



THE HODA SHARAWY ASSOCIATION

(Formerly the Egyptian Feminist Union)

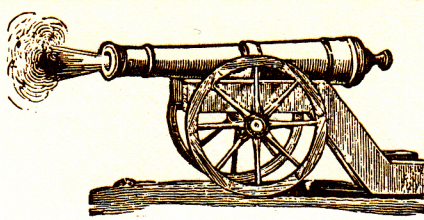
The history of the emancipation of Egyptian women dates back fifty-two years. On a spring day in March, 1919, rumor spread over Cairo that a procession of veiled women was marching down the streets in protest against the occupying powers who had sent four nationalist leaders to exile. One of those men was the husband of Hoda Sharawy, the woman who led the procession and who was destined to become the pioneer leader, not only in Egypt but in all the countries of the Arab world.

When the people got over the first surprise of seeing a procession of veiled women, a number of passers-by held hands and formed a cordon around the women to keep the masses away, meanwhile expressing their feelings with words of encouragement and cheers of admiration.

Soon, however, soldiers of the army of occupation circled the procession and stopped the women with bayonets. This went on for hours until many women fainted from heat, fatigue and exhaustion. It was not long before the people came to realize that a great movement was born.

The Egyptian women, hitherto confined within their homes as housewives and mothers only, had broken the shackles that tied them to a narrow and limited world. Hoda Sharawy, a woman of great beauty, wealth and foresight, soon gathered around her a group of equally enthusiastic women who firmly believed that the future development of Egypt demanded the combined efforts of both its men and women. The women organized themselves to face the serious problem of the day, mainly to gain the independence of Egypt, for which, so far, the men had fought alone. The attitude and courage of the women fanned the fires of nationalism and the whole country responded as one.

Before long, however, Hoda Sharawy realized that something was lacking. The women were not fully equipped to shoulder the ever growing responsibilities and problems that lay ahead. So, in 1923, she founded the Egyptian Feminist Union, having for its object the demand for equal rights in the educational, economic and political fields, as well as



reforms in family laws and the abolition of regulated prostitution. Hoda Sharawy was firm in her belief that women should receive an education that will develop their aptitudes as fully as possible so as to enable them to play an effective part as responsible citizens of the community and builders of a free nation. With tireless effort and whole-hearted enthusiasm, she set about, with her companions, to carry out the working program of the new association.

No opportunity was neglected, no effort was spared to overcome the obstacles that stood in the way of achieving women's rights. Petition after another were presented to the various governments, as well as to Parliament. Meetings with members of both houses of Parliament were often held at the club that Hoda Sharawy built. A poll conducted during an industrial exhibition, which was held in Cairo in 1946 with a view to tap public opinion on the subject of women's suffrage, created much interest. Members of the Feminist Union took turn in handing out questionnaires to visitors at the stand which was erected for the purpose.

With studied steps the fight continued and as the years went by, one by one of the demands which were on the agenda of the Feminist Union were realized. In 1929, girls were allowed equal education at all levels. The first four women graduates of Cairo University were welcomed by an outstanding group of men and women, invited by Hoda Sharawy for the occasion. Working women in many walks of life received better conditions, as to maternity leave and working hours, when we intervened on their behalf. Soon a law was passed setting 16 years as a minimum marriage age for girls and 18 for men. Regulated prostitution was abolished in 1949.

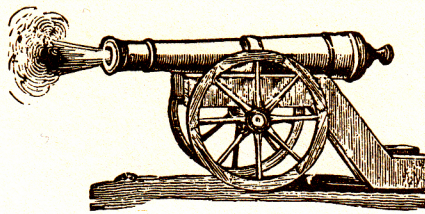
Aware of the importance of international cooperation and the role of women in contributing to world peace and understanding, Hoda Sharawy, always with a good delegation, attended every congress held by the International Alliance of Women, of which the Egyptian Feminist Union became an affiliate in 1923. Hoda Sharawy also became one of the vice presidents of the Alliance and remained in office till her death in 1947.



For many years she edited a magazine, "L'Egyptienne," in both French and Arabic, which served to bring Egyptian thought and women's activities to the outside world. The seat on the Board of the International Alliance of Women, which she occupied so ably, has remained all through these years (more than 30), bearing the name of our Feminist Union. One after another our members were elected to the post.

An outstanding achievement of which the Feminist Union should be justly proud was the founding of the Pan-Arab League for Women in 1944. Following the second congress for Arab Women of the Middle East, both of which were held at the premises of the Feminist Union, a league uniting women's organizations in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine was founded with headquarters in Cairo. Hoda Sharawy was the first president. The Board, which met once a year in one of the capitals of the Arab world, consisted of women's federations from the formerly mentioned countries and a congress was held every three years. The last one took place in Cairo in the spring of 1966 and headquarters have moved from Beirut to Cairo, with Dr. Sohair Kalamawy as president of the league. In recent years, Morocco and Sudan have become members. We women of the Arab world have every reason to be proud of the fact that the Pan-Arab Women's League was founded before our men formed the League of Arab Nations.

There is no doubt, however, that since the revolution of 1952, women have made greater strides towards equality. In 1956, women were granted the vote and it is with pride and our awareness of the duties and responsibilities that still lie ahead that we women of Egypt prize this great opportunity to fill our role as citizens of a free country. Progress is definitely being made, and more and more women are taking their place beside men, with equal dignity, opportunity and responsibility. In Parliament, in government offices, and in business concerns, as well as in factories and farms, women are contributing with efficiency and enthusiasm, unknown to the women of more than half a century ago. Definitely the concept of the role of the Egyptian woman is changed and



changing.

Formerly satisfied with their role as housewives, women today still retain their fundamental role but their interests and duties are no longer bounded by the four walls of their homes, or even their countries. Women are broadening out to reach outside needs and international contacts. Mrs. Aziza Hussein, with years of devoted service in various organizations, is now successfully representing Egypt in the Status of Woman Commission of the United Nations. More and more women are participating in international conferences and the number of those in the diplomatic service is increasing.

With the appointment a few years ago of Dr. Hekmat Abu Zade as Cabinet Minister for Social Affairs, the Egyptian women felt that one of the main strongholds of men was no longer a closed door. Every year witnesses a stream of thousands of University women graduates adding to the already growing ranks of doctors, lawyers, teachers, technicians, etc.

Women's nongovernmental organizations have made, and are still making, a great contribution in various services to the community. If we turn our attention to their record of achievements in the past half-century, the record will show an amazing degree of progress and some monumental achievements. One association founded, and for years ran a network of 27 hospitals, spread all over the country. Another group of enthusiastic women have created out of old stone army huts a veritable self-sufficing settlement with school rooms, workshops and dormitories where 500 boys and girls, all of them children of tuberculosis victims, are living under happy healthy conditions.

There are nearly five thousand organizations, eleven hundred of which operate in Cairo alone. Their services include vocational and technical schools, mother and child welfare centers, programs in adult education and homemaking, youth clubs, hostels and a variety of other services.

One of our oldest organizations, which was founded in 1906, provides



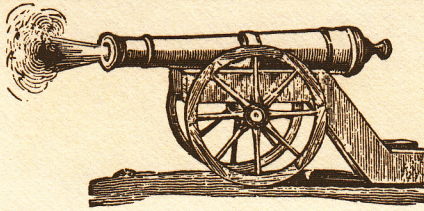
a home for unmarried mothers and another for delinquents, while a recent addition (in 1962) is a rehabilitation center for prostitutes.

The great need of the day, however, is for nurseries. Many of our women's organizations have gallantly risen to the occasion and are running a number of nurseries, often along with their other work. Family planning has added another responsibility to a large number of associations, the members of which have enthusiastically and energetically rose to the call. The first nursery established in a village was founded by the Cairo Women's Club. It was indeed a pioneer project which has received international recognition in the form of a \$500.00 prize in a competition organized by the General Federation of Women's Clubs of the U.S.A.

In the fields of art, literature and journalism, many women have made successful careers and a good number are already on the way to international recognition.

One cannot but express the deepest admiration and respect to those of our women and there is quite a large number who have always answered the call of duty whenever and wherever it happened to be. During two great epidemics (cholera and recurrent fever), both of which took heavy tolls of people in Upper Egypt, members from two of our leading associations organized themselves in teams, and without the slightest hesitation walked into the infected areas to serve the sick and dying. No less noble and self-sacrificing was the response of members of the Egyptian Red Crescent and other volunteers who left home and family to serve in hospitals and immigrant centers during two Palestinian wars, and also during the aggression on Egypt in the fall of 1956 and the summer of 1967.

The example set by such women should be a guide and an inspiration to all of us. It is proof beyond a doubt that women are and could be a dynamic force in society, a tremendous moral force which can accelerate the progress on humanity. Now more than ever women everywhere should be profoundly concerned with what is going on in the world around them.



A visit such as yours, dear guests, will surely make you realize that the problems of our times are closely related. Certainly, much, if not all, can be solved through a network of friendship and understanding. A joining of hearts and hands of men and women every where in every remote corner of the world can surely stimulate better understanding between all nations, eventually leading to a peaceful world for our children, a world of promise and hope, not of fear and despair.

Bahiga Sidki Rasheed, President

Hoda Sharawy Association

October, 1970