identity-based and cultural injustices. Nancy Fraser (1997) extended the discussion by integrating the principle of *recognition*, emphasizing the need to address both economic and symbolic injustices.

The *capabilities approach*, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (1993), shifts the focus from resource distribution to the actual freedoms individuals have to live lives they value. Justice, in this view, requires expanding people’s real capabilities to function and flourish. A just society thus not only allocates resources but also fosters the conditions that allow people to utilize them meaningfully.

Recent contributions further emphasize *relational justice* - highlighting power relations, institutional biases, and historical exclusions (Lister, 2013; Bohman, 2007). This broader view insists that social justice is as much about transforming social relationships and structures as it is about material redistribution.

2.2- Civil Society: Concept, Theoretical Perspectives, and Debates on Social Justice

Civil society is a foundational concept in the social and political sciences, commonly understood as a sphere of autonomous organizations that operate independently of both the state and the market. These entities—ranging from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and trade unions to social movements, charitable associations, and grassroots initiatives—play a critical role in advancing the public interest, defending rights, and fostering social cohesion and equity (Boje, 2021; Lieberman, 1975; Edwards, 2014). Historically rooted in classical philosophical thought, the concept of civil society has evolved into a key analytical framework in contemporary debates on democratic governance, social accountability, and sustainable development. Beyond its structural diversity, civil society represents a dynamic and pluralistic arena where competing interests, ideologies, and identities converge. It functions simultaneously as a site of contestation and as an engine of progressive change. Civil society actors not only provide services and support to marginalized communities but also engage in advocacy, symbolic resistance, and the reconfiguration of dominant power relations.

Various sociological theories offer distinct yet complementary lenses for analysing the complex relationship between civil society and social justice. From a *structural-functionalist* perspective, notably that of Talcott Parsons (1951), civil society contributes to societal stability by complementing state functions and supporting vulnerable populations. However, critics such as Giddens (1984) caution that this perspective risks overlooking civil society’s role in reproducing existing power hierarchies and social norms. In contrast, *conflict theory*, particularly as developed by Marx (1867) and Gramsci (1971), portrays civil society as a contested space where hegemonic forces seek to maintain dominance, but where subaltern groups can also organize, resist, and articulate emancipatory projects. This critical view highlights civil society’s dual potential as both a tool of domination and a platform for transformative action.

Social capital theory, notably associated with Putnam (1993), shifts the focus toward the relational dimensions of civil society. It emphasizes the importance of networks, trust, and civic engagement in generating social cohesion and democratic participation. While valuable, this approach has been critiqued for potentially obscuring deeper structural inequalities if not grounded in a broader critique of power and exclusion. *Critical theory*, particularly Habermas’ (1989) conception of the public sphere, underscores the communicative function of civil society. It views civil society as a deliberative space that enables citizens to debate, critique, and influence state action. Yet, the effectiveness of this public sphere remains contingent upon the openness of political institutions and the inclusivity of discourse (Cohen & Arato, 1992). Finally, the *capabilities approach*, developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000), reframes civil society’s role in terms of individual empowerment and substantive freedoms. From this perspective, civil society contributes to social justice by expanding people’s real opportunities for education, health, livelihoods, and meaningful participation. However, the transformative potential of such efforts is often constrained by structural barriers and resource limitations.

In sum, the relationship between civil society and social justice is complex, context-specific, and shaped by broader political and economic forces. While civil society can serve as a powerful mechanism for inclusion, empowerment, and reform, it can also be co-opted by dominant actors or rendered ineffective by systemic constraints. A comprehensive assessment of civil society’s role in advancing social justice therefore requires an integrated analytical approach—one that considers structural conditions with individual empowerment, while also accounting for civil society’s autonomy, its influence on policymaking, and its ability to confront exclusion and systemic inequality.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This section introduces the methodology and case study that guide this research. By focusing on the Noor Association for Women, Family, and Children in Algeria, the study provides a grounded analysis of how civil society interventions contribute to social justice, particularly in contexts marked by structural inequality, limited state support, and gendered vulnerabilities.

This study adopts a *qualitative case study approach*, designed to explore the role of civil society in promoting social justice through a detailed examination of the Noor Association for Women, Family, and Children. Given the research aim—understanding how localized civil society initiatives address structural inequalities and enhance the capabilities of marginalized groups—qualitative methods provide a

valuable lens for capturing lived experiences, organizational strategies, and social impact in context. A *case study's methodology* was selected for its capacity to offer in-depth, context-rich insights into complex social phenomena (Yin, 2009). The Noor Association was chosen purposively due to its commitment to social justice, and its work with vulnerable populations. Its multifaceted programs—ranging from legal and psychological support to vocational training—make it a compelling example of grassroots civil society engagement. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement with Noor Association’s programs. A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including 4 staff members, 6 beneficiaries (all women who had participated in vocational or legal aid programs for a minimum of three months). This selection ensured a holistic view of the association’s operations and impact.

Data collection spanned over a two-month period from May to June 2024, with non-daily visits scheduled according to the availability of participants and program activities. Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 to 60 minutes, followed a guide organized around three thematic axes: economic empowerment, legal advocacy, and community engagement. Participant observation was carried out during vocational workshops and legal aid using a simplified observation grid focused on key aspects of interaction and facilitation. Notes were taken during sessions to capture relevant dynamics. Additionally, internal reports, policy documents, and promotional materials were reviewed to triangulate findings.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process, following the steps outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This involved identifying key themes that reflect the association’s contributions to social justice. These themes were then reviewed and contextualized within the theoretical framework of the study to ensure the validity and reliability of the results.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Participants’ anonymity was maintained throughout the study. The research adhered to ethical standards for social research, ensuring respect, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. This methodological approach enables a grounded understanding of how a civil society organization engages with the structural and relational dimensions of social justice. The following section presents the case study findings, structured around key areas of intervention and their implications for theory and practice.

4. CASE STUDY: NOOR ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN, FAMILY, AND CHILDREN

The Noor Association for Women, Family, and Children, established in 2019, operates as a grassroots civil society organization in Algiers, Algeria. Its mission is to empower vulnerable women and families by addressing both immediate needs and long-term structural inequalities. The association’s approach is multidimensional, combining social services, legal advocacy, education, and economic empowerment. This case study draws on qualitative fieldwork to illustrate how Noor’s interventions operationalize principles of social justice in the Algerian context.

4.1. Economic Empowerment and Redistributive Justice

One of the core pillars of Noor’s strategy is economic empowerment. Among the Noor Association’s flagship initiatives in economic empowerment is the *"Kefaf" Project*, whose name translates to *"self-sufficiency with dignity."* This program exemplifies how civil society can create pathways for vulnerable women—particularly homemakers, artisans, and small-scale producers—to move from economic dependency to autonomy.

The *Kefaf project* provides vocational training, training in areas such as pastry, culinary arts, artisanal crafts, financial support, and technical mentorship, often culminating in the creation of women-led cooperatives. One participant shared: *"I never imagined I could contribute to my family’s income. Now I am teaching others what I’ve learned."* Another participant noted: *"Before, I relied entirely on my husband. Now I can support my children and myself. I feel stronger, more confident."*

Through these programs Noor association facilitates microcredit schemes and connects women with local markets, reinforcing both economic resilience and social recognition. It helps women to *forge new identities* as producers, entrepreneurs, and community contributors. Several women emphasized how the association helped them reconnect with their sense of purpose. *"I discovered I had value beyond the home. I never thought someone like me could start a business,"* shared a former homemaker who now runs a small cooperative with other trainees.

4.2. Legal and Psychological Support: Addressing Structural Vulnerabilities

Another crucial domain of intervention involves legal assistance and psychosocial support for women facing domestic violence, legal insecurity, or social marginalization. The Noor Association offers legal consultations, accompaniment to court proceedings, and partnerships with local lawyers and psychologists. These services contribute to justice not only in a legal sense but also in reinforcing agency and dignity among beneficiaries.

The presence of a safe, supportive space was repeatedly emphasized during interviews. Women described the center as “a second home” where they are “seen and heard”, underscoring the role of civil society in fostering a culture of recognition and solidarity. A legal counselor working at Noor explained: *“Many women don’t know they have rights. Our first task is to inform them, then to accompany them — emotionally and legally — through the process.”* One woman said: *“I realized I wasn’t alone, “I met other women who understood what I had lived through.”*

4.3. Promoting Family Stability and Educational Support Through Community Engagement

The Noor Association’s work extends beyond material assistance to encompass *transformative educational and awareness-raising initiatives* aimed at strengthening families and promoting community resilience. Among its core programs are *family education workshops* that foster healthy intra-family relationships, and *free academic support sessions* that respond to educational inequalities.

The family education workshops address vital themes such as *positive parenting*, and *child protection*, particularly in the face of risks posed by digital media. By equipping parents with tools to navigate contemporary parenting challenges—like managing screen time, understanding cyber risks, and maintaining open communication—Noor reaffirms the family's role as a *protective and cohesive social unit*.

These workshops are designed to *reshape traditional parenting practices* and align them with the realities of modern socio-economic life. Through collective discussions, practical advice, and emotional support, families are encouraged to adopt *non-violent discipline*, *digital literacy*, and *active listening* strategies. that nurture stronger, more adaptive family dynamics. As one participant noted, *“I realized that raising children today requires not just love, but understanding their world.”* Another participant reflected, *“These sessions helped me understand how to connect with my children instead of just controlling them. I feel closer to them now.”*

In parallel, Noor implements *free academic support programs* targeting students at various educational levels. These sessions, often led by volunteers and held in community centers, provide assistance in subjects like math, science, and languages. By alleviating barriers to quality education—especially for students from under-resourced families—these initiatives reinforce *social equity* and the right to education as a key pillar of justice.

4.4. Challenges and Structural Constraints

Despite its impact, the Noor Association operates under significant constraints. Limited funding, bureaucratic hurdles, and ambiguous legal recognition for associations in Algeria pose ongoing challenges. Staff members reported difficulties securing sustainable financing and navigating inconsistent cooperation with public institutions. These barriers illustrate the tension between grassroots activism and state-civil society dynamics, especially in contexts where civic space is tightly regulated.

Nevertheless, the association’s adaptive strategies—such as building local partnerships, leveraging volunteer networks, and emphasizing cultural legitimacy—highlight the resilience and creativity of civil society actors in challenging environments.

5. DISCUSSION

The case of the Noor Association for Women, Family, and Children illuminates the complex and multifaceted role that civil society organizations (CSOs) can play in advancing social justice in Algeria. The association’s initiatives reflect a deeply embedded commitment to addressing both the material and symbolic dimensions of injustice, consistent with Fraser’s triadic model of social justice—redistribution, recognition, and representation—as well as with the capabilities approach developed by Sen and Nussbaum.

Noor’s *economic empowerment programs*, particularly the *Kefaf Project*, operationalize redistributive justice by equipping marginalized women with vocational skills, access to microcredit, and pathways into local markets. These efforts do more than provide income; they reconfigure gendered power relations by fostering autonomy, confidence, and social recognition. In this regard, Noor’s interventions exemplify how civil society can function not only as a provider of services but also as a space for identity transformation and agency-building—central fundamentals of the capabilities approach.

The provision of *legal and psychosocial support* extends the association’s reach into the domain of structural vulnerability. By offering legal aid and safe communal spaces, Noor challenges the invisibility of domestic violence and empowers women to claim their rights. These practices resonate with critical theory’s emphasis on civil society as a communicative and oppositional space that can counter hegemonic narratives and expose structural inequalities. The testimonies of women who “discovered they had rights” reflect the process of consciousness-raising, which is foundational to transformative justice.

In its *family education and academic support programs*, Noor advances a preventive and pedagogical form of social justice. By promoting positive parenting, child protection, and access to education, the association not only addresses immediate social needs but also contributes to long-term community resilience. These initiatives reflect a structural functionalist perspective by reinforcing family cohesion and social stability, while simultaneously challenging outdated patriarchal norms and educational disparities. The emphasis on relational dynamics—between parents and children, and among community members—also speaks to the importance of social capital in fostering trust and shared responsibility.

However, the Noor Association’s work is constrained by *systemic limitations*: precarious funding, legal ambiguities, and bureaucratic hurdles. These challenges highlight the ambivalent nature of civil society in Algeria, which operates in a constrained civic space where autonomy is often compromised. From a conflict theory perspective, this illustrates how state institutions may simultaneously rely on and seek to regulate grassroots actors, maintaining control over the boundaries of civic engagement. Yet Noor’s adaptive strategies—such as emphasizing cultural legitimacy, mobilizing volunteerism, and forging local partnerships—demonstrate how civil society actors can creatively navigate structural constraints.

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of civil society’s role in promoting social justice—one that considers both its empowering potential and the limits imposed by broader socio-political dynamics. The Noor Association serves as a compelling example of how social justice can be pursued through community-based, multidimensional action, rooted in local realities yet informed by universal rights-based frameworks.

6. CONCLUSION:

This study has explored how the Noor Association for Women, Family, and Children exemplifies the potential of grassroots civil society organizations to advance social justice in contemporary Algeria. Through a multidimensional approach that encompasses economic empowerment, legal advocacy, psychosocial support, and educational initiatives, Noor addresses both the material conditions and symbolic injustices that shape women’s and families’ lives. Drawing on empirical fieldwork and informed by theoretical lenses such as the capabilities approach, Nancy Fraser’s model of justice, and critical perspectives on civil society, the analysis has shown how community-based organizations can become pivotal actors

in transforming lived experiences of marginalization into pathways for agency, resilience, and empowerment.

Noor’s work illustrates that social justice is not a singular objective but a layered process that requires sustained engagement with structural, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions of inequality. Whether through enabling women to achieve economic self-sufficiency, supporting survivors of violence in reclaiming their dignity, or reshaping familial relationships through education and dialogue, the association's interventions operate at the intersection of redistribution, recognition, and representation. These efforts demonstrate that civil society can serve as both a buffer and a bridge—mitigating the effects of state shortcomings while also generating new forms of solidarity and civic participation from below.

At the same time, the challenges Noor faces—ranging from unstable funding and limited legal recognition to restricted civic space—reflect the structural constraints that often shape the terrain on which civil society must operate. These obstacles underscore the need for more enabling institutional environments that recognize and support the critical work of grassroots actors in fostering social cohesion, equity, and democratic engagement.

Ultimately, the case of the Noor Association invites a broader reflection on the socioeconomic conditions necessary for civil society to flourish as a force for social justice and inclusive development. It reaffirms that transformative change often begins in modest, localized settings—but carries implications that extend far beyond, challenging prevailing power relations and imagining new possibilities for justice grounded in community, care, and collective agency.

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