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Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution: From Feminist Awakening to Nationalist Political Activism

By Nabila Ramdani[1]

Abstract

The formation of a feminist consciousness in Egypt ran parallel with the country's rapid development as a modern state at the start of the 19th century. Technological advancements within Muhammad Ali's increasingly capitalistic, secular country were accompanied by burgeoning intellectual thought among all sections of society, including women. By the end of the century, a middle-class female literary culture had become indelibly associated with a nationwide feminist awakening.

The feminist element to the wider independence movement was both vocal and powerful, as women rallied under the 'Egypt for the Egyptians' slogan. Elite women who had organised themselves politically had first taken part in nationalist demonstrations in March 1919, and were to become a critical force in achieving the partial removal of the British from Egypt in 1922. Nationalism also became a vehicle for specific feminist demands.

So it was that two dynamic and overlapping ideologies – nationalist and feminist – combined to create a formidable campaigning force which would have a compelling effect on the progress of Egyptian society. Radical calls for change being made by a pioneering women's movement strengthened the nationalist cause. In turn, feminists gained from their close association with the nationalists, using their connections to build up their own power base.

Keywords: Egypt, Nationalism, Feminism.

Introduction

The formation of a feminist consciousness in Egypt ran in parallel with the country's rapid development as a modern state at the start of the 19th century. Technological advancements within Muhammad 'Ali's increasingly capitalistic, secular country were accompanied by burgeoning intellectual thought among all sections of society, including women. The whole nation was united in criticising the way the occupying British had used their country for their own ends, demeaning the interests of the indigenous population, from the peasant masses up to the educated elites. This gave rise to numerous variations of Egyptian nationalism, all of which were eventually to play a part in seeing at least nominal native rule introduced.

The feminist element to this movement was both vocal and powerful, as women rallied under the 'Egypt for the Egyptians' slogan. Nationalism was certainly an obvious vehicle for feminist demands. So it was that two dynamic and overlapping ideologies – nationalist and feminist – merged to create a formidable campaigning force which would have a compelling effect on the progress of Egyptian society. Radical calls for change being made by a pioneering

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women's movement strengthened the nationalist cause. In turn, feminists gained from their close association with the nationalists, using their connections to build up their own power base.

Before 1919 there was a widespread perception that women were not involved in Egypt's nationalist struggle. Middle East historian Thomas Philipp noted the 'total lack of political involvement and the almost complete absence of patriotic nationalist expression' before 1919.[2] Other historians have largely drawn attention to the role women played in the Revolution of 1919 *per se*. That year was actually viewed as a turning point as far as Egyptian feminism was concerned.[3] The overlap between an emboldened nationalist consciousness and a women's awakening meant feminist progress was often blurred by nationalistic advancement. Thus the endeavours of women's rights campaigners in the decades leading up to the war have been largely overlooked in the scholarly debate. This article will attempt to bridge this gap in the literature.

This paper will examine how a women's movement started to take shape in Egypt at the end of the 19th century, with the appearance of women's journals expressing the feminist cause. It will trace its progress up until the early 1920s when the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) was formed. The focus will be on the female, middle-class literary culture which was indelibly associated with a nationwide feminist awakening. Besides, elite women who had organised themselves politically had first participated in nationalist demonstrations in March 1919, and were to become a critical force in achieving the partial removal of the British from Egypt in 1922. The merging of feminist and nationalistic aspirations is hugely significant, as both had a major part to play in moves towards the Revolution. [4] Indeed, this essay will highlight the way in which women of all classes became crucial political players in the country's struggle for independence from the British as they took part in nationalist demonstrations for the first time in 1919.

'The Women's Awakening in Egypt' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

Feminist consciousness and the chiefly male-dominated nationalist movement were developing at a different pace in late 19th century and early 20th century Egypt. Men were beginning to study abroad, for example, while women were only just emerging from upper- class harems into the state sector. Women in such close-knit traditional domestic situations were becoming increasingly disillusioned with their plight, and they found new outlets to display their frustration – namely a burgeoning publishing industry. This period is referred to as 'the women's awakening' by Egypt scholars such as Beth Baron who point to the manner in which women were able to make their demands aired. While the better educated found their voice through the

[2] Thomas, Philipp, 'Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt', in *Women in the Muslim World,* Louise, Beck and Nikki, Keddie (eds.), (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 284.

[3] See in particular the works of Latifa, Muhammad Salim, *Al-Mara'ah al-misriyya wa al-taghyir al-ijtima'i, 1919-1945* [The Egyptian Woman and Social Change, 1919-1945], (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyya al-'Amma lil-Kitab, 1984), pp. 26-29; Muhammad, Kamal Yahya, *Al-Judhur al-ta'rikhiyya li-tahrir al-mar'ah al-misriyya fi al-'asr al-hadith* [The Historical Roots of the Liberation of Women in the Modern Era], (Cairo: 1983), pp. 93-118.
Huda Sha'arawi herself deplores this view in her Memoirs: Huda, Sha'arawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, 1879-1924*, Margot, Badran (ed.), (London: Virago Press, 1986), p. 20.

[4] Ignoring sectional differences, references to the 'women's movement' of the time will concern the overall evolution of women's thought and action during this extremely turbulent period.

written word, others took part in public political action. Among the early female activists who inspired these developments were ‘Aisha al-Taymurriyya and Huda Sha’arawi.

Those studying early Egyptian feminism have traditionally viewed it as an upper-class development. The trajectory of the aristocratic Huda Sha’arawi (1879-1947), who became the first president of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923, helps perpetuate this view as she was the woman who led the actual struggle for independence. Yet more recent studies have challenged this belief, in particular works by Baron, and by Margot Badran, the women’s studies and Middle East historian. They show that it was middle-class women who were at the forefront of the feminist cause, using articles in magazines and newspapers, as well as more traditional literature like poems and novels, to highlight the need for improved rights for women.[5] Arabic was the language of the middle-class at the time, and the women’s press–its founders, its editors, its contributors, and its readers–mostly came from that class.

The new women’s literary culture gave rise to a powerful female Arabic publishing industry–one which articulated the consciousness of a previously home-bound section of society. As an increase in female literacy became a reality[6], middle-class women were able to convey their feminist agenda through their writings. This feeling that everybody could not only have a say, but make a positive contribution to change, was encapsulated in a phrase which came up time and time again in Egyptian literature of the period: *al-nahda al-nisa’iyya* (the women’s awakening). This expression was regularly used by female intellectuals to describe their growing literary movement. It also took on a more general meaning – referring to greater social mobility for women, a vast expansion in popular education, and an explosion in the number of clubs and associations being formed by newly-empowered women. The words *al-nahda al-nisa’iyya* became more a rallying cry than a straightforward description of a literary genre. They were certainly ones which captured the *zeitgeist* of a nascent women’s movement in Egypt.

There were also technical reasons for Egypt’s popular publishing industry flourishing from the late 1870s onwards. By the time of the British Occupation in 1882, the Cairo governments had relinquished their control of the press across the country, which meant that censorship had become far less rigorous. The number of presses increased because members of the middle and upper-classes had the financial means to invest in literature. Far more expenditure on the publishing industry saw profits for the sector rise, with the number of books, magazines, and newspapers multiplying.[7] As people became more interested in political ideas, and the possibility of united action, the press became the crucial means of communicating and indeed mobilising.

The specific development of the women’s press can be dated to the early 1890s. It corresponded with the emergence of private publications which allowed publishers to respond to a growing female readership, and its interest in women’s affairs. Opposition to women reading and writing had been prevalent among the middle and upper-classes, but this was no longer the case. Female literacy shed its subversive image and filled those women who were able to read

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[5] Beth, Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 188.

[6] Baron, *op. cit*., pp. 80-84, for data and details about the increase in female literacy in nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt.
For details about the expansion of education for middle and upper-class urban women in 19th and 20th century Egypt see Margot, Badran, ‘Dual Liberation: Feminism and Nationalism in Egypt, 1870s-1925’, *Feminist Issues*, Vol. 8, no. 1, 1988, p. 20.

[7] Baron, *op. cit*., pp. 90-92, for data and details about the circulation of the press in nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt.

and write with pride, if not a degree of conceit, as they opened up an entirely new literary culture.[8] Principally female problems, including ones about veiling and seclusion, were aired, along with popular ones about relationships, marriage and divorce. Women's journals also tackled issues like education and work, which were debated at length. The journals contained numerous articles about the world of entertainment, and domestic life, ensuring balanced, readable publications. Baron summarises the three elements of the early feminist popular press in Egypt: secularist, modernist, and Islamic.[9]

Publications which were more secular in content appeared to last the longest.[10] The tradition of the women's press in Egypt began in 1892, when Hind Nawfal (c.1860 - 1920), a Syrian Christian author, started the monthly journal *al-Fatah* (The Young Woman), which is viewed as the first wholly feminist publication in a sizeable list of Arabic periodicals which were written for, by and about women and their concerns. They came to be known as *al-majallat al-nisa'iyya* (women's journals).[11] Despite the wide variety of literary and scientific journals available at the time, Nawfal said she had set up *al-Fatah* because none of those publications dealt specifically with the rights of women, nor articulated their problems in a satisfactory manner. It was for this reason that Nawfal invited women to send her their contributions for publication.[12] Almost thirty of these women-centred periodicals had been produced for distribution around Egypt, and indeed in the outside world, before the start of the 1919 Revolution.[13]

However, as early as the 1870s and 1880s, women's achievements had been highlighted in the then male-dominated press, offering hope of moving beyond traditional gender roles. The first biographical dictionaries of women were published by Maryam al-Nahhas (1856-1888), Nawfal's mother, and Zaynab Fawwaz (1860-1914) – two women who had emigrated from Lebanon to Egypt and then settled in Alexandria. The pair were part of a dynamic generation of female writers who expressed the condition of women's lives in Egypt through their dictionaries. Al-Nahhas was very much at the forefront of the history of the Egyptian feminist awakening. Her biographical dictionaries, based on a genre stretching back hundreds of years to the medieval period, became vehicles to document women's lives. Some of the earlier biographical dictionaries included references to women, and there were even one or two volumes solely dedicated to women, but generally they were largely ignored in favour of men. Redressing the balance, al-Nahhas completed *Ma'rid al-Hasna' fi Tarajim Mashahir al-Nisa'* (The beautiful woman's exhibition for the biographies of female celebrities). The latter was a biographical dictionary which concentrated on Eastern and Western women[14], and which al-Nahhas researched and wrote while living in Alexandria.

Zaynab Fawwaz, the Shiite Lebanese writer, followed in al-Nahhas's tradition fifteen years later when, in 1894, she published a weighty biographical tome called *al-Durr al-Manthur fi Tabaqat Rabbat al-Khudur* [15] (Scattered pearls of the classes of secluded women). This highly

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[8] *Ibid*., pp. 82-84.
[9] *Ibid.*, p.189.
[10] Margot, Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt***,** (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 61.
[11] Baron, *op. cit*., p. 14.
[12] *Ibid.*, p.16.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 1.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 51.
[15] Zaynab, Fawwaz, *Al-Durr al-Manthur fi Tabaqat Rabbat al-Khudur,* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Kubra al-Amiriyya bi-Bulaq, 1894), p. 38.

descriptive work chronicled the lives of historical female icons, especially from Greek mythology. These included Atlanta the Huntress, while biblical characters such as Abraham's wife, Sarah, were also written about. The life stories of Isabella II, the Queen of Spain, were among those of more contemporary women covered, together with the 19th century American astronomer, Maria Mitchell. As far as Muslim role models were concerned, Fawwaz recounted the stories of Khadeeja, the Prophet Mohammed's first wife; the Prophet's daughter, Fatima; the Prophet's youngest wife 'Aisha; and Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet. Fawwaz is considered a hugely influential Arab feminist – not because there was anything overtly radical, let alone militant, about her works, but because she was a pioneer in her field. The very fact that she gave women an identity by highlighting their social contributions made her biographical work adventurous.[16]

Women's historical domestic seclusion in Egypt was well covered by the 19th century poet 'Aisha al-Taymurriyya (1840-1902), whose work was to influence numerous generations. Al-Taymurriyya mainly composed long passionate *diwans* about the equality of the sexes in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian (her lineage included a Circassian mother and a Kurdish father). 'Aisha al-Taymurriyya's determination to one day be treated equally to her male counterparts derived directly from her lack of formal education due to what she believed to be the constraining practices of men. Al-Taymurriyya's work was seen as a powerful argument for equality by thousands of Egyptian women. Just before al-Taymurriyya's death in 1902, her prose was circulated widely across the country, while most of her poetry was published posthumously. Al-Taymurriyya was a leading light of the early Egyptian feminist movement. Her writing concentrated on what was logically viewed as the biggest single impediment to women being treated equally in society – the denial of access to education. Hind Nawfal and Zaynab Fawwaz followed al-Taymurriyya's example in calling for improvement in the place of women in society. Both were, in particular, committed to bettering educational standards for women, arguing that this was entirely in keeping with religious teaching, including that of Islam and Christianity.

So it was that the number of journals available in Egypt grew rapidly from the 1900s onwards. There was also a considerable increase in the number of Egyptian editors and writers (Syrians and Lebanese had once dominated the industry).[17] As previously discussed, Egypt scholar Beth Baron provides a great deal of evidence that these early women authors – who were mainly drawn from the middle-classes of society – were an extremely committed and influential force as far as the initiation of the women's movement in Egypt was concerned.

There is little doubt that the work of female writers changed markedly as the feminist movement evolved, with women finding the nationalist movement a perfect vehicle for their aspirations. The arguments of people like al-Taymurriyah's were not just a call for education for women for its own sake, but an argument to make Egyptian society a better, more efficient one in the face of foreign invaders. Women argued that education and a feminist awareness would make them better citizens.

As a nationalistic consciousness developed alongside a feminist one, women's journalism began to play a role in changing people's awareness. Malaka Sa'ad founded *al-Jins al-latif* (The Fair Sex) in 1908, and her editing aimed 'to raise the status of Egyptian women in particular and Eastern women in general.'[18] Fluently argued nationalist and patriotic arguments were advanced by women writers, so making the entry of women into the literary arena a hugely significant

[16] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, p. 14.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[18] Malaka, Sa'ad, 'Fatihat al-'amm al-sadis', *Al-Jins al-latif*, Vol. 6, no. 1, May 1913, p. 2.

one.[19] Despite this, women writers would regularly dispute suggestions that they had political aspirations, or were in any way trying to change society by becoming political players.[20] They regularly dissociated themselves from the suffragette movement in Europe, for example, making clear that they were not trying to win the vote, as many women were doing in countries like Britain in the early 1900s. Sarah al-Mihiyya, editor of *Fatat al-Nil* (Young Woman of the Nile) (1913-1915) wrote that European women 'are in a worse situation now…having striven to attain political rights alone.'[21] There is no doubt that women wanted a revitalised, new relationship with society, but greater influence in the home was their priority. They wanted to influence their own families and others in their immediate circles, so influencing society in general. This was more important to them than outright political power.

Fatima Rashid, the wife of Muhammad Farid Wajdi, owner of the nationalist newspaper *al-Dustur* (The Constitution), highlighted her views of a woman's patriotic duty in an article called 'Nationalism and Woman', in which she argued that those living in an occupied country like Egypt had a moral duty to develop a nationalist consciousness. Rashid contended that there were plenty of enlightened women who shared this belief with men, and that they had an obligation to spread it around all levels of society. It was therefore crucial that 'every educated woman who senses the critical situation of her country […] to inspire all she meets with the essence of this honourable sentiment.'[22] She was confident that better mothers could pass on their cultural and moral instruction to their children. Baron describes this process thus:

> In their unique capacity as 'mothers of the world and child-raisers', women were given the imperative of imbuing their children with love for the nation, teaching them national songs and stories. 'It is upon you, tenderhearted mother, to impart to your son respect for his beloved nation, which has no dignity without him. The glory of this nation and its misery are in your hands.' Mothers were seen as particularly well-suited to be inculcators of moral values and patriotic values.[23]

Those advocating the aspirations of women in society tended to emphasise their wishes for enhanced authority within the home, rather than for improved political rights *per se*. In this sense, women's roles as highly moral wives and mothers, was always stressed. Taking up the cause of nationalism was also used to legitimise calls for improved women's rights. Yet limits were also set by the emphasis on domestic roles – by highlighting their dependence on bread-winning men they lessened their own roles as autonomous human beings who were capable of acting politically. Similarly, women made it clear that they were relying on men to bring about change through the political system, rather than seeing ideas of their own implemented. There was frequent criticism aimed at unwanted western influences introduced by colonialists, but not against men who routinely subordinated women and kept them in often highly restricted positions within society. Men legitimised their control of women with ideals of morality, many of them based on religion. Despite this, there were a number of concessions which women were able to win, and these increased awareness of women's rights in general.

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[19] Munira, 'Atiyya Suriyal, 'Al-Mar'ah al-misriyya', *Al-Jins al-latif*, Vol. 3, no. 10, April 1911, p. 279.
[20] Layla, Al-Shamakhiyya, 'Al-Mar'ah wa safsatat al-kitab', *Tarqiyat al-mar'ah*, Vol. 1, no. 12, 1908, pp. 179-182.
[21] Sarah, Al-Mihiyya, 'Tahrir al-mar'ah fi Europe', *Fatat al-nil*, Vol. 1, no. 6, April 1914, p. 239.
[22] Fatima, Rashid, 'Al-Wataniyya wa al-mar'ah', *Tarqiyat al-mar'ah*, Vol. 1, no. 2, 1908, p. 28.
[23] Rashid, Khalidi (*et al.*, eds.), *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. vii of intro.

The purpose of women demonstrating their nationalistic views was not solely an academic one – they wanted their work to have practical consequences. Thus nationalism became the obvious means by which Egyptian women could make their voices heard in society. It effectively allowed them to deal with numerous vexed questions including education, seclusion, veiling, and not least of all political action. The 'mother of the nation' role which women held for themselves meant venturing out of their homes as the country's feminist movement entered a vital second stage in the fight for independence for Egypt between 1919 and 1922. The progress of the 1919 Revolution had convinced thousands of women that their place was alongside male nationalists, not just because they supported their ultimate goal of a free Egypt, but because this proved that they, as women, could have political influence. What was undeniable, however, was that the two key movements – nationalist and feminist – had combined in a grouping which would have a huge impact on the development of Egypt in the years ahead. A joint quest for independence from Britain suited both men, and women who had been driven to political action.

Nationalist Feminist Political Activism

During the 1919 Revolution, Huda Sha'arawi led veiled women demonstrators in the struggle against the British. Female solidarity with the Egyptian nationalists was exemplified by Sha'arawi's close collaboration with Sa'ad Zaghlul (1859-1927), leader of the Wafd ('delegation') – the Egyptian nationalist movement which was formed in 1918 at the end of the First World War. It was at the forefront of the push for independence from Britain, with both men and women lending their support to the 'party of the nation'. What women also made clear, however, was that they were equally campaigning for equality of the sexes – so engaging in a 'dual struggle'.[24] Egyptian women first took part in nationalist demonstrations in March 1919, but they were to become crucial to the partial removal of the British from Egypt in 1922.

It is at this point that the paper focuses on the role of Huda Sha'arawi and Safiyya Zaghlul, two women from the aristocratic class who played an integral part in the nationalist feminist movement – helping to organise the demonstrations of March 1919 against the British, but also rallying the Egyptian feminist movement as the revolution gathered steam. Both women were the wives of Wafd activists: Huda Sha'arawi was married to 'Ali Sha'arawi Pasha, a senior member of the Wafd party and of the adjourned legislative assembly. Safiyya Zaghlul (1878-1946), in turn, was the wife of Sa'ad Zaghlul, the Wafd leader himself. Following the success of the 1919 Revolution, Safiyya Zaghlul was to become known as the 'Mother of the Egyptians'. There had been numerous ways in which upper-class Egyptian women resisted British rule, including through economic boycotts, pickets, and the distribution of anti-colonial literature. This article, however, intends to concentrate on the particularly symbolic marches in March 1919 and the way they created a seminal moment in the relationship between the nationalists and the feminists. It was the first public interaction between the two groups, and one which was in many ways an immediate success. So it was that women were able to use very public political activity to voice their concerns to as large an audience as possible, using their solidarity with men to advance their cause.

[24] For more on women's dual struggle see the Egyptian historian 'Abd al-'Aziz Ramadan's account of the Egyptian nationalist movement. 'Abd al-'Azim Ramadan, *Tatawwur al-Haraka al-Wataniyya fi Misr Sanat 1918 ila Sanat 1936* [The Rise of the Nationalist Movement in Egypt, 1918-1936], (Cairo: 1983).

Egypt scholars such as ‘Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, and especially feminist ones, highlight the fact that women from all kinds of backgrounds were involved in the struggle for change. This cooperation across different social and economic classes has been discussed at length. However, while the contribution of upper-class, aristocratic women to the revolution was often described in great detail, and indeed acclaimed, the involvement of poorer, unentitled women has frequently been forgotten. Masses of economically disadvantaged women actually lost their lives in the struggle, while the sacrifice of more privileged women was nothing like as extreme.

The arrests and deportations of Sa’ad Zaghlul and three colleagues by the British was the spark which ignited major protests all over Egypt in March 1919. It was also at this time that women took to the streets to demonstrate for the first time in the country’s history. This hugely significant development has been examined by historians writing in numerous languages, including English, Arabic and French. Thus a mythology has emerged around the women’s demonstration, with recollections of the ‘Revolutionary Gentlewomen’[25] written about, along with references to the ‘ladies’ demonstration’ of March 1919.[26]

Middle-class and upper-class women in Egypt were, before the First World War, involved in a number of professional sectors, including educational and journalistic. Women also gained some form of political action by forming social groups, but the outbreak of the war in 1914 brought a lot of these activities to an abrupt halt. Schools, for example, were effectively shut down as educational institutions as they were used to house refugees. Journalists lost their jobs as journals had to close because of high production costs in wartime. Many associations, including those founded by women, were dissolved. Rising prices, shortages of basic foodstuffs and other essentials were inconveniences which all hampered women’s activities in public life.

The war also led to increased interest in colonial politics, drawing attention to oppressive British rulers and their methods. As women joined men in becoming more hostile to the British authorities, they became more familiar with the language of national determination.[27] Wartime hardships increased a sense of injustice, and made women more inclined to protest. The basic narrative of the 1919 Revolution is well established, having been pieced together using numerous sources (both indigenous and foreign) – from eye-witness accounts, and newspaper articles through to contemporaneous historical chronicles.[28] Yet there are a number of contradictions in these accounts hampering the construction of a definitive minute-by-minute narrative of exactly what happened.[29] Indeed, reports of the March rallies are often blurred. Demonstrations first broke out on Sunday, 16 March, with the daily newspaper *Al-Ahram* reporting a ‘ladies’ demonstration’ starting. This was followed by a similar march on Wednesday, 19 March, and/or

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[25] ‘Afaf, Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, ‘The Revolutionary Gentlewomen in Egypt’, in *Women in the Muslim World,* Louise, Beck and Nikki, Keddie (eds.), (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 261 -76.

[26] *Al-Ahram*, 17 March 1919, p. 2; 21 March 1919, p. 2.

[27] For comprehensive information about women’s experiences during the war, see Beth, Baron, ‘The Politics of Female Notables in Post-war Egypt’, in *Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930*, Billie, Melman (ed.), (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 330-34.

[28] The Egyptian historian ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi’i, who was thirty years old at the time of the Revolution, recorded a remarkably detailed account of the events as they unfolded in his *Thawrat 1919*, which was first published in 1946.

[29] For example, while the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* reported a demonstration of 250 women on 16 March 1919, the London *Times* newspaper wrote about 400 women marching on 19 March 1919. The historian Beth Baron has suggested that: ‘It is quite possible that the events often associated with 16 March actually occurred on 19 or 20 March.’ See Baron, *Egypt as Woman*, p. 109.

Thursday, 20 March.[30] These distinct protests have frequently been erroneously joined together as one.

Although marches by elite Egyptian women were planned in advance, and meticulously coordinated by Huda Sha'arawi, the processions of March 1919 have often been characterised as being spontaneous ones. Sha'arawi's entourage sent a delegation to the British authorities to ensure there was official permission for the first demonstration. No authorisation was offered to begin with, but it was later reported in *al-Muqattam* [31] that permission had been granted by the colonial administration. Pre-demonstration work was then carried out, mainly involving upper-class women telephoning each other to organise meeting points. These women also used their literary skills to produce slogans on banners, and to circulate petitions supporting their aims. Although her husband was a massive figure in the march towards independence from Britain, there was no question of Safiyya Zaghlul remaining in his shadow. On the contrary, she became a formidable political actor in her own right, showing huge support for the March 1919 Revolution.

Safiyya Zaghlul's very home in Cairo became known as *Bayt al-Umma* (the House of the Nation), with nationalists from far and wide rallying within it. Safiyya Zaghlul invited activists to visit while her husband was away – first in exile following his arrest and later travelling to London and Paris to press for independence for Egypt. Through this period, Safiyya Zaghlul took a pride in playing a pivotal role in their struggle. By organising meetings at their house, and styling herself as a national 'mother' figure, she achieved results which have often been overlooked by those studying nationalist movements. During the house meetings, Safiyya Zaghlul would sign petitions, make speeches, and generally make the men and women who visited this focal point of revolution feel welcome. Safiyya Zaghlul had until then lived a largely secluded life in her own upper-class enclave, so took particular pleasure in becoming a public figure.[32] Sultan (later King) Fuad summed up the power which Safiyya Zaghlul yielded within the Wafdist nationalist movement when he noted the 'extraordinary influence of the women and particularly of Madame Sa'ad Zaghlul in exciting native hostility to the British.'[33]

The home of the distinguished protestor 'Atiyya Abu Isbaa was used as rallying point for demonstrators on the first day of their march. The house was in Garden City, near the central square of *Maydan Isma'iliyya* (later renamed *Maydan al-Tahrir* or Liberation Square), and also close to government offices, as well as the headquarters of foreign diplomatic missions. Petitions were signed by all women who rallied, and then a route was explained to all marchers, with all those taking part encouraged to walk in an orderly manner, to maintain the image of a limited, well-organised and peaceful demonstration. Those participating mainly wore dress favoured by women from the highest strands of Cairo society, including long black head scarves and robes, and white face veils.[34] Most of them arrived by car, keeping them parked nearby as they set out to walk the demonstration route. Estimates of the number of women who turned up ranged from 150 to 530.[35]

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[30] *Al-Ahram*, *op. cit*.
[31] *Al-Muqattam*, March 1919.
[32] For more on Safiyya Zaghlul see her biography written in French by her close friend, Fina Gued Vidal, shortly after Safiyya's death. Fina, Gued Vidal, *Safia Zaghloul*, (Cairo: R. Schindler, 1946).
[33] FO 407/184/286, Allenby to Curzon, 20 April 1919, enclosure: 'Colonel Symes' Note on Interview with the Sultan, April 17, 1919'.
[34] Sha'arawi, *Harem Years*, p. 113.
[35] *The Times* of London, 11 April 1919, p. 11.

Banners at the front of the demonstration projected slogans including: 'We protest the shedding of the blood of the innocent and the unarmed' and 'We demand complete independence.'[36] Slogans shouted out verbally included: 'Long live freedom and independence!' and 'Down with the protectorate!' The march progressed along Qasr al-'Ayni Street, now one of the oldest streets in central Cairo, towards the foreign missions and other administrative offices, where organisers aimed to deliver tracts stating their demands. As the march progressed, however, it was diverted to the home of Sa'ad Zaghlul. This building was a centre of activity for the Wafdist movement – a symbol of the idea that all those involved in the protest were part of a 'national family'.

As the marches approached the house of Sa'ad Zaghlul, it soon became clear that the occupying forces were uneasy about what was going on. 'When we had arrived at the end of Sa'ad Zaghlul Pasha Street we were surrounded by British troops who levelled their weapons at us', women wrote in a later petition.[37] Huda Sha'arawi then challenged the soldiers with the words: 'Let me die so Egypt shall have an Edith Cavell.'[38] Cavell was the English nurse who became a female martyr when she was killed by German soldiers in Belgium in 1915 after helping Allied prisoners of war to escape. The reference to Cavell showed that Huda Sha'arawi knew how to use emotional British references to her own advantage. Other marchers had to physically restrain Sha'arawi from overly intimidating the British. They feared that violence might ensue if this were to happen. The officers then 'kept us standing thus for two hours under a burning sun.'[39] Sir Thomas Russell Pasha, British commander of the Cairo City Police, later admitted that it was his decision to keep the women standing around under a hot sun as a way of sapping their energy and morale. The tense situation came to an end when Russell called for the women's cars to be summoned so that all the demonstrators could depart in an orderly, easily monitored fashion.[40]

The American Consul-General was among foreign missions which received petitions from the women. These petitions were to become central prescribed acts of elite women's protests. Many included complaints from the women about the way they had been treated by the British. Petition lists confirm that the women demonstrators came from the highest echelons of Cairo society. Those taking part in the demonstration included Safiyya Zaghlul, Sharifa Riyad, Esther Fahmi Wisa, Labiba Ahmad, and the wife of the late revolutionary feminist activist Qasim Amin.[41] Many were the wives and daughters of pashas and beys, and they signed their names accordingly. The lists also reveal that many of the women who protested together came from the same august families.

Resistance to the way the British military authorities suppressed public demonstrations was expressed in the petitions, as well as the principal call for Egyptian independence from Britain. Petitioners particularly resented the use of force against people, 'who have done nothing more than claim the liberty and independence of their country, in conformity with the principles proclaimed by Dr. [President Woodrow] Wilson and accepted by all belligerent and neutral

[36] Beth, Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, (London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 109.
[37] SD 883.00/135, enclosure petition dated 20 March 1919.
[38] Sha'arawi, *op. cit*., p. 113.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[40] Thomas Russell Pasha papers, (Oxford: The Middle East Centre, St. Anthony's College), c. 1 April 1919.
[41] SD 883.00/135, enclosure petition dated 20 March 1919.

nations.'[42] At the time Egyptians were hugely influenced by Wilson's principles of self-determination, as outlined in his Fourteen Points speech delivered to Congress at a joint session on January 1, 1918. Petitions presented by the elite women condemned the British for using machine gun fire against unarmed women and children, especially as many of the women protestors were taking part in peaceful demonstrations. A petition signed by 118 women called on the international community: 'We beg you to send our message to America and to President Wilson personally. Let them hear our call. We believe they will not suffer Liberty to be crushed in Egypt, that human Liberty for which you[r] brave and noble sons have died.'[43] The reference to the US War of Independence from Britain was seen as a particularly poignant one by the demonstrators.

Examining the early demonstrations of March 1919, Middle East specialist Beth Baron makes it clear that elite women spent next to no time demonstrating with women from other classes. In this sense the revolt was not a united social one, Baron argues. Instead, the main aim of the orderly demonstrations was, at first, to convince the British that the upper Egyptian classes were opposed to their presence in their country. Coptic and Muslim women joined forces on these rallies. The women's choice of black clothing with white veils was that of privileged women who lived in relative seclusion, albeit highly privileged seclusion. They set themselves apart from women working in menial jobs in the countryside, or in factories, or solely in their husband's homes. The women used the telephone to plan their marches, and turned up in chauffeur driven cars. The evidence of this elitism, Baron contends, contradicts the idea that the 'lady demonstrators' expressed social solidarity and unity across class boundaries. Instead, their attitude contributed to maintain a very stiff hierarchical view of society based on class distinctions.[44]

The principal outcome of the elite women's activity was to create a female Egyptian voice which would impress a wider, international audience. Petitions written by the elite women used expressions like: 'In the name of the women of Egypt.' Many of the petitions were signed as 'The Ladies of Egypt' and 'The Egyptian Women.'[45] The Egyptian family unit also became a rallying cry for the women demonstrating in 1919. They styled themselves as 'the mothers, sisters and wives of the victims massacred for the satisfaction of British ambitions.'[46] Through presenting themselves as 'Mothers of the Nation', women played on their moral high ground as wives and mothers, so dramatising their struggle for freedom. Some commentators, such as the wealthy Socialist and prolific Coptic writer and journalist Salama Musa (1887-1958), have described the March 1919 demonstrations as a feminist act. A staunch defender of women's rights, Musa writes in his Memoirs published only a year after al-Rafi'i's authoritative *Thawrat 1919*: 'That even women went out to stage demonstrations was not only a revolt against the English, but even more so against a thousand years of veiled obscurity.'[47] Baron, however, denies that feminist demands were rehearsed during the protests. Privileged, elite women stayed

[42] SD 883.00/130, enclosure 'The Egyptian Women to the American Diplomatic Agent and Consul-General, Cairo', 18 March 1919.
[43] SD 883.00/135, enclosure 'To the U.S. Diplomatic Agent in Egypt, Cairo', 24 March 1919.
[44] Margot, Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 76-77.
[45] SD 883.00/130, *op.cit.*, 18 March 1919; SD 883.00/135, *op. cit.*, 20 March 1919; SD 883.00/135, *op.cit.*, 24 March 1919.
[46] SD 883.00/130, *Ibid.*
[47] Salama, Musa, *Tarbiyat Salama Musa* [Education], (Cairo: 1947), pp. 150-151.

away from working-class women. Elite women insisted on remaining cut off from other social groups, and indeed from men, so reinforcing gender boundaries.[48]

The social historian Ijlal Khalifa wrote:

> It is said that the daughter of the wealthy or aristocratic class is the one who participated in the revolution and the adept political work after it, and that the daughter of the middle and lower classes is the one who died as a martyr by the hand of colonialism, who felt its humiliation and oppression.'[49]

Peasant women from the countryside also supported revolutionary action. Among their work were acts of sabotage, including the destruction of railway lines. Khalifa honours the 'female martyrs' who died carrying out this kind of work, and lists their names, the places they came from, and the dates of their deaths. The Egyptian feminist Nawal al-Sa'adawi (1931-), suggests that 'little has been said about the masses of poor women who rushed into the national struggle without counting the cost, and who lost their lives, whereas the lesser contributions of aristocratic women leaders have been noisily acclaimed and brought to the forefront.'[50]

Demonstrations against the British became increasingly populist as 1919 progressed, with working-class women who had marched in different sections to the elite women gradually marching with them. So it was that class boundaries were crossed. Female historians, in particular, have underplayed the gender segregation that has been associated with elite women's activity. There is also evidence that women 'agitated side by side with their men.'[51] Husbands and wives were thus brought together in protest. Sha'arawi's memoirs make this clear.

Following the success of the revolution, elite women tried to establish a political role for themselves through the foundation on 12 January 1920 of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC), a subsidiary organisation of the main Wafd. These female activists wanted to share the nationalist stage with their male counterparts so as to push women's political culture in new directions. However, once nominal independence from the British had been granted in 1922, male liberal nationalists who had worked with women in the liberation struggle disowned them. Women were thus prompted to create formal organisations to follow their own route towards female emancipation. Foremost among these was the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), which was created and presided over by Huda Sha'arawi in 1923. The EFU was to become the first in a number of influential women's political organisations which would work towards equality and reform.

The development of a literary culture among middle-class Egyptian women at the turn of the 19th century and early 20th century was tied up in a feminist awakening in the country. Nationalist aspirations were part and parcel of this movement, with women using pride in country and their fellow citizens as a means of expressing themselves as feminists.

Elite women also saw taking up a public role as a way of voicing their concerns while displaying loyalty towards men involved in the strive towards independence. The 1919 Revolution, led by the Wafdist Sa'ad Zaghlul, was a flagship opportunity for women to show

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[48] Badran, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.

[49] Ijlal, Khalifa, *Al-Haraka al-Nisa'iyya al-Haditha: Qissat al- Mar'ah al-'Arabiyya 'ala Ard Misr* [The Modern Women's Movement: The Story of the Arab Woman in the Land of Egypt], (Cairo: 1973).

[50] Nawal, al-Sa'adawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, translated by Sherif Hetata, (London: Zed Books, 1980), p. 176.

[51] Al-Sayyid-Marsot, *op. cit*., p. 269.

that their endeavours lay beyond their own societal rights as women. Instead they wanted to prove that they were just as capable of working towards Egyptian independence as their male counterparts. Veiled female protesters led by Huda Sha'arawi confronted the British, indicating their solidarity with all Egyptian nationalists, and particularly the Wafd party. These early female demonstrations – the first of their kind – certainly helped precipitate the partial removal of the British from Egypt in 1922.

However, following nominal independence in 1922, many male Egyptian nationalists effectively abandoned women campaigners who had showed them so much loyalty. Feminists were in turn forced to face up to an unavoidable reality – to succeed they needed to establish their own independent political movement.

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Al-Ahram

Al-Muqattam

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