GENDER, RELIGION and CHANGE in the MIDDLE EAST

TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORY
English edition
First published in 2005 by
Berg
Editorial offices:
First Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street, Oxford OX4 1AW, UK
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

© Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flakerud 2005

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form
or by any means without the written permission of
Berg.

Berg is the imprint of Oxford International Publishers Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gender, religion and change in the Middle East : two hundred years of history / edited by
Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flakerud. — English ed.
p. cm. — (Cross-cultural perspectives on women,
ISSN 1068-8536 ; v. [26])
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Women—Middle East. 2. Women—Islamic countries. I. Okkenhaug, Inger Marie. II.
Flakerud, Ingvild. III. Series.
HQ1785.G46 2005
305.3'0986'0904—dc22

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13 978 1 84520 198 2 (Cloth)
978 1 84520 199 9 (Paper)

ISBN-10 1 84520 198 1 (Cloth)
1 84520 199 X (Paper)

Typeset by JS Typesetting Ltd, Porthcawl, Mid Glamorgan
Printed in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn.

www.bergpublishers.com
# Contents

**Introduction**  
_Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Ingvild Flaskerud_  
1

1 Justice without Drama: Observations from Gaza City Sharia Court  
_Nahda Younis Shehada_  
13

2 From the Army of G-d to the Israeli Armed Forces: An Interaction between Two Cultural Models  
_Yohai Hakak_  
29

3 To Give the Boys Energy, Manliness, and Self-command in Temper: The Anglican Male Ideal and St. George’s School in Jerusalem, c.1900–40  
_Inger Marie Okkenhaug_  
47

4 Women Students at the American University of Beirut from the 1920s to the 1940s  
_Aleksandra Majstorac Kobiljski_  
67

5 Women’s Voluntary Social Welfare Organizations in Egypt  
_Beth Baron_  
85

6 Nineteenth-century Protestant Missions and Middle-Eastern Women: An Overview  
_Heleen Murre-van den Berg_  
103

7 The Paradox of the New Islamic Woman in Turkey  
_Jenny B. White_  
123

8 Visions of Mary in the Middle East: Gender and the Power of a Symbol  
_Willy Jansen_  
137

9 An Army of Women Learning Torah  
_Leah Shaked_  
155

10 Stones and Stories: Engaging with Gender and Complex Emergencies  
_Nefissa Naguib_  
175
Contents

11 Tradition and Change: Afghan Women in an Era of War and Displacement
  Karin Ask 191

12 Vows, Mediumship and Gender: Women's Votive Meals in Iran
  Azam Torab 207

Index 223
Women’s Voluntary Social Welfare Organizations in Egypt

Beth Baron

Introduction

Social welfare activities have been acknowledged in works on Middle Eastern women’s rights movements and on gender and nationalism, for feminists often had strong social agendas and female nationalists nearly always coupled their work for the nation with social reform. Indeed, one cannot read through works on women’s movements and on gender and nationalism without noting the active engagement of the female protagonists in philanthropic endeavors (on Egypt, see, for example, Marsot 1978; Badran 1995). Yet this commitment and activity has rarely been the main story. Rather, it has been used to demonstrate other points, such as the feminists’ concern for the poor and the reach of their movements, women nationalists’ fervor and desire to uplift the nation, or women’s search for an outlet for their energy and a path to wage-earning jobs and professions. None of this is necessarily wrong. Only more could be said about these voluntary social welfare projects.

My own work followed this pattern. A final chapter in The Women’s Awakening in Egypt Culture, Society, and the Press on women’s organizations saw their involvement in charities from 1890 to 1920 as a road to something else, a path to professional or political enhancement. “Charitable work came to be seen as a legitimate outlet for women of means as they learned new skills... Through voluntary associations, women expanded the parameters of permissible activities and increased their mobility.” And, “elite women identified social welfare as a neglected field and fertile ground for building a power base and pushing toward the center of politics” (Baron 1994: 175, 171). In Egypt as a Woman: Nationalists, Gender, and Politics (Baron 2005), which covers the period through the 1940s, I suggest that social welfare work was not always a path to politics but sometimes a path from it, with women turning to social welfare work when pushed out of nationalist politics. A final chapter in Egypt as a Woman examines the philanthropic work of the Islamic activist Labiba Ahmad (1870s–1951) in the context of her religious nationalism.
Women’s nationalist, feminist, religious and social politics cannot be easily disentangled, as women moved among and between these endeavors, seeing them as intimately connected. A range of figures, including Huda Sha’rawi, Esther Fahmi Wisa, Labiba Ahmad and others worked on several fronts, often simultaneously. The press of the period confirms this, containing numerous references to new charities, fundraisers and workshops side-by-side with discussions of women’s rights and resistance to the British occupation. Yet ultimately female activists set priorities, with feminists primarily concerned with women’s rights, nationalists with independence, Islamists with religious renewal, and social welfare activists with poor relief and public health (see Gallagher 1990: 54, whose work provides a good model on writing the history of women’s social welfare work). Thus feminist, nationalist, religious and social politics need to be viewed both together and apart, to the extent possible.

The elite background of many of the Egyptian philanthropists, who as one author noted “were blessed with wealth” (Marsot 1978: 275), caused other observers to condemn their efforts as ineffectual, misbegotten or worse. They have been both lauded and attacked, yet there has been little serious historical reconstruction of their programs or analysis of the part they played in providing poor relief in Egypt. The social welfare activities of elite women were not only a central part of their lives but also a crucial chapter in the history of public health and social welfare in Egypt. This chapter moves women’s social welfare activism to the center of inquiry, to examine it in the context of social welfare movements, as part of the history of “poverty and charity” in the Middle East (see Bonner, Ener and Singer 2003) and as a chapter in Egyptian women’s history. The time frame considers women’s voluntary social welfare work from the early 1900s through the 1960s.

**A Patchwork of Providers: Private, State and Foreign**

Scholars of European and US history have offered useful conceptual tools for analyzing women’s social welfare work. The writing on this is voluminous, particularly from the 1990s, and is central to the field of US women’s and gender history (see Ginzberg 1990; McCarthy 1990; Koven and Michel 1993; Sklar 1993; McCarthy 2001). These works consider the class backgrounds, motivations and methods of female philanthropists and “social justice feminists” (Sklar, Schuler and Strasser 1999). Their works make clear that the relationship between women and the state, and the state and social welfare, is pivotal to understanding social welfare. The literature suggests that the state picks up what women started, with women remaining instrumental in shaping and enforcing state policies and programs as they moved from volunteers to professionals with the growth of the welfare state system.
Yet for Egypt, like other areas of the Middle East, the interplay of state and private forces in providing social welfare is not the only story to be told, for there was another set of important actors in the field. These included missionaries, colonial officers and their wives, Western feminists, among others, who provided a range of social services. At first glance, it seems that women’s welfare societies arose in Egypt as a nationalistic reaction to foreign inroads in the field of social welfare. But to stress this simplifies the complex relationship between local and foreign social welfare activists, who competed, cooperated and relied upon one another to launch and sustain programs. This was true even as the ideological underpinnings of state, private and foreign social welfare programs shifted over time.

Mine Ener sketched transformations in poor relief in her Managing Egypt’s Poor and the Politics of Benevolence, 1800–1952 (2003). Prior to the nineteenth century, she tells us, providing benevolence was a religious obligation which individuals and the community fulfilled through acts of charity and the establishment of trusts. The rulers and elite had a special social obligation to take care of those in need and demonstrated largesse and power through the funding of soup kitchens, hostels, hospitals and the like. During the nineteenth century, the state increasingly appropriated religious functions and funds, taking over trusts and the care of the poor. Ener speaks of “managing” rather than “controlling” the poor, suggesting agency on the part of the recipients who received assistance and who “astutely negotiated” the state system of poor houses. The impulse to provide for the poor may have initially been a religious obligation, but the service was now increasingly divorced from religious institutions.

Under the British occupation from 1882, state “management” of the poor in Egypt continued. Like their predecessors, the British espoused a policy that seemed more concerned with keeping the poor out of view or off the streets than with providing meaningful services or training, and colonial authorities allotted less than 1 percent of the budget to health and welfare. Eager to have private individuals and groups bear the burden of providing social welfare, the British left the field open to private initiatives. Public health and social welfare thus remained a patchwork of state but mostly private Egyptian and foreign initiatives. The haphazard approach of the colonial authorities to social welfare was reflected in the distribution of services among various ministries with a reliance on efforts from missionaries, colonial wives and local elites.

Missionaries who had come to Egypt in the nineteenth century faced a ban on proselytizing among Muslims and had shifted their strategy from conversion to social transformation. They established a vast network of orphanages, schools and hospitals, and were joined in this effort by colonial wives and officers. The missionaries and colonial wives of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were increasingly replaced from the 1920s by representatives of large foundations
such as Rockefeller and Ford. The rise of the big foundations reflected a new chapter in American philanthropy, as the foundations, some of which commanded huge resources, pushed their own ideological and social agendas. US government aid would follow the foundations into Egypt, but only later in the twentieth century.

The women’s social welfare organizations that emerged from the late nineteenth century were often organized along religious and communal lines, though their lay leadership challenged traditional religious leaders. Intercommunal groups also appeared, playing a role in the secularization of society, and both communal and intercommunal organizations formed an important part of civil society. The volunteers who established these associations showed remarkable skill in navigating between the state and international agencies. The shifts and turns in this story are best told by focusing on a few examples. The stress here is on four voluntary welfare societies that devoted themselves to health and welfare. (Health and welfare are the focus rather than education, which is an enormous topic that has had some coverage and needs separate treatment.) The approach taken here diverges from the emphasis on the discourse of social reformers and family planners evident in the work of a cluster of young scholars (for more on the discourse of social reformers, see Shakry 2002). Rather, this chapter examines the founding of women’s social welfare associations, their visions and programs, and the relationship of these associations to the Egyptian state and private donors.

Mabarrat Muhammad ‘Ali al-Kabir (Muhammad Ali Benevolent Society)

The Mabarrat Muhammad ‘Ali al-Kabir was founded in the early 1900s by royal women seeking to make a “humanitarian contribution” to the Egyptian nation in the wake of a high wave of infant mortality. Colonial wives had started a foundling home in 1898 in memory of the late Lady Cromer and subsequently started dispensaries as well. As Huda Sha’rawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, recounts in her memoir: Princess ‘Ayn al-Hayat discussed her idea for founding a dispensary after Huda had declined an invitation to a tea for the new Lady Cromer. The latter, wife of the British high commissioner, had wanted to thank those Egyptian women who had participated in the founding of the Lady Cromer Refuge, among them Huda’s late mother. Princess ‘Ayn al-Hayat confessed to Huda she was ashamed that “we Egyptians” did not undertake such “splendid projects” (Sha’rawi 1981: 119–20 1986: 94–5; see also Mahfouz 1935: 106). At a subsequent meeting of princesses and aristocratic women, participants each pledged £50 pounds or more, with Khedive ‘Abbas Hilmi’s mother pledging £120 annually, and the Khedive and his wife also promising support. The pledges plus sales of a stamp added up to...
£E3,000 (Egyptian pounds), which was the capital with which the society started. The stamp, which was distributed to ministries throughout the country for sale, showed a woman hugging a poor girl, reflecting the founders’ maternalist vision of their benevolent role. Yet in relying on contributions of time as well as money and establishing a voluntary association to steer the project, the Mabarra marked a departure from earlier royal charitable projects.

Princess ʿAyn al-Hayat died shortly thereafter, but Princess Nazli Halim took over the project and with the assistance of aristocratic women such as Huda Shaʿrawi moved their plans forward. A building was rented close to the palace on Shariʿa al-Baramuni in the ʿAbdin district of Cairo. An Egyptian architect renovated it and society members furnished it with donations: Huda gave beds, her brother gave desks, and one of the princesses gave sheets. The dispensary opened in 1913 in a ceremony attended by the wife of the Khedive. A “Miss Crouser,” an Irish specialist in childcare, ran the unit, which was staffed by Egyptian and European physicians who volunteered their time. The society raised funds through elaborate galas in royal and aristocratic homes, which became events of great social occasion. The members of the Mabarra, who were well connected and wedded to elite notions of social prestige and “performance” of charity, assured the future of the organization (see Shaʿrawi 1981: 121–3; Baron 1994: 240, notes 19 and 20).

While royal patronage of the association remained important and gave the group visibility, the day-to-day operations were in the hands of a paid staff, which was supervised by elite volunteers on the executive committee. Huda Shaʿrawi at one time headed that committee, but after World War I Hidiyya Afi (1898–1969) assumed control as treasurer and from that point effectively ran the Mabarra for nearly half a century. A product of a French convent school (Notre Dame de la Mère de Dieu), Hidiyya was tied to Saʿd Zaghlul, head of the Wafd Party, through marriage to the law professor Baha al-Din Barakat (Seton 1923: 30–1; Marsot 1978: 271–5). When she took command of the Mabarra, she pushed to expand the society’s operations. According to the annual report for 1920, while the government operated twelve children’s dispensaries throughout the provinces, in Cairo the field was left to “the useful work” carried out by “charitable committees” of the Mabarrat Muhammad Ali. The Mabarra ran a dispensary at Manshia and opened a new building at Madbuli, on the border of Bulaq (UK Foreign Office 1921: 77). The dispensary in ʿAbdin eventually became a hospital with an outpatient clinic. Mabarra committee members oversaw the operation of the clinics and hospitals, inspecting them regularly.

Using its connections, women of the Mabarra encouraged donations of land and money to build new facilities. Government hospitals existed in major provincial towns, but these did not serve smaller towns or remote villages. Yet the government refused to broaden its services to outlying regions: “A general provision of such by
the State ... would impose too great a financial burden upon the Government, and this local need must fall to be met by local effort," wrote the high commissioner in 1921. Noting the "evidence of an increasing public interest in the provision of hospital treatment for the poor is shown by the readiness of the prominent residents in many localities to give land and money to provide hospitals and to help in collecting funds for their maintenance," he was probably seeing the hand of the Mabarra at work (UK Foreign Office 1920: 83–7, 1921: 76).

Under Hidiyya Affi Barakat’s guidance and with the support of the government, the Mabarra continued to build hospitals and clinics. In the 1940s, it added emergency relief to its repertoire when faced with war and epidemics, a story which Nancy Gallagher (1990) has chronicled. During the bombing of Alexandria in 1940 and 1941, women from the Mabarra set up soup kitchens and shelters for refugees. In 1944, Mabarra leaders drew attention to the severity of the malarial epidemic and sent teams to the south to assist in emergency relief. In coordination with the Ministry of Health, which set guidelines for their work, they divided the field with the newly formed Women’s Committee of the Egyptian Red Crescent Society. The first Mabarra group that went out to Luxor included Amina Sidqi, Firdaws Shitta, Mary Khalil, the Mabarra physician Dr. Benyamin, as well as two nurses, Aba Sa’id Ahmad and Ni’matullah Amin. The Red Crescent team, which was based at Isna, included women such as Nahid Sirri, Princess Chevikar’s daughter Luftiya Yusri, Layla Shawarabi, Gertrude Butrus Ghali and Celine Cattawi, plus a palace physician. The volunteers delivered food, clothing and medicine to the sick and dying in the villages surrounding Luxor. They worked long stretches, setting up soup kitchens that fed up to 4,300 people a day and transporting food and medicine to villagers too sick to come to the larger towns for help. They soon built bases of operation and food distribution in other towns (Gallagher 1990: ch. 3; for contemporary accounts of the Women’s Red Crescent, see “Shabbat al-Hilal al-Ahmar” 1945: 36–8, 1948: 40–4).

In the field and understaffed, the volunteers recognized the magnitude of the crisis and also understood that food and medicine, and their intervention, were not enough to stem the epidemic. Princess Chevikar, who then headed the Mabarra, drew attention to the crisis through a series of press conferences calling for support of the women’s relief efforts. The politics of public health in the 1940s proved daunting. The British tried to defend their rather abysmal record on public health from the outset of the occupation in 1882, to deny their complicity in conveying the malarial mosquitoes to Egypt by air transport, and to keep American medical and technological competition at bay. The Wafd Party wanted to portray its own efforts from 1942, when the outbreaks of malaria began, as effective, and opposed foreign intervention, which would contradict their claims. King Faruq hoped to capitalize on the catastrophe to drive the Wafd, which the British had forced on him in 1942, from power. On their part, Chevikar and the volunteers from the Mabarra
encouraged the king to press the Minister of Health to recall the Rockefeller Foundation expert in eradication. During the period that the Rockefeller team worked on eradicating the mosquitoes, they received help from the women of the Mabarra and the Women’s Committee of the Red Crescent (Gallagher 1990: ch. 5).

The Mabarra continued to support the Rockefeller Foundation, which sought to turn the success of the eradication campaign into a more permanent presence in Egypt and a headquarters for their Middle East division. When Egyptian ministers proved unreceptive, officials turned to the women from the Mabarra and Red Crescent for guidance. They continued to back one another in political skirmishes, and in the field, specifically in a delousing campaign in 1946 to combat relapsing fever (Gallagher 1990: 101–2, 109). In 1947 when cholera broke out in the Delta, the government turned again to the women’s relief organizations for help. The Mabarra and Women’s Red Crescent Society responded by distributing supplies and clothing and by setting up vaccination centers. The Mabarra, now under the presidency of Faruq’s sister Princess Fawziyya, started fourteen such vaccination centers, which inoculated hundreds of thousands of people (Gallagher 1990: 135–6).

Women involved in social welfare services developed a keen political sense and learned to work with government officials and foreign foundations. They were also well attuned to the needs on the ground. After coming face to face with the extent of rural poverty in Egypt during the eradication and inoculation campaigns, the Mabarra extended its programs and opened dispensaries in Minya, Tanta, Sidi Salim and Zaqaqiq in the late 1940s. By the time the monarchy was overturned in 1952, bringing an end to Princess Fawziyya’s presidency and royal patronage, the Mabarra operated twelve hospitals and eighteen dispensaries. Hadiyya Barakat assumed the presidency of the organization that she had essentially run for over forty years, administering over a hundred full-time male employees, seventy-six full-time female employees and twenty-two volunteers (Badran 1995: 121, from Oeuvre Mohamed Ali; see also Gallagher 1990: 170). The Mabarraat Muhammad ‘Ali was one of the first non-governmental organizations founded in Egypt and provided a significant share of health and emergency relief at a time when the Egyptian state lacked the means or will to provide such services.

Jam‘iyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida (The New Woman Society)

An alliance of middle- and upper-class Christian and Muslim notable women active in the Women’s Wafd Central Committee (WWCC) founded a philanthropic organization in 1920. Calling it a “moral and charitable society” and “the first of its kind,” they named it the New Woman Society (Jami‘yyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida)
after Qasim Amin’s famed turn-of-the-century book of that title (“Fi Mashghal al-Mar’a al-Jadida” 1928: 183; “Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida” 1921: 67–76). The American visitor Grace Thompson Seton, who met some of the female founders of the society, claimed they “represented the brains, culture, and wealth of the country,” and characterized their ambition as “no less than to stimulate and control the welfare work of the whole nation” (Seton 1923: 47).

Members ratified the charter of the society in April 1920. The charter divided the society into three sections: founders, distinguished members, who paid $12 per year in dues and voted a higher committee to supervise the finances and functions of the society, and general members, who elected the administrative officers to a board. The administrative officers were elected for three years, with the first term starting in 1920. The society recruited respected members of the community, announcing that only ladies of “good reputation” need apply and others would be excluded without explanation. Fees for general membership were set at 120 'ushr. As articulated in the group’s charter, the mission of the society was to help Egyptian women advance through charitable projects and good works. They took as their main mission the raising and educating of poor girls.

The administrative board met weekly. It initially consisted of Amina Sidqi, wife of Dr. Mahmud Sidqi and daughter of Ismail Sidqi, an Egyptian economist, politician and sometime prime minister as president; the wife of Ahmad Shakir as vice-president; a daughter of Hussayn Thabit as treasurer; and Jamila ‘Atiya, the daughter of Mahmud ‘Atiya, as secretary. Distinguished members included ‘Alwiya Sharif, Esther Fahmi Wisa, Fatima Sami, Zaynab Rifat and Ni’mat Hamdi, plus the wife of Dr. Habib Khayyat, Raghib Iskandar and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Hilmi, and the daughters of Hussayn Thabit, Rahib Ahmad and Iskandar Ibrahim. More than a few were daughters or wives of physicians, and all were of the elite. Huda Sha’rawi served as honorary president, a role which essentially meant she was the main benefactor. The charter of the group clearly spelled out its structure and mission, and shows the formal nature of the organization as well as its commitment, at least on paper, to democratic processes (“Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida” 1921: 67–76; the program is also reproduced in el-Subki 1986: 203–7).

By the time the story of the society broke in the monthly journal al-Mar’a al-Misriyya, the group had already raised and invested a significant sum of money. The funds were used to set up a handicraft workshop and training school in the Munira section of Cairo. The editor of the journal praised the group for their industriousness and circumspection, for they had produced results rather than chased publicity (“Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida” 1921: 67–76). When Muhammad Tawfiq Rifat Pasha, Minister of Education, visited the complex in the late fall of 1920, it was already in full swing, and he congratulated the group on its good work (“Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida” 1921: 36–7; Seton 1923: 48–9; Baron 1994: 172–3; Badran 1995: 51).
Seton visited the “Girls’ Club” in the early 1920s. She described being taken to a “decayed old palace” in a poor quarter in Cairo where girls were taught “rug-weaving, embroidery, dress-making, lace-making and household work in order to learn a trade and become self-supporting.” They were also given elementary instruction and lessons in simple hygiene “such as the care of teeth, eyes, skin and hair according to modern standards” (Seton 1923: 47). Jamila ‘Atiyya, secretary of the society, oversaw the school with special help from two Thabit sisters—Amina and Wajida—as well as from Fatima Sami. The workshop contained between 150 and 250 girls, with some 50 living in residence (“Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida” 1923: 273; Seton 1923: 47). Seton noted that a visit to the facilities of the New Woman Society as well as to those of the Mabarrat Muhammad Ali “leaves one with the same impression as would a similar visit to Hull House in Chicago, or a settlement house in the Whitechapel district of London” (Seton 1923: 46).

Girls who benefited from charitable institutions sometimes served as foot soldiers for their benefactors. During a large meeting in January 1922 to protest British occupation policy, girls from the New Woman Society workshop sang nationalist songs (Badran 1995: 83). In a protest coordinated with the WWCC at the opening of the Egyptian Parliament in April 1924, girls from the society held up placards in French and Arabic attacking the British occupation and colonial efforts to separate Egypt and the Sudan in addition to demanding women’s rights to education, divorce, monogamy and the vote (Al-Lata’if al-Musawwara 1924: 4; Sha’rawi 1981: 296–97, 1986: photo on p. 133). Whether the working-class girls carrying the signs understood or spoke French is not clear.

The New Woman Society established branches in provincial towns, including one, for example, in Zaqaziq early in 1922. The founder of that branch, the wife of Abd al-Baqi Kaffi, sent in seventeen gallabias for students in the society’s workshop, sealing the tie between branches with a gift (“Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida bi al-Zaqaziq” 1922: 215). Other gifts to the society were reported in the press; giving was meant to generate publicity, garner good will or mark an auspicious occasion. Upon the death of her husband in the spring of 1922, Huda Sha’rawi gave £50 toward clothing for the students of the workshop. At the same time, Sharifa Riyad donated a quantity of valuable jewelry (“Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida” 1922: 262). Later that year and upon the occasion of the departure of Safiyya Zaghlul (“Mother of the Nation”) to join her husband in exile in Gibraltar, Wajiyya Muhammad Musa of Minya gave £40 for clothing for the girls in the workshop (“Akbar Dakhiliyya” 1922: 405). The workshop was also meant to generate its own funds through the sale of the items of clothing, carpets and other handicrafts it made and potentially be self-sustaining.

Money was also raised in annual charity bazaars, which many flocked to and others found frivolous. These were generally held in the palaces of the elite and ran for a few days. In April 1923, the society held a three-day bazaar (two days
for women only, one day for both men and women) in Munira in the palace of Mahmud Sami Pasha, a deputy in the Ministry of Communications. The bazaar included displays of handicrafts made at the workshop as well as food, sweets, flowers and musical entertainment. It made close to £1,300, the bulk of which came from the benefactor and her family ("Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida" 1923: 272–4). The following year, a European seamstress supervised sewing of women’s and baby’s clothing for a special fair ("Mashghal Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida" 1924). In 1928, the annual bazaar of the New Woman Society was held under the patronage of the Queen and raised £1,386 ("Fi Mashghal al-Mar’a al-Jadida" 1928: 183).

In elections in 1927, there was some reshuffling of administrative posts. Amina Sidqi retained the presidency, Fatiha Sami became vice-president, the wife of Muhammad Musa took over as treasurer, the wife of Hasan Khalil Shanab became secretary and the wife of Ratib Pasha became the new honorary president ("Jam’iyyat al-Mar’a al-Jadida" 1927: 148). The change in honorary president that year (and possibly as early as 1924) might have marked the break Sha’rawi had had with the Wafd and the unraveling of the Women’s Wafd Central Committee (Baron 2005: ch. 7). Already in 1924, the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) had opened its own dispensary for poor women and children, and a handicrafts workshop in Sayyida Zaynab, a densely populated lower-class quarter (Badran 1995: 99–100). That probably marked the withdrawal of Sha’rawi’s patronage from the New Woman Society. The EFU workshop taught girls with an elementary education in Arabic, French, arithmetic, hygiene, drawing, morals, religion and manual crafts (including needlework, sewing, rug-weaving and weaving of stockings, flannels and scarves). The dispensary operated alongside the workshop and was meant to serve women and children, teaching mothers hygiene and healthcare. Approximately two hundred people came daily to the dispensary, which received support from the government and from physicians who volunteered their time. Both operations were moved to Habbaniyah on Qasr al-‘Ayni Street when the EFU relocated there in 1932. After the move, many medical cases were referred to the Qasr al-‘Ayni hospital, which was close by, and eventually, in a budget crunch, the EFU closed the dispensary. Although a daycare facility was later opened, social work was an arm of the EFU but not its main purpose ("Dar Itiḥād al-Nisā‘i" 1925: 7, see photos of girls in the workshop on pp. 15–16; Arafa 1973: 33–6; Sha’rawi 1981: 298–9; Badran 1995: 99, 111–13).

By the 1940s, the New Woman Society workshop had become known for its production of carpets, handiwork and beautiful dresses, which “equaled the best” of foreign clothing styles (“al-Nahda al-Niswiyya fi Rub’ Qarn" 1949: 14). By then the workshop had prepared poor girls for artisanal work and handicraft professions for over two decades.
Esther Fahmi Wisa and the Work for Egypt Society (Jam'iyyat al-'Amal li-Misr)

Esther Fahmi Wisa came from a leading Coptic notable family and was among the founders of the New Woman Society. Like many women in that group, she had marched in the ladies' demonstrations in March 1919, rallied to the side of the Wafd, and helped to found the Women's Wafd Central Committee in January 1920. When Huda Sha'rawi broke with the Wafd in 1924 and resigned as head of the WWC, Esther stayed the course and helped establish the Sa'dist Ladies' Committee, which functioned for many years as the women's auxiliary of the Wafd Party. Having been schooled by an English nanny and American Presbyterians in Asyut, she spoke artfully to small and large gatherings at home and abroad and wrote articles for the press. She also acted as an intermediary with British officials, including Lord Allenby and others. The British high commissioner, Miles Lampson, described her in 1932 as "a prominent Wafdist lady, much interested in charitable works," and later as "a well-meaning enthusiast, much given to good works." By 1937, her son tells us, she had become disillusioned with the male political elite and declined to revive the Women's Wafd when approached by Mustafa Nahhas, successor to Sa'd Zaghlul as head of the party. (For full references, see Baron 2005: ch. 7.)

Esther had always split her energies between nationalistic politics and social welfare work and was involved in a constellation of philanthropic organizations. These included the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), an organization that had been started in England in the 1850s, became internationalized in the 1890s, opened its first branch in Cairo in 1905 and came under the direction of Regina Khayyat in 1923. Its mission was to provide spiritual guidance and accommodations for young women along Christian lines. Esther served in numerous official capacities: as secretary of the Alexandrian board, ex-officio for Alexandria on the General Council from 1933 to 1936, chairman of the Executive General Council from 1937 to 1948, and president of the Alexandrian branch from 1942 to 1983. The group held an annual bazaar to raise funds, and Esther later hosted an annual charity dance at her home as well as the two-day summer meeting of the Executive Council. She also served on the boards of the Women's Committee of the Egyptian Red Crescent and the Coptic Ladies' Society, and worked for the Home International affiliated with La Maison des Jeunes Filles in Geneva (Wissa 1994: 251–3; Badran 1995: 114).

Hans Weiss, who surveyed conditions of "street waifs" in Alexandria for the Rockefeller Foundation in 1930, met "Madame Fahmy Wissa Bey." He described her as the woman leading the social welfare movement in Alexandria. Esther requested that a young woman be trained "so that Alexandria might also have a worker who could organize social work along modern lines in that city." She
had considered studying social work in the United States herself but her family obligations—she had five children—ruled this out (Weiss 1930). Egyptian women like Esther proved savvy in seeking government and foreign assistance, and followed developments among American foundations. At the time, the journal *al-Marʿa al-Misrīyya*, edited by a Coptic compatriot, Balsam ʿAbd al-Malik, noted the establishment of the Ford Foundation (“Mabarrat Mahmuda li-Mister Ford” 1930: 131).

Although Esther was involved in a range of philanthropies, she dedicated the bulk of her energy to the Work for Egypt Society and was the force behind the founding of the organization in 1924. Like the New Woman Society, it established a formal structure, published by-laws and established multiple branches, promoting the ideal that privileged members of society should give financial and moral support to poor families. The branch in Alexandria built and maintained an outpatient clinic at Schutz Ramleh, a suburb, on land it had purchased. The clinic employed a full-time general practitioner and nurse, with part-time specialists visiting several days a week. Patients were treated free of charge and provided with medicines. The society also had an educational arm, which gave mothers lessons in hygiene and provided childcare for working mothers (“al-Jamʿiyyat: Jamʿiyyat al-ʿAmal li-Misr” 1927: 48–50; “Baʿd al-ʿUta” 1929: 296–7; Wissa 1994: 254–8).

Money was raised from subscriptions, annual plays, concerts, film showings, public contributions, subventions and a lottery. In 1928, in its fourth year, the Alexandrian branch of the society had a net income from the charity show of £E1,031 (after taxes) plus £E83 from subscriptions and donations. The expenses for the year, which included medicine and salaries, were £E863. The society was a corporate body whose accounts were audited annually after it came under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs (Wissa 1994: 254–8).

**Labiba Ahmad and the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening (Jamʿiyyat Nahdat al-Sayyidat al-Misriyyat)**

Labiba Ahmad (1870s–1951) also marched in the women’s demonstrations of March 1919, signed the petitions and rallied for the Wafd. She may have been involved in the work of the Maharra before that, because her husband was closely tied to the royal court and was briefly master of ceremonies for Khedive ʿAbbas Hilmi II (r. 1892–1914). After the 1919 revolution, Labiba remained close to Safiyya Zaghlul and to the inner circle of female Wafdistas, but instead of joining the Women’s Wafd Central Committee, she struck out in another direction. In 1919 or so she founded the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening (Jamʿiyyat Nahdat al-Sayyidat al-Misriyyat), an association with an Islamic nationalist vision. Her work was “inspired by God” and a desire to “uplift the nation.” The society’s
first project was an orphanage: Labiba and her colleagues gathered together 170 orphaned or abandoned girls from the area around Sayyida Zaynab, their base of operations, and opened the home in 1920. Labiba vowed to raise the girls and teach them the commandments of Islam. (For full references to the section here and below, see Baron 2003: 239–54.)

Not much is known about the orphanage other than the need for such an institution. Given the stigma of illegitimacy in Egyptian society (which was taken as proof of illicit sexual encounters), undesired infants were abandoned. The Lady Cromer Home (or Foundling Hospital) was originally founded in 1898 in a wing of Qasr al-Aini Hospital to take in abandoned babies. In 1902 it admitted 85 children, of whom 32 were later adopted; two years later, the hospital admitted 131 abandoned babies. Mortality was high among the group for the infants had been found shortly after their birth in deserted buildings or on waste ground (UK Foreign Office 1903: 53; “Malja’ al-Itfal wa al-Wilada” 1920: 353–7). A Muslim women’s welfare organization—Waf’d Khalil Agha—was subsequently established in connection with the hospital to, among other things, find homes for the orphans, though strictly speaking adoption was not legal in Islam (Seton 1923: 49). The refuge still carried the name of Lady Cromer in 1920, though by then it was funded by the Egyptian government and some called it the Children’s and Birthing Home (“Malja’ al-Itfal wa al-Wilada” 1920: 353–7).

Labiba’s group may have taken note of the fact that missionaries and colonial wives had established orphanages throughout Egypt raising them in a Christian context, and that the state ran only a few institutions at most. By starting an orphanage, Labiba Ahmad could guarantee contributors that the girls would be raised in a Muslim setting, would learn Islamic tenets and would also be groomed to be good nationalists. Like the girls of the workshop of the New Woman Society, the girls of the Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening marched in demonstrations carrying banners.

Raising orphans meant caring for their various needs: feeding, clothing, healing, educating and training them. Appeals were made for donations of clothing, and physicians, including her son, volunteered their services. A workshop was established to teach the girls handicrafts and housekeeping so that they would have skills and vocations. There was an appeal for lecturers to teach the girls morality. When Labiba subsequently decided that poor girls in general needed training to save them from falling into professions like prostitution, the society looked for a larger space. It rented the palace of the late ’Abd al-Qadir Pasha Hilmi in Sayyida Zaynab and opened the doors to the new “Institute and Workshop of the Women’s Awakening” in 1923.

The Society of Egyptian Ladies’ Awakening did not use the same strategies for fundraising as some of their contemporaries. Bazaars and dances were too Western for their taste, even if they were segregated affairs. Instead, they started
the journal *al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya* (The Women’s Awakening) to publicize their values and mission and made appeals through the press to Islamic circles. Labiba also tried other fundraising tactics. She sold a book of wisdom to raise funds and tapped into a network of governing officials as well as an Islamic circle that generously supported her venture. The workshop, too, in time probably became self-sufficient, as not only did it train girls, but also the girls produced items that could be sold.

Tracing the girls of the orphanage and workshop is difficult as their stories are not recorded in the brief reports of the society in the press. Some photos of the girls appear in *al-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya*. One shows a small child who accompanied Labiba on a trip to see off a friend sent into exile. Others show them marching with the society’s banners in demonstrations or at the opening of the new workshop and institute.

**Toward a Welfare State**

The British colonial state was stingy in funding social services. Once Egyptian notables gained a greater measure of control over the state in 1923, they sought to undo some of the damage done by the neglect of this field. They turned their attention first to increasing the provision of state education, for education made loyal citizens and good nationalists, and only hesitantly addressed public health and welfare issues. The Egyptian state moved incrementally in the 1930s and 1940s toward broadening social services. There were reorganizations of ministries and departments, with the appearance of a Ministry of Social Affairs in 1939. One of the charges of the new ministry was to monitor private social welfare organizations. In practice this often meant giving subventions and auditing them annually. The ministry had limited funds to launch new initiatives and tended to work in cooperation with private groups. There was little legislation in this sphere during this period, aside from some protection of women’s and children’s labor, and in general the pace of socio-economic reform was slow.

The 1952 revolution did not result in an immediate transformation of the state’s social welfare policy. Although the end of the monarchy removed an important layer of the patronage network (royal women), many of the women’s social welfare organizations had assets that had been built up over the course of decades, and the societies continued to operate orphanages, workshops, clinics and hospitals. The 1950s showed a tightening of state control, continuing the pattern of characteristic of earlier years: under the provisions of Law no. 384 of 1956, all private social welfare organizations came under government supervision. This did not immediately mean a complete loss of autonomy. But eventually the state nationalized many foreign and private institutions, including most women’s
Women's social welfare organizations, as part of its commitment to provide a wide spectrum of social services. The women who had been deeply involved in social welfare experiments since the 1920s experienced the new regime’s injunctions in different ways as their institutions faced a variety of fates.

In 1962, the director of the Ministry of Social Affairs in Alexandria told Esther Fahmi Wisa’s family that she thought the Work for Egypt Society’s aims were “old-fashioned” and “irrelevant to the Ministry’s plans for the development of social affairs.” Having eyed the premises of the society, she planned to transform the space into a handicraft school for girls. While Esther and her board wanted to fight liquidation or to direct their assets to an institution of their own choosing, her children cautioned against putting up a fight. In the end, the Work for Egypt Society lost the property they had administered for thirty-eight years and, in spite of a promise to the contrary, the name associated with the space (Wissa 1994: 258).

The Mabarra operated its twelve hospitals and eighteen dispensaries until 1964, when all major hospitals were nationalized and its clinics were taken over as well. By its own count, it treated some 13 million patients in its last two decades, designating one-quarter of the beds in the hospitals for free service and providing treatment in the clinics for free or for nominal fees. Hidiyya Barakat stayed on as the only volunteer to work alongside government officials. By that time, the New Woman Society had merged with the Mabarra, and the new group turned its attention and what remained of its assets to developing orphanages and childcare centers. After Hidiyya’s death in 1969, her daughter assumed her place as head of the group (Marso 1978: 272–4; Gallagher 1990: 171).

Labiba Ahmad died in 1951, before the revolution. Her workshop, had it lasted until then, would have been confiscated, as most education and training centers came under the control of the state. On the other hand, if the orphanage had survived, it might have been allowed to continue. A 1965 list of member organizations and centers of the Joint Committee of Family Planning, which were all based around Cairo, included “Renaissance of Women,” which was one possible translation of the group’s name. Labiba’s group may have survived and refashioned itself as a provider of family planning services (Hussein 1965).

Tentative Conclusions

Women’s social welfare work underwent a metamorphosis from the 1900s to the 1960s. Royal, aristocratic and elite Egyptian women had always engaged in charitable giving. From the beginning of the twentieth century, they became involved in starting and running voluntary philanthropic associations that sponsored clinics, workshops, orphanages and the like, and they dedicated time
and resources to the smooth functioning of these operations. When war and epidemics challenged the state welfare apparatus, these women moved into relief work, forming teams that went throughout Egypt to help clothe and feed refugees and fight disease and epidemics and advocate policy.

The state’s neglect of social welfare gave women’s groups ample space to launch programs and follow their own particular recipes for improving the conditions of the poor. At the same time, the state capitalized on the free services of these volunteers and intervened only to set guidelines, inspect sites and check financial records. When government officials needed their expertise and assistance, they were not averse to calling upon them. These social welfare activists in turn negotiated with the state for permissions, subventions and support. The mutual dependence worked for a few decades, giving the government a cheap way to provide limited welfare services and the women freedom to work without professional training. When the state expanded its reach in health and welfare in the 1960s, this collaboration ended. The properties of most women’s voluntary social welfare organizations were taken over in a bid to monopolize and expand the scale of social services offered by the state. In revolutionary times, most of the volunteers were also discredited for having refused to address or to challenge the underlying causes of the poverty they were trying to ameliorate.

To what extent did this group of social welfare activists have an impact on the social policies of the state from the early 1900s through the 1960s? Although they were advocates of the poor, these volunteers lacked the power to enact a broad program of social legislation. Their advocacy in the political arena needs further exploration. But with the exception of some bills to regulate women’s and children’s labor in the 1930s, there was little social legislation in Egypt until after the revolution. The volunteers had a larger influence on social welfare practices than they did on policy. Some of the social welfare institutions they started, such as hospitals, dispensaries and workshops, endured for years and served as models. They also established a record of achievements in a new field, opening the door of the profession of social work to women. A coterie of women soon staffed the Ministry of Social Affairs and reached its upper echelons. The social welfare activists also forged links with foreign foundations, which set precedents for alliances between a generation of development specialists running NGOs and Western aid providers. While the development specialists would later disparage the relief projects of an earlier generation of social welfare activists as misguided if not outright reactionary, those professionals built their programs on decades of social welfare work in which women volunteers had started from scratch, used the tools at hand, taken risks and attempted to build projects that were local, self-sustaining and ahead of their times.
Dedication

This chapter marks the beginning of a new research project on social welfare in Egypt. I had hoped to be accompanied in this journey by Mine Ener, who set the groundwork for subsequent studies in this field with her pioneering work *Managing Egypt’s Poor and the Politics of Benevolence, 1800–1952* (2003). She died in tragic circumstances in the summer of 2003. I would like to dedicate this chapter to her.

References


Al-Lajat al-Musawwara (1924), April 21.


Mahfouz, N. (1935), The History of Medical Education in Egypt, Cairo: Government Press of Bulaq.
"Malju‘ al-if’al wa al-Wilada" (1920), al-Mar‘a al-Misriyya, December.

Seton, G. (1923), A Woman Tenderfoot in Egypt, New York: Dodd, Mead.
"Shabbat al-Hilal al-Ahmar" (1945), al-Taliba, 8, May.

— (1948), al-Taliba, 11 July.


Weiss, H. (1930), Letter to Dr. Durham, May 6, folder 524, box 38, series 3, Bureau of Social Hygiene, Rockefeller Archive Center.


Al-Lata’if al-Musawwarah (1924), April 21.

Mahfouz, N. (1935), The History of Medical Education in Egypt, Cairo: Government Press of Bulaq.

“Mal‘a al-Itfal wa al-Wilada” (1920), al-Mar’a al-Misriyya, December.

Seton, G. (1923), A Woman Tenderfoot in Egypt, New York: Dodd, Mead.
“Shabbot al-Hilal al-Ahmar” (1945), al-Taliba, 8, May.
—— (1948), al-Taliba, 11 July.


Weiss, H. (1930), Letter to Dr. Durham, May 6, folder 524, box 38, series 3, Bureau of Social Hygiene, Rockefeller Archive Center.