

For activists and academics—and everyone in between

Who said this?

“Neither illness, grief, nor fear of censure can prevent me from shouldering my duty with you in the continuing fight for our national rights. I have vowed to you and to myself to struggle until the end of my life to rescue our beloved country from occupation and oppression.”

Huda Sha'rawi



Opportunities

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For more information kindly contact al-raida: al-raida@lau.edu.lb

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Women, Children, and Human Rights in the Middle East: A conference in honor of Nancy Gallagher

Date & Location: April 26, 2014 – University of California Santa Barbara Loma Pelona Conference Center.

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International women's day: Fighting early marriage in Lebanon

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The roots of ongoing evil: Understanding Egypt's “culture of sexual violence”

A discussion of street sexual assaults in Egypt does not require a long introduction. The phenomenon had been widely discussed both by Egyptian and foreign media and analysts, and Egyptian women are no longer silent about it. What is striking to note here is not only the ways in which sexual violence is becoming the *Defining* experience of women in the public space in Egypt, but also the methods in which sexual violence in the public sphere seems to perpetuate itself overtime, increasing in both scope

and intensity. The public discourse on those crimes seem to center on decaying morality and on women's responsibility for what happens to them on the streets. The prevalence of justifications that center on the victims' responsibility, directly informs what we conceive as the rise of a “culture of sexual violence” against women in Egypt.

In the following paragraphs, we analyze the roots of this culture in an attempt to reach a nuanced understanding of two main binaries

that provide important clues that explain the rise of sexual violence. The first explanatory binary is that of the state/society divide, and the rise of a culture of immunity towards perpetrators of sexual violence. The second binary concerns the public/private divide as two separate yet intertwined spheres. The public/private binary is central to our argument; women tend to suffer the most from a “domestication” of the public sphere in Egypt, a consequence transferring the dominant patterns

The roots of ongoing evil: Understanding Egypt's "culture of sexual violence"

of relationships in the private sphere to the public sphere; and thus turning the personal literally into the political.

The State in Society: what signals does the state send to society about women?

The year 2005 represents a turning point for sexual violence in Egypt. In a now infamous incident known as Black Wednesday, the state hired thugs to sexually assault female journalists and activists opposed to the constitutional amendments. At the time, no one fully understood the significance of the fact that women activists could be sexually violated in broad daylight in front of everyone. In fact, no one even realized a year later when on the first day of the Eid al-Fitr holiday, the first cases of mass sexual assault occurred downtown, when groups of young men attacked women, stripping off their clothes and sexually assaulting them. The Ministry of Interior issued a statement denying that any group harassment had taken place. Sexual violence continued to increase, as the next few years saw increasing verbal and physical harassment of women in the streets, public places, and public transportation. The situation continued to deteriorate until we reached the stage of women being raped in the middle of Tahrir Square itself—the symbol of the revolution—on three separate occasions in November 2012, January 2013, and June and July 2013.

As this historical review makes clear, state representatives sent signals to society when they violated the bodies of Egyptian women in the heart of Cairo. These implicit symbols contained two key messages: women's bodies are up for grabs/fair game in general but this is particularly true if they happen to be in the "wrong place" at the "wrong time", and that crimes of sexual violence will likely go unpunished. In short, the state let it be known that there was a kind of immunity from prosecution for perpetrators of sexual violence, and that the public sphere was not safe for women. This carried a corollary message: men are responsible for protecting "their" women from other men. These implicit messages doubled the burdens on everyone—men and women—and added new dimensions to the long-standing demarcation of gendered social roles.

The betwixed public and private spheres:

We cannot analyze the phenomenon of epidemic sexual violence in the public sphere in Egypt without attending to the private/domestic sphere where women are being controlled by a number of oppressive practices that fall under the rubric of gender violence in its broadest sense. The most prominent of these practices in Egypt include

early marriage, female genital cutting (FGC), restrictions on freedom of movement, and preventing women from making major life choices for themselves. We claim that public and private spheres are closely interrelated especially when it comes to perceiving women's roles and rights in Egypt. The glorification of women's reproductive role and their domestic obligations expedites men's control over women's movement outside the house and their freedom to make decisions. We could then look at the growing sexual and gender-based violence in the public sphere as a process of domestication of this sphere. In other words, the convictions and values prevailing in the private sphere would infiltrate the public sphere and the power structures are being replicated as well turning the society into a big home. The manifestation of this domestication could be recognized in the prevailing gender, class and race norms in the public sphere where a well-off woman, a middle class woman and a domestic worker would be treated differently by state actors although they are all citizens before the law. This phenomenon could be attributed to two main reasons; first, the weakness of the state to the extent that its efforts at modernization and

changing perceptions are usually overridden by the power of the existing power structures and societal norms and second, the deterioration and disappearance of the public sphere as Hebarmassian concept, i.e. as an arena where men and women are legal and political subjects not superior and inferior genders respectively. Given the weakness of the Egyptian state since January 2011 and the transformation of the public sphere to a battlefield over the past three years, it is only natural that values of the private sphere would precipitate into the public one especially to deny women the gains they have achieved regarding their presence in the public space in the early period after the revolution.

As bleak as the picture may appear, we are not desperate. On the contrary, the feminist scene in Egypt is more hopeful than ever. The grave violations against women's bodies either by state or non-state actors and the severity and barbarism of these attacks are not being witnessed in silence. Tens of initiatives led by feminist NGOs, grass-root movements and young women and men are emerging every day to resist the epidemic violence. We believe that this bottom-up resistance could represent a seed for a real feminist movement in Egypt that could bring about the long awaited change in women's conditions in this country.

Hind Ahmed Zaki, Ph.D. Candidate, Political Science Department, University of Washington in Seattle & Dalia Abd El-Hameed, Gender & Women's Rights Officer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

*A longer version of this article was published (in Arabic) in *Jadaliyya*.

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We are interested in articles, announcements, conference reports, workshop updates, film-screenings, and social initiatives related to women and gender issues in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

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NGO Highlight

Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance

The center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) is an Egyptian non-profit, non-governmental organization. It was founded in 1995 by a group of dedicated Egyptian women lawyers. The organization's main objective is to provide legal assistance to women, especially underprivileged women. Fighting female genital mutilation, discriminatory divorce laws and honor crimes are among the many issues they are engaged in.

[Click here](#) to know more about The center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance

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Gendering choices: *Ikhtyar* for Gender Studies and Research



Without the freedom of choice, there is no personal freedom. When we talk about the choices women have we need to think about two things; the availability of resources, and more importantly, the ability to use these resources to 'imagine' a different reality, in other words the ability to make a change in one's life and conceive of a different way of living.

This is what "Choice" meaning *Ikhtyar* in Arabic is all about. *Ikhtyar* is an open space whereby a group of young feminists, researchers and activists from various backgrounds and different interests, came together to carve a space to exchange ideas and discuss gender as a cross-cutting topic. Our aim is to produce an indigenous knowledge around gender and sexuality trends and dynamics in Arabic, and to make these resources available to the public to be used as a tool to open up other possibilities of being.

Choice/Ikhtyar's first project was the *Gender School* which started last November 2013. During the three months of the project, a group of Ph.D. candidates and M.A. graduates in gender studies from the region volunteered to give lectures on various topics such as feminism, post colonialism and masculinity in the Middle East. Despite the instability in Egypt, the lectures were a success; they were attended by a large group of participants.

Another project is what we call the "deconstruction sessions" where activists and researchers have the chance to deconstruct and discuss terms and notions such as the word "feminism".

Other activities include film screening "the movie nights" where films with a gender perspective are screened followed by a discussion.

The lack of funding is not hindering the center from achieving its objectives thanks to the efforts of the large network of supporters and interested parties.

We, women and men from the Middle East, are often subjects of research rather than producers of knowledge especially after the 'Arab Spring'. Since then researchers from all over the world have been coming to 'study' us. It's time to speak about ourselves rather than being spoken about.

Our aim is to provide researchers and activists from Egypt with the necessary tools that will enable them to contribute to this body of knowledge owing to the lack of resources on gender studies, and to help show people that there is something beyond the current status quo to enable them to have a choice *Ikhtyar*.

Dina Wahba



Deconstructing the term
"Feminism"



Mai Panaga, one of the
co-founders of *Ikhtyar*

International women's day: Fighting early marriage in Lebanon



The National Campaign to "Protect Underage Girls from Early Marriage"

Nujood Ali is a brave girl from Yemen who fought for her life and had enough courage to abandon her marital home demanding legal divorce at the age of 10, setting an example to many girls all around the globe. Sadly, this is not the fate of many other girls that are likely forced into early marriages. Most of them are subjected to sexual abuse and domestic violence, while others face death owing to early pregnancies, recurrent miscarriages as well as other related health complications.

Fortunately, stories of early marriages are starting to rise in the Lebanese community spurred by the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon and their tragic plight, particularly women and young girls.

There is no law that sets the minimum age for all Lebanese; it is rather the family code of each sectarian group that defines it (Lebanon officially recognizes 18 sects). In general, the average minimum age for marriage ranges between the age of 14 and 18, but for some sects (mainly Sunnis and Shiites) a judge can wed a girl as young as nine as long as there is consent from her legal guardian.

To prevent this phenomenon from worsening, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) initiated jointly with the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) chaired by the first lady H.E. Wafa'a Sleiman a national awareness campaign entitled "*The National Campaign to Protect Underage Girls from Early Marriage*".

The event took place on the occasion of International Women's Day on March 4, at LAU premises. Ministers, members of parliament, ambassadors, international as well as national NGOs and activists attended the event.

The ceremony embraced a short film initiated by IWSAW and NCLW and directed by Wafa'a Celine Halawi reflecting the stories of five women who were forced to marry at an early age. In addition to short notes from different speakers including H.E. Randa Berri representing the first lady, LAU President Dr. Joseph G. Jabbara, Dr. Samira Aghacy, director of IWSAW, Zoya Rouhana, head of KAFA (meaning enough) Violence and exploitation, a prominent Lebanese NGO, and Judges Arlette Tabet and Fawzi Khamis who initiated a preliminary study around the topic focusing on the legal perspective.

During the ceremony lawyer Fadi Karam, secretary general of the commission also announced the inception of the two-year campaign that will entail in-depth research to overcome Lebanon's lack of accurate statistics, a media campaign targeting direct stakeholders as well as the Lebanese society at large, and developing a lobbying strategy to promote a draft law.

The draft law starts with the premise that early marriages constitute a major violation of human rights, children's rights and essentially girls' and women's rights. It denies these girls their right to protection, education, and health, but most importantly it denies them the freedom of choice. The draft law will aim at setting the minimum age for marriage at 18 years. In the meantime, it will propose measures to protect minors by imposing health and psychological examinations before marriage and ensure that both parties, notably girls, have given their consent willingly.



*A preliminary legal study (in Arabic) was distributed during the ceremony. Click [here](#) to learn more about the study

WOW project: Graffiti to promote women's issues

Women on Walls (WOW) is a project that started in 2013 with the aim of using graffiti as a tool to both talk about women's issues and empower graffiti artists, particularly female artists. Last year, over 40 artists participated in painting murals all over Alexandria, Mansoura, Luxor and Cairo; in addition to a downtown garage (on Karim El Dawla St., off to Mahmoud Bassiouny St.).

This year, WOW in collaboration with Nazra for Feminist Studies and HarassMap chose to work on the theme 'Women and the Public Space'. Alongside the Swedish feminist graffiti artist, Carolina Falkholt, 20 artists from Alexandria, Fayyoun, and Cairo designed and painted murals reflecting a variety of issues related to women, including harassment and empowerment. The Egyptian artists were from different backgrounds, including engineering, architecture, and graffiti, and designed several pieces that were both graffiti-based and mixed media-based, integrating calligraphy, stenciling, and poster art.

Angie Balata



WHO IS SHE? Profiling: Huda Sha'rawi



Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) is one of the most prominent Egyptian and Arab pioneer women who founded, on March 16, 1923, the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) (*al-Ittihad al-Nissa'i al-Misri*). The EFU was the first women's rights movement established solely by women, of the upper and middle classes, at a time when Egyptian women's political claims were part and parcel of the claims for women's emancipation (Malak Hifni Nassef), reform in Islamic thought and institution (Muhammad 'Abdo), and independence from British occupation and oppression (Sa'd Zaghlul).

The EFU called for political and social reforms and for special rights for women such as the right to work in advisory positions in education, attaining suffrage, ending polygamy, restricting divorce, and demanding alimony to divorced women. (Amal Kamil Bayyumi al-Subki, *al-Haraka al-nisa'iya fi Misr ma bayna al-thawratayn 1919 to 1952*, al-Hay'a al-missriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1986).

Huda Sha'rawi was founder and president of the EFU from 1923 until 1947, and president of the Arab Feminist Union (*al-Ittihad al-Nissa'i al-Arabi*) from 1945 to 1947. She founded the two newsletters of the EFU, both in French and Arabic, *L'Egyptienne* in 1925 and *al-Missriyya* in 1937. She was also member of the International Alliance of Women Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, and served as vice-president in 1935.

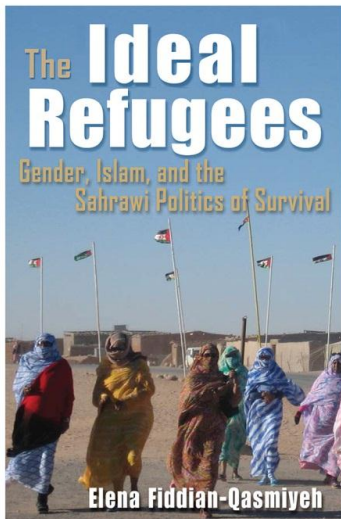
Huda Sha'rawi led the first Egyptian women's nationalist demonstration during the revolution of 1919. She and 300 women of upper, middle class and working classes, Christians and Muslims, joined the uprisings, and for the first time called for the right of women to political participation and social reform.

On March 16, of every year, Egyptians celebrate the day of the Egyptian woman (*yawm al-Mar'a al-Missriyya*) to honor the al-Sha'rawi and women nationalists who demonstrated during the revolution of 1919. Egyptian women political activists of the January 2011 revolution are linked to a long history of struggle by women nationalists whose active role in the independence of Egypt and emancipation of women is still alive.

Dr. Hosn Abboud
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The selected quote is taken from Huda Sha'rawi's speech after the death of her husband Ali Sha'rawi in 1922, and at a time she was head of the Wafdist women. See *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist Huda Sha'rawi*, translated and introduced by Margot Badran, NY, 1986, p. 126. (The photo is also selected from the same source). The original memoirs were published and edited in Arabic by Abd al-Hamid Fahmi Mursi with an introduction by Amina al-Sa'id in 1981 under the title *Muthakkarat Ra'idat al-Mar'a al Arabiyya al-Haditha* [Memoirs of a Modern Arab Woman Pioneer].

Highlights



"An original and important contribution to refugee studies."

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"Scrupulous research in a range of locations and from diverse perspectives gives comparative and cross-generational depth. . . . Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's work provides stimulating conceptual challenges to scholars and policy-makers alike."

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"This lucid and sensitive account of the Sahrawi refugee context invites us to reflect critically about the intersections of the politics of gender with the international canons of aid to refugees."

—Deniz Kandiyoti, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Syracuse University Press

The Ideal Refugees

Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Cloth \$39.95s 978-0-8156-3326-6 ebook 978-0-8156-5236-6

6 x 9, 304 pages, 13 black-and-white illustrations, notes, bibliography, glossary, index

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"A path-breaking analysis of the politics, colonial history and present-day realities of the Sahrawi refugee camps. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh reveals the extent to which the common representation of these camps as gender-equal spaces free from violence is the result of a carefully honed strategy designed to maintain support from international solidarity networks. What she finds is something rather different, and this certainly raises many questions, political as well as humanitarian. Everyone concerned with contemporary refugees and the way refugee camps are managed will benefit from reading this book."

—Robert J. C. Young, author of *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*

Refugee camps are typically perceived as militarized and patriarchal spaces, and yet the Sahrawi refugee camps and their inhabitants have consistently been represented as ideal in nature: uniquely secular and democratic spaces, and characterized by gender equality. Drawing on extensive research with and about Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, Cuba, Spain, South Africa, and Syria, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh explores how, why, and to what effect such idealized depictions have been projected onto the international arena.

In *The Ideal Refugees*, the author argues that secularism and the empowerment of Sahrawi refugee women have been strategically invoked to secure the humanitarian and political support of Western state and non-state actors who ensure the continued survival of the camps and their inhabitants. This book challenges the reader to reflect critically on who benefits from assertions of good, bad, and ideal refugees, and whose interests are advanced by interwoven discourses about the empowerment of women and secularism in contexts of war and peace.

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh is departmental lecturer in forced migration at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, where she is also junior research fellow in refugee studies at Lady Margaret Hall.

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The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival

Author: Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

Publisher: Syracuse University Press

Year: 2013

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AMEWS E-bulletin is published in cooperation with the Women and Memory Forum and the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University.

