

1 *Women and Egypt's National Struggles*

Roses and basil were on that day
the only weapons on which they relied.
The hours of struggle seemed so long
that embryos might have become grey-haired.
But then the women became feeble,
for the fair sex has no physical strength.
They were defeated and fled,
dispersed, to their palaces.
What a glorious army indeed!
What a victory, to have defeated women!

(Hafiz Ibrahim, 1929, quoted in Baron 2005: 115)

Hafiz Ibrahim's poem "Muzaharat Al-Nisa" [The Ladies' Demonstration] is one of the most important written memorials to the 1919 Egyptian uprising. It has been central to constructing the nation's collective memory of it. Collective memory is the site of identification and conflict for a nation. It not only constructs the past but also organizes the experience of the present and the future. Jacques Derrida (1973) describes this simultaneity with his famous strategic concept of deconstruction. Deconstruction and construction, Derrida argues, are mutually exclusive. Something new in thinking can only be evoked by supplementing something already given; new meanings do not erase established ones but write over them, and thus are always bound to them. The representation of women in Ibrahim's poem, as such, in part describes and inscribes broader views and debates on women's political participation in Egypt. The poem is an example of the different ways in which nationalist regimes have constructed the image of nationalist women and manipulated the discourse of women's rights in Egypt.

In this chapter, I focus on the framing of women's engagement in Egypt's national struggles. I argue that the experience of Egyptian women in the 1919 nationalist uprising and the 1952 Free Officers'

revolution crystallizes the tension between nationalist and women's rights discourses in Egypt. Women's experience, I contend, is remembered only selectively, at key moments and when it serves some symbolic purpose. Notwithstanding the resisted path of change following political struggles, I explore how women's mobilization has contributed to democratizing and gendering the public and political sphere in Egypt.

In the attempt to develop this particular argument, I, first, critically survey the literature on women's participation in nationalist movements to situate the experience of women in Egypt's uprising of 1919, and the 1952 Free Officers' revolution. Second, I examine how women's engagement at these key political junctures has been commemorated and remembered in a number of relevant literary and artistic productions. I analyze women's experiences in the past, with my eyes on the present. My objective is to identify continuities and ruptures in the framing of women's national activism in Egypt.

This chapter, thus, presents a nuanced view of women's engagement in political struggles at the time of revolutions and their status in the new regimes. It builds upon and contributes to the literature on women and the process of nation-building. This is done while problematizing the tendency in mainstream literature to theorize a single, common relationship between the nationalist movement and women's rights. Despite the rich debate and the theoretical insights that have been provoked by the literature, for the most part, nationalist-motivated political movements are still more often "objects of fear and scorn than of systematic study" (Vickers 2006). This obscures the complexity of the issue and overlooks the positive influence of revolutions on women's post-revolution movements. As such, the analysis presented in this chapter functions in de-essentializing the category of women, while suggesting areas for continuities or junctures in the assumed relationship between women and political struggles. In so doing, I bridge the experience of Egyptian women to the experience of women in other parts of the world and situate it within the broader body of feminist research.

Women's Engagement in Political Struggles

Women's engagement in national revolutions has been the subject of study in nationalist and feminist literatures. Their contributions range

from an examination of theoretical dilemmas to case studies in a variety of contemporary and historical settings. The case studies document women's meaningful, though often hidden, experiences during the revolutions and analyze their experiences through "maternalist" and/or "warrior women" frameworks (Edmonds-Cady 2009; Hatem 2000; Noonan 1995; Tètreault 1994).

The maternalist framework exemplifies the theoretical and practical practice of posing motherhood as a basis for political action and political action as a motherly obligation for women (Edmonds-Cady 2009; Noonan 1995). That is to say, women's participation in political struggles is framed as a mothering response to the danger imposed by the regime on her children. The maternalist framing focuses on women's feminine roles in political struggles but also acknowledges women's non-traditional roles that bend gender expectations. It, however, places women's activism squarely in the context of the nationalist struggle and does not ascribe feminist meanings to them.

In contrast, the term "women warrior" or "women fighter" is used to describe women's militant participation in armed political struggles. Warrior women are female participants who fought side by side with men at the forefront of several armed struggles (Tètreault 1994). For instance, in the Vietnam war and Eritrean liberation struggle during the 1960s and 1970s, the image of a khaki-clad woman warrior – indistinguishable from men in some cases – brandishing a rifle became symbolic of the nationalist movement (Bernal 2001: 131).

Women have often moved across these frames in past struggles. For instance, case studies of Palestinian women's resistance to Israeli colonialism highlight the different functions performed by women during the first and second Intifadas. As a "mother of all boys," militants, politicians, and grassroots organizers, Palestinian women took up diverse roles throughout the history of the conflict (Allen 2003: 655–657; Jad 1990). The same holds true for women in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America who supported combatants and/or were the combatant themselves (for a collection of case studies see Joseph 2000; Joseph and Najmabadi 2003; see also; Stephen 1997; Tètreault 1994; Volo 2004; West and Blumberg 1988; Zaatari 2006).

It is worth noting that women's mode of participation not only is the product of their personal choice and/or the nature of the struggle but is often dictated by the culture and environment within which

they carry out their activism. To participate in protests, the “heirs of Zaynab” in Iran and Palestinian women in the “Intifada Hijab”¹ had to adhere to a certain role. Their role was to wear their veils as a sign of opposition to imperialism (Afshar 1985). Women participating outside this role – that is demonstrating without covering their heads – were considered anti-revolutionary and insufficiently nationalist (Allen 2003: 657; Azari 1984: 268; Hammami 1990: 26).

Women’s participation as such was encouraged by nationalist and Islamist alike in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond. Yet with the end of political struggles, the new regimes often ignored women’s demands. Several studies in Latin America document how the new states brought a reassertion of traditional gender expectations (Jaquette 1973) and the waning of women’s mobilizations and representation in formal political power (Waylen 1994). The same tendency has been observed in the Middle East and North Africa following regime change and political struggles.

The Gender “Pitfalls of National Consciousness”

The failure of new regimes to improve gender equality after revolutions has been the foci of several feminist and nationalist studies. The studies question whether women’s post-revolutionary experiences lived up to their expectations or imaginings during the nationalist struggle. In this regard, scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which the process of nation-building after the revolutions is premised on particular gender identities and meanings (Abu-Laban 2008; Boehmer 2005; Dhruvarajan and Vickers 2002; Joseph 2000; Vickers 2006, 2008; Yuval-Davis 1997).

Similar to Franz Fanon’s efforts to reveal the ethnic “pitfalls of national consciousness” (1963: 148–205), several feminist contributions unveil the *gender pitfalls of national consciousness*. Within this tradition, scholars have analyzed the ways in which nationalist projects essentially “gendered nations” (Yuval Davis 1997) and “masculinized citizenship” (Zubaida 1989) following national liberation struggles. They have, thus, questioned the influence of a number of

¹ The same was true in the first Palestinian Intifada, when a campaign was waged in Gaza to impose hijab. In what analysts interpreted as “Intifada Hijab” (Ababneh 2014; Allen 2003: 657; Hammami 1990: 26), hijab came to signify women’s commitment to the nationalist movement.

factors in shaping the political openings and ideologies available to women's movements in transitional periods (Viterna and Fallon 2008; Waylen 1994). Among the key factors highlighted in the literature are the nature of political struggles (Jayawardena 1986; Terman 2010; Yeganeh 1993), and the legacy of women's previous mobilizations (Kumba 2001; Noonan 1995; Viterna 2006; Viterna and Fallon 2008).

Broadly speaking, this body of work acts as a *caveat emptor* for women who wish to participate in revolutions. Examining the process of nation-building and the construction of citizenship following major revolutions, scholars conclude by criticizing national struggles and typically argue that women were used during them only to be relegated to home and hearth after (Hatem 2000; Joseph 2000; Tètreault 1994; Vickers 2008; Yuval Davis 1997).

Scholars stress this sentiment to a different degree. While the majority of early feminists displayed an absolute cynicism (Woolf 1938; Petteman 1996),² their non-Western counterparts have often contextualized their skepticism toward women's participation in liberation movements (Berkovitch and Moghadam 1999; Jayawardena 1986; Terman 2010). Valentine Moghadam and Kumari Jayawardena have argued in the past, that in Asia and the Middle East "feminism and nationalism were complementary, compatible and solidaristic," but they conclude, "(t)his has changed" (Moghadam 1994: 3; see also Jayawardena 1986). This is because, anti-modern nationalism³ in contrast to modern nationalism is on the rise (1994: 6–7). They believe that the former expands women's rights, while the latter constrains them.

Contrary to Moghadam and Jayawardena's view, a number of studies argue that religious movements have the potential of liberating women as well (Parashar 2010; Terman 2010). Writing on the Iranian revolution, Rochelle Terman (2010) argues that the Islamic revolution has liberated women by mobilizing them in the public

² Australian Jan Jindy Pettman is skeptical about the possibility of positive relations between women's rights and nationalism. She recognizes that the relationship can be negotiated in different ways over time and place, but accuses nationalist movements of mobilizing women's support and labor, while simultaneously seeking to reinforce women's female roles and femininity (1996: 61).

³ Scholars associate anti-modern nationalism with the rise of religious fundamentalists.

sphere. Terman (2010: 290) claims that the revolution aimed at creating a female subject that is "simultaneously pious and politically active." This particular form of subjectivity, however, "exceeds and defies the categories and dichotomies" of earlier social norms (Terman 2010: 290). This unique subjectivity gives rise to a productive tension in that women are using this new identity to act in ways that are both beyond and contrary to what the Islamist regime initially anticipated (Terman 2010: 290; see also Al-Qasimi 2010; Zahedi 2007).

In addition to the nature of the movement, women's post-transition movements benefit from women's pre-transition activism and influence their gains under the new regime. Women whose pre-transition activism was political or distant from traditional understandings of the feminine were better able to organize and pressure the regime for women's rights (Kampwirth 2002; Shayne 2004).

The strategies and frames used prior to transitions can also constrain the materialization of gender equity. In Latin America, female protestors appropriated the authoritarian regime's discourse of the pious woman and selfless mother in framing their political participation and struggle for democratic reform. This framing, however, constrained women's activism in the period following the uprising. The new political actors used women's feminine framing to justify women's exclusion from the public space and to encourage female activists to return to the private sphere (Chinchilla 1994; Fisher 1993).

Scholars therefore conclude – with varying certainty – that the women's movement failed to secure their full rights after transition because the movement failed to convert the pre-transition frames into strong feminist discourses following regime change and democratic transition. This view does not go uncontested. Some argue that feminine movements often evolve into "feminist" ideologies (Molyneux 1985; Stephen 1997; Viterna and Fallon 2008). While subscribing to the rationale underpinning this argument, Jocelyn Viterna and Kathleen M. Fallon (2008: 672) critique the paucity of studies written about which movements evolve, which languish, and whether this broadening of movement goals results in gendered changes within the state apparatus. Egyptian women's involvement in the 1919 revolution can be seen as an example of these *feminine turning feminist* movements.

Women and the 1919 Revolution

In contrast to the Urabi Revolt of 1881/1882,⁴ which has been characterized as a “manly event” (Russell 2004: 87), the Egyptian 1919 revolution, against British colonialism, was led by female participants. Women’s national activism prior to 1919 ranged from signing petitions to launching boycott campaigns; yet it was the “ladies’ demonstration” of March 1919 that came to be one of the most prominent symbols of women’s national activism (Baron 2005; Bier 2011; Botman 1991; El Saadawi 1997; Hatem 1994, 2000; Mariscotti 2008; Rizk 2000). Following the exile of male nationalist leaders in March 1919 by the colonial forces, women led protests and rallied for the release of male nationalist leaders and for Egypt’s independence.

Much of the literature documenting women’s engagement in this revolution utilizes a class lens in analyzing the different and often contradictory experiences of female participants. Class, many argue, assigned different roles, dictated different counter-colonial responses, and brought different gains for women who participated in the revolution (Baron 2005; Bier 2011; Botman 1991; El Saadawi 1997; Hatem 1994, 2000).

Elite women, including Safiya Zaghoul and Huda Sha’rawi, led the masses, lower-class women participated in street protests with men, and rural-class women in the countryside provided food and assistance to male activists. Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian feminist and a physician by training, observes 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” (El Saadawi 1997: 258).

Class also played a role in the colonists’ chosen method of discipline. Many observers argue that it is not coincidental that female national martyrs came from lower classes. Meanwhile, elite protestors were only punished by keeping them under the glow of the blazing sun for several hours (Badran 1988; El Saadawi 1997). Ijlal Khalifa’s work was central in articulating this argument, too, particularly

⁴ The Urabi Revolt was carried out by Egyptian army officers, who were dissatisfied with the preferential treatment of the Turkish-speaking Ottoman elite and with the dire economic conditions.

in her book: *Al-Harakah al-Nisa'iyya al-Haditha: Qissat al-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya 'ala Ard Misr* [The Modern Women's Movement: The Story of the Arab Woman in the Land of Egypt] (1973). In it, Khalifa notes how class had an impact on women's experiences in the 1919 uprising. "The daughter of the wealthy or aristocratic class," she writes "is the one who participated in the revolution and the adept political work after it" (cited in Ramdani 2013: 50). The daughter of the middle and lower classes, however, "is the one who died as a martyr by the hand of colonialism, who felt its humiliation and oppression."

The Framing of Women's Engagement in the 1919 Revolution

The literature on the 1919 uprising highlights two important facets of the framing of women's participation. First, women's activism was placed within a maternalist frame in historical texts and national symbols (Ahmed 1992; Badran 1995; Baron 1997, 2005; Russell 2004). Second, women themselves constructed their activism in the revolution through a maternal discourse (Golley 2003; Rizk 2000; Shafiq 1956; Sha'rawi 1987).⁵

The women-led demonstrations of 1919 quickly became part of the national memory, but as Baron (2005: 113) observes, "the collective memory of this 'iconic moment' fractured along gender lines." For instance, Hafiz Ibrahim – the famous Poet of the Nile – in his poem, "The Ladies' Demonstration," discussed earlier, praises women's participation in the revolution; however, his poem concludes by reminding us of women's physical weakness. He thus mocked the British troops' victory because it was a victory over women and not men. Other major work narrating the uprising emphasized women's secondary role in it; they detail how women supported and mobilized their men. The work of the prominent historian Abdel Rahman al-Raf'i is

⁵ In signing the 1919 petition, prominent women activists chose to sign and identify themselves in relation to their husbands, fathers, or brothers (Ahmed 2010). Even when the post-revolutionary regime did not honor women's rights, many studies highlight women's compliance with the maternalist construction of women's rights (see Hatem 1994, 2000; Bier 2011; Rizk 2000; Osman 2012). For instance, the program of the Feminist Union emphasized the need for women's access to education and social services and, as Hatem (1994: 33) points out, focused on enabling middle-class women to be better mothers and wives.

exemplary in this regard. He praised women for their participation in the national uprising, but then, in a footnote, restricted the role of women to caring for the poor and sick.

Motifs of family and motherhood were invoked as well in commemorating women's leadership in the uprising. For instance, as a nod to Safiya Zaghloul's heroine role in leading protests, she was designated as "Um El-masrayeen" [the mother of Egyptians] and her home, the headquarters of protest mobilization, was christened "Byt Al-Umma" [the house of the nation].

The term "domestication of female public bravery," I propose, describes the ways in which women's participation has been framed and celebrated using domestic vocabulary in Egypt. These gendered representations of symbols within nationalist movements have been an important area of study in feminist scholarship (Cusack 2000; Hatem 2000; McClintock 1993; Yuval Davis 1997). Feminist scholars reveal similarities in the ways in which women served as idealized symbols in revolutionary struggles and how this representation of women shaped their treatment in the new order. The domestication of female public activism serves to contain the effects of women's public activism and maintain gender hierarchies. Recent work, however, critiques this depiction of women's experiences as an extension of their domestic task in the home to the outside, in the service of the nation. (For critique, see Ahmed 2010; Bier 2011; Elsadda 2006; Hatem 2000: 38–39; Osman 2012; Pollard 2005.)

This maternal nationalist framing reached its apogee in Egypt in the interwar years with the creation of the image of Egypt as a national mother (Baron 2005: 135). The fiction, Baron (2005: 135) asserts, generated a sense of solidarity and relatedness among people who were otherwise strangers or divided along class, race, ethnic, and religious lines. The "mothers" and "fathers" provided comfort, creating a sense of collective belonging and suggesting that the welfare of the people was in the right hands (Baron 2005). Yet assertions that the nation was a family, Pollard (2005) explains, were also meant to insure obedience to the male nationalist leaders and to silence dissent.

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In *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, Cynthia Enloe explicates how masculinity and nationalism have always been parallel discourses. Whether through media projections or literary texts, women were often consigned to representational roles, and men were presented as the real performers in popular portrayals of national struggles (Enloe 2000: 44). This, I suggest, holds true in the case of Egypt. The history of women's representation in Egypt's nationalist movements indicates a tension between representations of the nation as a woman and representations of women defending the nation, with the first prevailing in the national imagery (Baron 2005; Botman 1991; Hatem 2000).

This tension is often projected in the visual representation of national symbols in Egypt. For example, in the statue of the Egyptian nationalist leader Mustafā Kāmil, in Cairo, Kāmil is depicted in modern Western clothes standing erect, delivering a speech (Baron 2005: 65). At the pedestal of the statue is a bronze relief that shows a seated young peasant woman, with head covered, of smaller dimensions than Kāmil. This differential representation confirms Tricia Cusack's critique of the process of nation-building. The nation, Cusack (2000) argues, has been traditionally conceptualized as "Janus-faced"; that is: looking both ways, to the past and to the future.

According to Cusack (2000: 67), women are often the object of the "backward look" that is associated with tradition; meanwhile men are seen to embody the forward-thrusting agency of national progress, especially in religious societies. The young veiled peasant woman in Kāmil's statue represents Egypt under British occupation. By this time, the motif of the nation as a woman was popular in Egypt's nationalist memory (Baron and Pursley 2005: 523). In Anne McClintock's (1993) view, such practice, while construing women as the symbolic bearers of the nation, denies women any direct relation to national agency.

Feminism and Women's Rights after the Revolution

The traditional depiction of women's experiences within the maternalist frame and discourse omits feminist meanings and implications that might have developed as a result of women's activism in nationalist struggle. The rise of feminist consciousness and activism in Egypt following the 1919 uprising is exemplary of these long-term outcomes

(Badran 1988; Baron 1997, 2005; Russell 2004). This important body of work seeks to reclaim women's history and experience in Egypt's national struggles. Scholars within this tradition highlight some of the ways in which women fought concurrently as feminists and nationalists (Badran 1988; Baron 1997).

Following the 1919 revolution, middle- and upper-class women formed their first formal political organization, the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC), electing Huda Sha'rawi as its president (Badran 1988). Notwithstanding the WWCC's ties to the "patriarchal Wafd," commentators are quick to point out that the WWCC functioned as a space to challenge patriarchal politics and men's domination over policies (Badran 1988; Baron 2005; Russell 2004). For instance, women publicly criticized the male Wafdist leaders for neglecting the WWCC views on the Wafd independence proposal, at the end of 1920. It is in this sense that the Egyptian feminist movement has feminized and democratized Egypt's political and public sphere. Beyond Egypt, the democratic effects of the women's movement in Middle Eastern societies have been elucidated in a number of important studies (see, for example, Hatem 2005; Libal 2008; Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006).

Huda Sha'rawi – the first Egyptian feminist and leader of the 1919 revolution – bitterly critiqued the hypocrisy of male nationalist leadership. She wrote: "[I]n moments of danger when women emerge by their side, men utter no protest. Yet women's great acts and endless sacrifices do not change men's views of women" (Sha'rawi 1987: 131). In an attempt to nudge women away from the public and political sphere, key national figures began to openly critique women's independent behavior and insistence on their citizenship rights (Badran 1988; Baron 2005; Sha'rawi 1987).

These attempts proved to be counterproductive as they created deeper resentment among nationalist women who again openly criticized their male counterparts in 1922 over the terms of independence. The terms of independence did not address Egypt's relation to Sudan and failed to oust the British troops from Egypt. Badran (1988: 28) narrates how Huda Sha'rawi telegraphed her disapproval to Saad Zaghloul in an open letter to the newspaper *Al-Akhbar* and demanded that he step down. She, herself, resigned as president of the WWCC, and with a number of other feminist nationalists established the Egyptian Feminist Union, on the fourth anniversary of

the first women's public demonstration, in March 16, 1923 (Badran 1988: 28–29).

Women's expectations were crushed and their demands were further ignored with the denial of women's suffrage. This was a big affront to female nationalists who prided themselves on their contributions to the national cause and their access to power. In fact, many commentators view this development as a turning point for feminist nationalists, who felt betrayed after their participation in the nationalist struggle (Ahmed 1992; Badran 1988; Baron 2005; El Saadawi 1997, Sha'rawi 1987). As such, female leaders took their case to the international arena. The Egyptian Feminist Union sent a delegation comprising Huda Sha'rawi, Nabawiyya Musa, and Saiza Nabarawi to a meeting of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in Rome, in May 1923 (Badran 1988). The nationalist feminists' move to the international arena mimicked that of the male Wafdist leaders' independence strategy. Like the male leaders of the Wafd in 1919, the feminists reached for the Western audience and solidarity (Badran 1988; Baron 2005).

On their return from the IWSA meeting, Huda Sha'rawi and Saiza Nabarawi removed their veils as they stepped into a large crowd of cheering women (Badran 1988). Several feminists place great emphasis on the significance of this move, considering it as demarking "the end of the hareem system – the end of the seclusion of women and the segregation of the sexes – and the beginning of a public, open, organized feminist movement in Egypt" (Badran 1988: 29; see also Hijab 1988: 51; Lanfranchi and King 2012; Sha'rawi 1987; Zuhur 1992: 41). Badran (1988) and Baron (2005) extend this argument, asserting that the significance of this move lay in giving a real face to female leadership, after their voices were first heard in press a half-century before.

Following the victory of the Wafd and Saad Zaghloul, feminist activists were further excluded from the political landscape. They were not allowed to attend the opening ceremony of the new parliament in 1924, a welcome being extended to the wives of ministers and high officials only. In Badran's words, it was "a truncated celebration – a celebration of patriarchal reassertion rather than national triumph" (1988: 29). As a response, the WWCC and the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) joined forces and struck against the opening of parliament, proclaiming thirty-two nationalist and feminist demands, including, among other demands, the right to vote (Badran 1988).

Women's experience in the uprising as such contributed to establishing a strong women's movement and a well-developed discourse on women's rights. Their activism, as they confronted the new regime, had a number of important implications. It contributed to politicizing women, connecting them to transnational feminist networks and expanding their activism. For example, Saba Mahmood (2005:153) explains that Zaynab Al-Ghazali was able to acclaim a position of leadership in the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1950s and the 1960s because of her considerable exposure to a well-developed discourse of women's rights that dates back to the turn of the twentieth century. A discourse, Mahmood stresses, "was crucial to her formation as an activist" (2005: 153). Women's participation, notwithstanding the gendered outcomes of the 1919 uprising, had thus carved out new political and public roles for women.

Women and the 1952 Free Officers' Revolution

Unlike the literature on the 1919 national movement, studies on the 1952 Free Officers' revolution dedicate scant space to women's experiences at the time of it. This is because the Free Officers' revolution had been a male business; it was planned and carried out by the free officers in Egypt's army (Sedra 2011). Women's experiences after the revolution, specifically, the centrality of women in the regime's nationalist discourse, have been discussed, however, in great detail. The literature draws attention to how the new regime co-opted women's rights into its nationalist program and suppressed independent feminist movements (see Abdel Halem 2012; Bier 2005, 2011; Hatem 1994, 2000, 2005; Muhamed 1979; Nelson 1996). Most importantly, recent expansions in the literature examine the ways in which state feminism has constructed the "working women" figure as an expression of the regime's modernization project (Bier 2005, 2011; Hatem 1992, 1994; Keddie and Baron 1991; Meriwether and Tucker 1999; Russell 2004). This, in my view, is crucial for understanding the status of women in modern Egypt, since the politics of state-sponsored feminism envisaged by the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s remained the dominant discourse for women's rights under his predecessors. These policies of state feminism had weakened the women's movement in Egypt and distanced it from its grassroots bases.

The Premises of State-Sponsored Feminism

In the early years of Nasser's rule, the discourse of women's rights was absent from the nationalist agenda. The early nationalist literature, such as Nasser's book *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (1954) does not include any mention of women and their rights. Laura Bier (2011) notes the absence of the wives of prominent Free Officers from public occasions and views this as mirroring the absence of women from the regime's early agenda. For instance, it was not until 1956 that Nasser's wife, Tahia Kazem, made an official public appearance welcoming Tito, the former leader of Yugoslavia and his wife. This, several observers note, stands in stark contrast to the visibility of female members of the royal family, who were well-known public figures in their own right (Baron 1997; Bier 2011; Russell 2004).

The regime's attitude toward gender issues, however, soon shifted, as Gamal Abdel Nasser moved to co-opting women's rights in his nationalist discourse (Abdel Haleem 2012). This co-optation took the form of state-sponsored feminism. Women in Egypt, as in many Middle Eastern and African societies, have historically functioned as the contours of nationalist thoughts and the modernization project (Badran 1988; Baron 2005; Sayigh 2007; Sonbol 2005; Terman 2010). Under the Nasserist modernization project, the state adopted a top-down approach and implemented legal reforms to advance gender equality. The most iconographic expressions of the regime's gender politics are the 1956 Constitution, the 1961 Charter for National Action, and the legislative and administrative decisions enacted by the regime to mobilize women to join the workforce.

While the regime had portrayed these legislatures as a leap for women's rights, these legal steps were scrutinized in a number of feminist studies (Abu-Lughod 1998; Al-Maaitah et al. 2011; Bier 2011; Hatem 1994, 2000; Russell 2004). Laura Bier, in her recent book *Revolutionary Womanhood* (2011), eloquently captures the essence of these discussions and explains the contradictory nature of state-sponsored feminism. She rightly explains that "the concept of rights granted to the universal (purportedly un-gendered) citizens coexisted with gender-specific obligations that women (and men) were expected to meet" (Bier 2011: 34). That is to say that the gender-neutral rights held by women as citizens coexisted with new, gender-specific responsibilities. For instance, Article 19 in the constitution states that the

state will facilitate the reconciliation of women's contribution to the workforce and her obligation within the family (Jumhuriat Miṣr 1956: 11).

Furthermore, although the constitution recognized universal suffrage, the procedural law established gender-specific procedures for the registration of voters. Men were automatically registered as voters; in contrast, women had to petition the state to include them in the list of registered voters (Muhammad 1979: 73). As such, while the revolution represented a push for women's rights generally, the revolutionary regime prioritized women's social rights as mothers while hindering their political rights as citizens (Hatem 1994, 2000; Muhamed 1979). In this sense, women's rights ostensibly incorporated the right to education and public participation, and excluded the right to meaningful political and economic participation.⁶

Consistent with the state's feminist discourse is the regime's successful move to suppress independent feminist initiatives. The Free Officers, Mervat Hatem explains, associated women's rights with the aristocratic activities of the Feminist Union and the social agendas of the *ancien régime*, which in turn legitimated and necessitated the former's suppression (2000: 46). A common strategy was the incarceration of prominent women's right advocates, such as Doria Shafik – the head of Ittihad Bint Al-Nil [the Daughters of the Nile Union] – and Inji Aflatun in the 1950s. The conflict was not merely over the agenda of women's rights or to curb potential challengers and imminent threats. In 1957, Doria Shafik was put under house arrest after she carried out a hunger strike against Abdel Nasser. Her name was barred from all Egyptian texts and most of her original documents were destroyed. The issue thus is one of control and consolidation; the aim is to consolidate the regime by establishing full control over social groups and weakening their ability to organize.

While most scholars claim that the 1952 revolution marked the end of independent feminism in Egypt, others like Mervat Hatem (2000) and Laura Bier (2011) stress that the politics of gender did not disappear. They have noted the emergence of a younger generation of professionals and intellectuals who gained access to the newly established institutions. Amina Al-Sayed, Bier (2011) highlights, despite

⁶ This is not unique to Egypt; several scholars observed the same policies and inconsistencies in the context of Iran (see Terman 2010; Yeganeh 1993).

being part of the system and working within it, did not endorse state policies passively. In fact, she played an active role in contesting the gendered parameters of Nasser's nationalist project.

Women as the Contour of the Nationalist Project

The developments introduced by Nasser's regime were significant, as they changed the landscape of women's rights in Egypt. Given their significance, feminist scholars have turned to interrogate the model of state-sponsored feminism with special focus to its discursive and ideological functions (Abu-Lughod 1998; Ahmed 1992; Bier 2011; Hatem 1994; Hijab 1988; Keddie and Baron 1991; Nelson 1991; Podeh and Winckler 2004). The figure of *al-mar'a al-'amela* [the working woman] was central in the regime's agenda and official discourse. Through a series of legislations and administrative decisions, the state redefined the category of the working women to encourage their participation in the workforce. The regime constructed the figure as a signifier of gender equality and as evidence of modernity; such claims were refuted by several feminists. In their studies, scholars have interrogated the figure of the working woman by examining its official discourse and policy outcomes. Their analysis emphasized the inconsistency and inadequacy of the approach for altering gender inequalities (Abu-Lughod 1998; Bier 2011; Hatem 1994; Keddie and Baron 1991; Russell 2004).

Despite the state rhetoric and legal commitment to facilitate women's economic participation, the overall number of women in the labor force, studies confirm, remained relatively low (Bier 2011; Hatem 1992, 1994; Muhammad 1979). In explaining the discrepancy between the policies and their gender outcome, scholars have examined the ideological function underpinning the policies. According to them, the figure of the working woman was not a genuine effort by the regime to alter gender inequalities; rather, it was important in constructing the image of a progressive postcolonial society and a modern socialist public sphere (Abu-Lughod 1998; Bier 2011; Hatem 1992, 1994; Russell 2004). The outcomes of the socialist development, specially the participation of unveiled and active women in the public sector, were presented as symbols of the regime's success in transforming Egypt into a modern socialist nation. The mythical representation of women as the nation, Bier (2011: 16) writes, was

replaced by the representation of women as symbols of the state and the success of state-driven modernization.

Some scholars go as far as arguing that the model of state-sponsored feminism was a way to effectively govern women and reproduce gender hierarchies. Timothy Mitchell (2000: 136) argues that the formation of an educated Egyptian motherhood was part of the process whereby the “inaccessible” and “invisible” world of women and family would be rendered visible and thus governable by the institutions and modern powers of the state. The backdrop of this critique is the modest outcomes of gender policies. They did not deliver real cultural changes and/or substantial gender equalities. Hatem (1994) explains that the inadequacy of these developments was due to the persistence of gender inequalities in the private realm of the family. The private realm of the family was not the focus, as the promotion of women's rights was secondary to the consolidation of the regime.

Campaigns encouraging women's economic participation were accompanied with extensive discussions over how to balance women's duties at work and at home (Abu-Lughod 1998, 2005; Bier 2011; Hoodfar 1997). Exempted from these discussions, I notice, is men's role. These discussions were directed to women only, rarely including men; in fact, there were no parallel discussions over men's responsibility to perform domestic labor, or balance work and family commitments. Hoodfar (1997: 106–107) views Nasser's encouragement of women's entry into the labor market as the first “official devaluation” of women's domestic labor. The emphasis on women's responsibility to carry out domestic labor and the exemption of men from these duties contributed to maintaining gender hierarchies and safeguarding men's privileged position in Egyptian society.

Concerns over men losing their privileged position were captured in several media productions of this era (see Bier 2011). The complicated and multiple tensions between women's duty to participate outside of the home and their continued centrality inside the home were reflected in the 1960s movies and literature (Bier 2011). This is important given the significance of the Egyptian movie industry, which has a long tradition and a dominant position within the Arab world. Once the Egyptian cinema became nationalized by the Nasser regime, it was perceived as a threat by colonial powers in the neighboring Arab countries. For example, the French colonial power in the Maghreb formed a “special department” on African problems that was “responsible for setting up a production

centre in Morocco whose official mission was to oppose the influence of Egyptian cinema" (Salmane, Hartog, and Wilson 1976, quoted in Schochat 1983: 22). As Ella Schochat (1983), the media scholar explains, the Egyptian movie industry was influential in propagating culture and national ideas in society. Given its significance for nation-building in Egypt, the nationalization of the industry by the Nasserist regime meant that "the state had nearly complete control over the different branches of the film industry, which previously had been in private hands" (Schochat 1983: 26).

Anxieties about women's work and independence found expression in popular movies such as *Lel Regal Fakat* [For Men Only] (1964)⁷ and *Miraty Modeer 'am* [My Wife Is a General Director] (1966),⁸ to name a few. The producers highlighted some of the common concerns in society, such as the risk of men losing their authority as husband and the potential displays of female sexuality in the workplace (Bier 2011). The movies, however, only played on these anxieties without providing a solution to these tensions.⁹

Bier (2011) reveals how such concerns were voiced by male writers and feminist advocates of women's work alike. In her occasional column for *Hawwa'*, Latifa al-Zayyat (1923–1996), an active writer and commentator on gender issues, advised women to leave their femininity at home before descending into the street (Bier 2011). Salama Musa – the secular women's right advocate – adopts a stance similar to that of al-Zayyat. In his book *Al-Mar'a Lyst Lu'bat al-Rajul* [Woman Is Not the Plaything of Man] (Musa 1956: 72–78), Musa lists numerous objects that he felt had no place in the office, such as cologne, chic dresses, high heels, laughing and raised voices. Introducing a class perspective,

⁷ The movie tells the story of two young female graduates who disguise themselves as men in order to work as oil engineers at an oil refinery – strictly a male domain – in the desert.

⁸ The movie reveals the troubles associated with women in senior positions, and the ways in which this creates tensions, especially when their husbands work under them.

⁹ It is sad to see the same theme produced in recent movies like *Taymur and Shafiqa* [Taymor we Shafika]. In this 2007 movie, Shafiqa, a young ambitious Egyptian woman, has to quit her job as minister of environmental affairs to marry Taymur, a domineering male figure, who manipulates the relationship without any discussions or compromises. I think the movie reflects continuities in the cultural and social devaluation of women's work in Egyptian society. It is, arguably, a case in point that the policies of state feminism did not completely alter societal views toward women's rights and gender equality.

he shamed women who can afford these goods and accused them of being part of the corrupt Egyptian bourgeoisie.

In sum, the complicated and multiple tensions that exist between women's duty to participate outside of the home and their continued centrality in national projects were the subject of several nationalist and feminist studies. Analyzing the popular discourse that ran parallel to the policies of state-sponsored feminism, scholars have concluded that the regime did not work toward eradicating gender inequalities; its approach aimed to modernize gender relations in the public realm in order to construct the image of a modern society. This aim was critical in mapping out the contours of a socialist, postcolonial public sphere (Bier 2011; Podeh and Winckler 2004; Russell 2004). Women were key to constructing the image of a modern and nationalist society because of their important role as the bearers of identity and cultural norms. Across history, women in the Middle East and beyond were used to demarcate cultural differences and reflect modernity.

Following the Nasserist regime, subsequent regimes adopted the same strategy as a way to polish their international image and strengthen their control over civil society and independent women's movements. The implication of this full control of the agenda of women's rights in conjunction with the cosmetic changes in gender policies and legislation distanced the discourse of women's rights from its grassroots bases and moved it toward the regime in power. These bio-politics of control remained in place under successive regimes; under Sadat's regime as well as that of his predecessor Mubarak. The 1980s, the historian Lucia Sorbera (2013) writes, were years when a new generation of women, highly educated and with international networks, appeared on the scene. This generation of feminists was crushed between two powers: the secular forces represented by the regime and the religious forces represented by the Islamist movement (Sholkamy 2012a; Sorbera 2013). On one side, the regime stopped every independent initiative and appropriated gender issues under its name (Sholkamy 2012a). On the other side, the Islamist opposition has mobilized the lower classes, to which feminism and gender issues are alien in terms of class and culture (Meriwether and Tucker 1999; Nelson 1991; Sholkamy 2012a; Sorbera 2013; Zuhur 1992). In this context, Sorbera (2013) argues, in line with earlier research, that feminism was perceived by the majority of the population as an elitist movement that was incapable of producing grassroots activities.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals the tensions involved in documenting, remembering, and commemorating women's engagement in political struggles. Scholars have highlighted the ways in which men, early in revolutions, tend to encourage, in varying degrees, women's nationalist activism and to vocally support women's rights and their struggle for liberation and equal citizenship rights. However, with the end of political struggles, the figure of the strong, politically active woman is resented. The case-study-based scholarship highlights that male nationalists accept female nationalists' activism where it suits them and under duress. However, as male nationalists came to power, they ignored women's views, deprived women of their citizenship rights, and pushed female activists from the public sphere.

The tension over women's engagement in political struggles is evident as well in the ways in which their heroism is praised and constructed in the collective memory and national commemoration. In this regard, women's political culture has often been excluded from the collective memory or remembered only selectively at key moments, when it served some symbolic purpose. Woman as a symbol, Baron (2005: 117) argues, is thought more important than woman as historical actor. Memory of women's activism tends to pale in comparison to men's and is often constructed using familial and domestic concepts. For instance, the motherist framing has dominated scholarly and public accounts of women's participation. Its relevance is due to its feminine character that does not disturb traditional gender hierarchies (Badran 1988; Baron 1997, 2005; Hatem 1994; Pollard 2005).

Underpinning this argument is the assumption that political and gendered national forces contribute to constructing our collective memory of women's engagement in political struggles. This construction is deliberate, as it services certain overt and covert interests. Carol Marvin and David W. Ingle, in their book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (1999: 2–5), explain that the dynamic that embeds heroes and legends in a population's collective memory sheds at least as much light on the commemorators' intentions and needs as on the essence of those commemorated. As national heroines come to represent and reflect the traits of the model female citizen, female nationalists and heroines were constructed in

a way that exhibits not only heroic traits and actions but traditional gender roles as well.

In the same way, women's experience following the 1952 Free Officers' revolution crystallizes the tension between nationalist and women's rights discourses. The regime's claims to liberate women brought important rights, but these rights were contingent upon gender-specific obligations that women were expected to meet as proper national subjects and citizens (Bier 2011: 6; Hatem 2000; Nelson 1996). In her study of the role of women in the nation-state, Nira Yuval-Davis (1993) reminds us that the state constructs the citizenship of men and women in terms of their national tasks. The major national task for women in almost all national states is closely related to their biological role in reproduction rather than their ideological role (Yuval-Davis 1993).

In line with this framing, the nationalist discourse in Egypt granted women maternalist citizenship rights¹⁰ while curtailing their political rights. Emancipation of women included rights to education and public participation, but not meaningful political and economic participation. In many ways this reflected the continued belief that the primary role of women was in the family as mothers. So while the revolutions claimed the status of a new women's rights order, the revolutions in Egypt did not completely "modernize" gender relations or instill equality in the private and public domains.

Despite this seemingly disappointing relation between women and political struggles, scholars are quick to point out the liberating consequences of these struggles on women's activism. For instance, scholars cite the growth of feminist movements in Egypt after the 1919 revolution. Notwithstanding the nationalist regime's hostile attitude toward women's rights, women's participation in the nationalist struggle provided a strong base of experienced activists, as well as established national and international networks and collaborations. Meanwhile, the 1952 Free Officers' revolution brought state feminism, which resulted in co-opting the women's movement and suppressing independent feminist organizations. Women's agency, however, can still be

¹⁰ The reference here is for the rights extended to women on the basis of their role as wives and mothers. For instance, the Egyptian state granted women maternity leave to guarantee their economic equality with men. However, the same effort is not exerted to facilitate their political participation and hence promote gender equality in the political realm.

located within the state feminist arrangements and its gendered agenda (Bier 2011; Mahmood 2005; Podeh and Winckler 2004). As the prominent feminist scholar Judith Butler attests, the possibility of agency can be located within the structures of power (1990: 15). In the case of Egypt, the increased numbers of female professionals brought progressive changes for women and opened up venues for their public participation.