

Amina Sa'id, the First Professional Woman Journalist in Egypt

Born in Cairo in 1914, Amina Sa'id has been a champion of women's rights since her school days. Chosen by the famous Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'rawi to give a speech in classical Arabic at a charity ball, Amina Sa'id became her assistant and read all her speeches until her death in 1947.

In 1954 Amina Sa'id was appointed editor of *Hawwa* (Eve) the most widely read women's magazine in Egypt. Active in journalism, radio and the women's movement, Amina Sa'id is also author of six books and has translated into Arabic some American novels such as "Little Women."

The wife of Dr. Abdullah Zein el Abideen and a mother of three (one girl and two boys), she was the first woman to be elected to the Egyptian Press Syndicate's Executive Board. She is now president of the Executive Board of Dar al Hillal, one of the oldest publishing houses in the Arab World. She is also a member of the Supreme Board for Journalism and has represented her country at many regional and international conferences.

Last November, our co-editor was able to meet this "Dean of Egyptian Journalists" in her office and to record with her the following conversation:

Q: Madame Sa'id, why did you choose journalism as a career?

A: It is difficult to tell you why; it rather happened to me due to my personal predispositions. I was drawn to journalism without realizing it since the beginning of my life. I think I couldn't have succeeded in anything else. When I was in school, for example, I was always a protestor. When I entered college my participation in political life increased, and there was no other way to express my opinions except through the media.

Q: How could you describe the beginning of your career?

A: I entered journalism braving all the traditions of my country which, 40 years ago, considered a journalist to be a kind of entertainer. How could the daughter of a well-known medical doctor become a journalist in those days? I still chose journalism as my career and became the first Egyptian woman to make it my profession. Before me, women who worked in the media were amateurs or rich and idle who worked for the fun of it.



Q: Where did you start working at first?

A: I started with Moustafa Amin (a famous Egyptian Journalist founder of "Al-Akbar newspaper) when I was still at university. I used to sign my articles "Misriyyah," which means Egyptian Woman in Arabic. I was afraid that if they found out I was only a student, they wouldn't take my writing into consideration and wouldn't publish my articles. I used to earn 3 Egyptian pounds a month, which was nothing compared to male colleagues who earned 20 or 30 pounds. But I was very happy with what I earned.

From working with Mustafa Amin, I gradually shifted to Dar al Hillal ⁽¹⁾ and it is there that I spent most of my professional life.

Q: How was work at Dar al Hillal?

A: I started at the bottom of the ladder and ascended it step by step without depending on anyone. I was the only woman working among hundreds of male colleagues. The owner of Dar al Hillal, Emile Zeidan, was a great man; he had an eye for journalistic talent. He gave me a chance to prove myself and treated me exactly like he would have treated a man. He was very

severe when I made mistakes. Zeidan definitely helped me build a strong journalistic base and I still remember him with great respect.

Q: What did journalism teach you after 43 years?

A: It is a difficult field to work in and I tried my hardest to convince my children not to follow my footsteps, because I suffered a lot.

Journalism taught me perseverance and the courage of fighters; Huda Sha'rawi taught me a lot, too. She taught me never to be afraid of the truth. She encouraged me and advised me, since my school days. I believe that no one should work in journalism unless one has real love and real faith in it.

Q: What's your opinion about the new generation of journalists?

A: I am sorry to say that many of the new generation of journalists are only after quick fame. Many — especially women — expect to be famous only after having worked few months. I gave layers of my life and my happiness in order to be a good journalist. I have missed many holidays and social outings.

Journalism is a dangerous profession because if the pen is put in the hands of dishonest people it becomes a disaster. A good journalist should be ready to pay a lot of him/herself before he/she reaps a reward.

Q: In what direction did you want to see Hawwa growing when you became its editor?

A: When I was asked to become editor-in-chief of Hawwa during the early 1950's, my aim was to make it a magazine with a message and not a magazine for entertainment only. I wanted it to be read by men as well as women, so I chose every employee, even the proofreader, with the utmost care.

That's how I started Hawwa, and I fought a lot for it. Years later, a study done by the Social Sciences Department of the American University of Cairo revealed that as many men read Hawwa as women.

A: Was Hawwa ever a vehicle for the emancipation of women in Egypt?

Q: Through Hawwa many campaigns in favor of Women's Liberation were waged. For example, Hawwa campaigned to allow women into Parliament (The People's Assembly) and campaigned against the compulsory wearing of the veil. It campaigned for free education for all and for improving the Family Law in Egypt.⁽²⁾

Q: How did the general public react to these campaigns?

A: Demonstrations were waged against my ideas. They threatened to kill me. I was cursed in the Friday sermons in a thousand mosques in Cairo. The most fierce reaction happened when I wrote articles against imposing on women the wearing of what is called the "Islamic dress" (a long sleeved type of coat worn winter and summer).

My house was guarded by police night and day for four consecutive years.

No woman journalist stood beside me in this particular battle when my life was at stake; I stood alone, I was ready to die for a cause I strongly believed in rather than to give up my beliefs. Thank God that most of what I fought for became a reality.

Q: What gave you this self-confidence, this inner strength to stand by your beliefs?

A: My father, Dr. Kamel al-Sa'id, who was a great man, a battler and a physician. He was one of the leaders of the (old) National Party of Egypt during the days of Saad Zaghloul. In 1919, he was arrested for his political activities and remained under detention until the end of the revolution. We remained alone with my mother.

My father was also a great orator, he used to cause uproars among the people when he spoke for the Revolution.

My mother by contrast was a very traditional beautiful and sensitive woman whose life was the home and the children. She was removed from the world of politics all too busy giving birth to eight daughters, only four of whom lived. My only brother was born four of five before my father died.

Q: How were you brought up?

A: My mother had a heart problem and was an

(1) Dar al Hillal (House of the Crescent) is an Egyptian company that publishes a large number of books and periodicals in the Arab World. It has grown out of one of the first Egyptian newspapers, Al Hillal (The Crescent) which appeared in 1892.

(2) In 1956, President Nasser granted political equality to women in the New Constitution only after women started a hunger strike in the offices of the Egyptian Journalists' Syndicate. They were given the vote, and in the following elections two women were elected to the People's Assembly. In 1962, the National Charter summed up the position of women as follows: "Woman must be regarded as equal to man and must shed the remaining shackles that impede her from taking a constructive part in national life."

invalid in bed most of the time. My father who wanted very much to have sons put all his hopes in us four.

Even now, years after his death, I still believe that he wanted to see in us "the men."

As children, we lived in the province of Asyut (250 km south of Cairo). My father used to have a well established clientele. But as soon as he heard that the first government secondary school for girls was opening in Cairo, he left everything and moved us to the capital in order to give us a proper education. He gave us all the chances that were given to men in those days and always instilled in us the spirit of the revolution. I think I was the one who was influenced most by it.

In the early 1920's my father sent my two elder sisters, Karima and Aziza, to school at Cheltenham Ladies' College in England where they graduated with honors. The eldest, Karima, went to Westfield College to study education. Back home she worked for many years as a teacher and a principal. In 1965 she was appointed Under Secretary to the Ministry of Education and was the first Egyptian woman to hold that position.

She arrived to this post through sheer talent and in a quiet manner. I, on the contrary, have a certain aggressiveness in me, I can become very angry and answer back.

My younger sister, Amina, and I stayed in Cairo. In summer, my father used to send us alone as paid guests to live with a family in Alexandria. Imagine in those days sending two school girls, alone on holidays, to look after themselves! This taught us independence at a very early age so, when my father died, we were able to depend on ourselves and manage the affairs of our estate.

Q: Did you work in any other paper than Hawwa?

A: I first worked for the political magazine Al Moussswar (The Photographer) in 1946 and continued to do so for the next 27 years. I used to write for a special section entitled "Is' alouni" (Ask Me) and wrote articles that had impact. In addition to working for the written media, I worked for radio, preparing programmes entitled: "Masterpieces of English Literature."

In those days the majority of people spoke French and very few were English educated. I

wanted the general public to have a taste of English Literature, so I became the first one to introduce English Literature to an Egyptian audience.

Q: Weren't you also one of the first women to enter the English Literature Department of Cairo University?

A: In fact, I was the first woman to do so. Other women before me were in the Departments of History, Arabic Literature, etc. The English Department was one the student feared because it was a demanding one. The professors came from the most prestigious universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge.

When I enrolled in it, there were seven male students and myself. They used to call us "the class of seven and a half," because a woman was considered half as capable as a man.

Q: Did your knowledge of English help you as a journalist?

A: It gave me a different outlook on the world. I also read and speak French. A foreign culture gets inside you and gives you strength.

Q: Were you influenced by the Women's Movement in England?

A: I was influenced by Huda Sha'rawi in a way that cannot be measured. I first met her when I was a school girl. In those days wealthy people did not like to speak or read Arabic; they preferred French. But my father brought us up differently. He insisted that we learn Arabic and raised us up to be Egyptian in heart and mind. Huda Sha'rawi was looking for a young student to read a speech in Arabic. She went to our headmistress at school who gave her the names of three students. I was one of them. From that time on, she adopted me and introduced me to the Egyptian Union of Women, which included many eminent men like Lutfi Bacha el Sayyed.

I used to attend the meetings of the Executive Committee, sitting on a chair beside her and listening to all that was said. I learned a lot just by observing and listening to how matters were discussed. Until I was old enough, I joined the Union as a full member.

Q: You have been involved in the Women's Liberation Movement in Egypt almost since it began. Do you see any changes in that movement? Has there been much improvement in women's status since then?

A: There is no way to compare then and now. In the early 1930's I was the only woman to be enrolled in the English Department of Cairo University. There were only 15 women attending the university then. Today, 50% of the university students are females, studying exactly like males in all departments.

Forty years ago almost no women worked in journalism; today women form 25% of the members of the Press Syndicate (600 in total). Women dominate the elections every year and when we, women journalists, agree on a matter, it passes through.

There is no newspaper in Egypt that does not have women on its staff. Every profession, every ministry in the country employs women. They have become ambassadors, ministers and so forth ⁽³⁾. It is a whole new life for women now.

However, I am afraid that today's women do not appreciate enough the work we've achieved

Q: Why do you say so?

A: I am afraid that today's women are born with a golden spoon in their mouth. Jobs and universities are open to them, so they seem to take everything for granted. I feel they have lost this sense of mission, this battling spirit that characterized the early Egyptian feminists. Nowadays, women care more for their jobs than for the overall movement, and this is a loss because we women have achieved what we have now by participating in political life and making sacrifices exactly like men. We marched in demonstrations, braving the bullets ⁽⁴⁾.

Q: What's in your opinion the biggest problem facing Egyptian women today?

A: Due to the difficult political circumstances Egypt has passed through in the last two decades, many laws in favor of women have not been applied properly. Take rural women for example. Due to lack of funds, the government has not been able to apply in practice the laws of compulsory education

There are also many die-hard traditions. Parents, especially in rural areas, prefer to send their son to school rather than their daughter. They believe that the son has to work and support the family while the daughter will get married and be supported by her husband. That's why in rural areas there is a higher percentage of female illiteracy than in urban ones.

Q: You've been working for 43 years now. Did you think of stopping work and retiring?

A: Never. Work is all my life. This office has become part of my constitution; it's in my blood. If I ever stopped work, I am sure I will fall ill and die. This is my life, I have failed many times at the beginning of my career but I never gave up. Thank God, I think that he wrote success for me.

(3) In 1962, Dr. Hikmat Abu Zeid was appointed minister for Social Affairs. Dr. Aishah Ratib, professor of International Law at Cairo University, replaced her afterwards. In 1977, it was Dr. Amal Uthman who was given this position. The present Egyptian Cabinet formed in July 1984 has kept Dr. Uthman as Minister of Social Affairs. Also the present Egyptian Ambassador in Bonn is a woman.

(4) Here Madame Sa'id is referring to the demonstrations of March 16 and April 10, 1919, when hundreds of veiled women led by Huda Sha'rawi marched through the streets of Cairo to protest against the arrest of four leaders of the Egyptian revolt against English colonialism. Madame Sha'rawi's husband was among those arrested and later exiled.

(5) Since 1924, the Egyptian Constitution gave an equal chance of education to girls and boys. In 1925, the first Government Secondary School for girls was established, and in 1929 the first girls in this school qualified for entrance to Cairo University. After the Egyptian revolution of 1952, university education was made free for all. Secondary education had already become so in 1950.