

Daughters of the Nile Photographs of Egyptian Women's Movements

Edited by **Hind Wassef and Nadia Wassef**

The American University in Cairo Press,
2001, 178 P.P, L.E 90.

Reviewed by Kamal Labidi

Feminist research has often been described as "research by, about, and for women." But *Daughters of the Nile* edited by two active members of the Cairo-based non-governmental feminist organization, the "Research Center for the New Woman" is for anyone who does not want to be kept in the dark, as far as women's contribution to the struggle for the independence of Egypt and their march on the thorny road to social and political rights from 1900 to 1960. Many Arab countries have paid a heavy price for overlooking the role played by women during the resistance to colonial occupation and for denying them basic rights after independence.

Hind and Nadia Wassef provide the reader with a useful historic insight about the emergence of photography in Europe and its immediate invasion of the Middle East "at a time of exploration and imperialism." In the latter half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of European photographers flocked to Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul and Jerusalem and roamed through the region to capture "its exotic splendor for a thirsty European public." The authors explain how in these photographs, "women were constructed as sex objects and metaphors for the Orient itself (and its connotations of the sexual and dominated other)." Egyptian women's rights activists soon realized that the photographs could be used to mirror their struggle for emancipation and that the press is an important tool that could further their cause: "When Huda Sha'rawi and Seza Nabarawi publicly unveiled, they provided the press with their photographs for wider circulation. Women began courting the press for its power to disseminate images."

The book opens with pioneering women who "through their lives and work achieved 'firsts' that enabled later generations to follow in their footsteps." They came from different social and geographical backgrounds,

like Princess Fatma Ismail who sold some of her jewelry to contribute to the construction and the management of the Egyptian University; Na'ima al-Ayyubi, the first Egyptian woman to graduate from the Faculty of Law; Zaynab Fuad, founder of one of the early design workshops; and Umm Kulthum who rose to the top of the world of Arab music after moving from a small village in Upper Egypt to Cairo. Others came all the way from what later became Lebanon and Syria, such as the two writers Anisa Shartuni and Afifa Shartuni as well as the actress and publisher Fatima (Rose) Al-Yusif.

The second chapter "Feminists Making History" contains photographs of women who identified themselves as human rights' activists, such as Huda Sha'rawi and Seza Nabaraoui. Some used journalism and poetry to promote women's rights such as: Alexandra Avierino, Malak Hifni Nasef, Labiba Hashem, Aisha Taymourriya and May Ziyada. Others campaigned for women's rights through the Egyptian Feminist Union, like Eva Habib al-Masri, who became in 1928 the first Egyptian woman to enter the American University in Cairo.

The following chapter focuses on the role played by women in the social field, particularly their part in fighting illiteracy and resisting the British occupation and helping the Palestinians who took refuge in Egypt in 1948. Chapters four and five show how women used journalism and took collective initiatives "to assert themselves on the local and international scene." The photographs of Egyptian women discussing women's rights issues with a Muslim authority in 1945 and exchanging views with French feminist Simone de Beauvoir during her visit to Cairo in 1961 with Jean Paul Sartre, highlight the determination of Egyptian feminists to take further steps on the road to equal rights with men. Such determination led many women to go on hunger strikes and to improve their lobbying skills in order to achieve political rights, two years after the Free Officers' Revolution (chapter six and seven).

Chapter eight mainly contains photographs of Egyptians mourning the death of their leader Sa'd Zaghlul and of his wife Safyia and other women's rights activists, like Huda Sha'rawi. The last chapter shows "women in action" campaigning for various issues on political participation and equal rights with men from the end of the British occupation until the Naser revolution. Women's independent action and contribution to civil society and free press comes to an end in the early sixties. That is why the editors of this book chose to focus only on photographic documentation of Egyptian Women who enjoyed a certain degree of freedom of movement and initiative in the first half of the twentieth century. This book would undoubtedly shed new light on the recent history of Egypt and might encourage researchers to re-evaluate women's contributions to the independence of their countries, in the days before freedom of movement, associations and speech were confiscated by emerging Arab states.