

# HUDA SHA'ARAWI (1882-1947)



A born leader, she was the first Egyptian "lady" to tear up her veil in public and throw it into the sea. In 1919 she led a demonstration of "veiled women" against British occupation; in 1920, she claimed for women the right to vote.

In the time of Saad Zaghloul, Egyptian women enjoyed the sympathy and consideration of this militant leader, thanks to the influence of his wife Safyyiah, who, in 1919, succeeded in forming the "Wafd Women's Committee", presided by Shareefa Hanum Riyad, and including Huda Sha'arawi as a member.

In Zaghloul's time also, women were officially accepted as members in political parties. The Egyptian constitution did not differentiate between men and women concerning political rights. After him, they were deprived of membership in the Wafd and of other political rights. Yet the Egyptian women continued their struggle on both social and political levels. This double activity remains until now the distinguishing mark of active women, not only in Egypt but also in the whole Arab world.

Huda Sha'arawi was born in a privileged home. Her father was a pasha who presided the first parliament in Egypt. He also was at the time, the richest man in Egypt. An orphan at seven, she was married at 13 to her cousin and guardian Ali Sha'arawi, one of the three leaders who in 1919 claimed Egypt's independence from Great Britain.

Durriyah Shafeek, the Egyptian feminist, who wrote *The Egyptian Woman*, relates about Huda the following anecdote: When she was a child, no more than seven, her brother obtained, on medical advice, a pony on which he would practise riding. Huda insisted that she should have a pony to ride like her brother and a carriage which she would drive by herself. Finally she was led to accept a compromise. They bought her a piano on which she could practise playing and, at the same time, she would be allowed to ride her brother's pony.

In her memoirs, she complains of her husband's fanatical spirit. He objected against her opening the windows of her apartment, against her playing the piano, against her smoking a cigarette. In spite of that, Huda found opportunities for outside activities by encouraging and collaborating with women's social and charity organizations. She obtained recognition as a militant nationalist when in 1919 she led, in conjunction with three other women

leaders, a political demonstration against British occupation, grouping no less than 300 women. They were veiled; one of them fell dead from a policeman's bullet, but neither veil nor bullets prevented those women from carrying out their purpose.

In 1920, she presided a women's meeting in which were formulated the following claims:

Equality of the sexes in the right to education.

Women's right to vote.

Abolition of polygamy.

In 1923, when back from a women's conference attended in Rome, she arrived at the port of Alexandria, she declared to her daughter and son-in-law that she would never return to the veil which she forsook in Rome. Both she and her secretary, Seeza Nibrawi, tore up their veils in public, threw them off into the sea and, with unveiled faces, rode the open car which carried them home.

This was followed in 1923 by her founding the "Egyptian Women's Union", affiliated in the same year with the "International Women's Union," to which conferences she regularly sent delegates. Equally intensive were her efforts to consolidate cooperative relations with the women of other Arab countries.

Among her many achievements we may mention the following:

1. Fixing the minimum age of marriage for women at 16.
2. Obtaining for women the right to education at all levels, including the secondary and university levels.
3. Patronage of fine arts and providing artists with material and moral support.
4. Foundation of the feminist magazine: *The Egyptian Woman* in both Arabic and French.
5. Participation of the Women's Union in social and political activities like supporting "The Bank of Egypt" project; amendment of tax laws with the aim of protecting local industries; working for the improvement of prisoners' conditions and the abolition of prostitution.

Through her efforts also, Egyptian wives obtained in 1929 the right to divorce if they presented adequate evidence of their husbands' ill-treatment. The mothers' guardianship over their children was raised from nine to eleven years.