

**International Feminism and the Women's Movement in Egypt, 1904-1923  
A Reappraisal of Categories and Legacies**

By

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*Woman's place is in the world; her sphere,  
the highest she can attain to.*

*(The International Women's Suffrage  
News, Jus Suffragi, January 1923)*

**Introduction**

The Egyptian Feminist Union and its founder Huda Sha`rawi were in the vanguard of demanding changes in the structure and emotional life of the upper-class Egyptian family. The old-style eighteenth-century elite family/household characterized by polygamous unions, concubinage, female seclusion and fictive kinship was rejected in favor of a nuclear family based on the monogamous, companionate union of the spouses. These changes, which Sha`rawi demanded in her personal life and which the EFU sought to implement through legal reform, should be considered in the context of the social, economic and political changes of the time. However, as I have argued elsewhere, we should not take a teleological approach to this issue: that the Western-style nuclear family was the natural outcome of the social and economic transformation that Egypt underwent during the course of the nineteenth century or that the model was adopted as part of a process of westernization by the elite. Rather, we should consider the importance of struggle and agency on the part of the women and men who advocated the model of family life described above, and we should remember that this was one only one trend in the discourse of nationalism and reform that emerged as opposition to the British occupation escalated even after quasi-independence was granted in the 1922. It was not a certainty in 1922, that the model of the family advocated by the EFU would emerge through legal reform as the dominant model. Of the demands made by the EFU in 1923, the year that it was formed, only two were granted expeditiously, raising the age of boys and girls at marriage and extending the duration of women's custody of children. With the other demands the EFU was not so successful. The goals of restricting polygamy and curbing men's easy access to divorce have not been realized. It was not until the late 1990's that women's ability to divorce was institutionalized through legal reform.

In the context of the early nationalist period of Egyptian history, there was no consensus on the appropriate role for women in an independent state. An important connection was forged between the nationalist movement and what has been called the “woman question.” The question of women’s role in an independent and modern Egypt was seen as crucial to the form that the Egyptian state would take. The definition of “modern” and “state” seemed to hinge on the role women were expected to play in the new Egypt. Nationalists of all kinds, liberal nationalists, such as Qasim Amin, for example, who spoke against polygamy and for women’s education, also supported a European notion of the nation-state rather than religion as the basis of community and national identity.<sup>1</sup> As modernists, they also tended to see practices such as veiling and female seclusion as “backward.” Thus, they linked the creation of a modern Egypt to ending such practices, allowing women a degree of education so that they could better educate their children and in general, adopting the nuclear family as a model for Egyptian families. Other nationalists, variously labeled traditionalists, organicists and eventually, Islamicists, had other ideas, but all of them seemed to be linked to and expressed in terms of the roles that women were expected to play in the new nation state. Thus, changes in Egyptian family life and the emergence of a new model for the family were linked to the nationalist discourse and the debate over the role of women and the rise of an Egyptian feminist movement that had an explicit agenda for women’s rights.

In this paper, I would like to situate the EFU in the context of the social, political and economic changes that were taking place in Egypt and the organization’s participation in the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance (IWSA). I will argue that there were important commonalities in the aspirations and demands of Western women and Eastern women that were expressed through their national associations, such as the (EFU), the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) or the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies (NUWSS-Great Britain) and internationally through the IWSA. My paper has two aims: First, to critique prevailing paradigms for understanding Western and Eastern feminists, which, on the one hand, attach the label “Orientalist” to British and American feminists and on the other, accuse the feminists of the EFU of “Westernization” and to suggest other possible models and paradigms, and second, to show how feminist goals for women as articulated by their national associations converged under the international umbrella of the IWSA and made international cooperation possible. The focus of this paper is the 1923 meeting of the IWSA in Rome, which was the first conference that an Egyptian delegation headed by Sha`rawi attended.

It is important at this point to discuss briefly the origins of the EFU in order to understand how and why its particular agenda for women and the family arose and why the label “Westernized elite” is not an accurate depiction of how it came into being or the goals it sought to achieve. Then, I will argue that the labels of “feminist Orientalist” and Westernized elite are inaccurate and misleading descriptions of both the Western feminists and the Egyptian women of the EFU. Finally I will demonstrate the basis for “international sisterhood” by showing how the EFU’s goals were congruent with those of other feminist/suffrage organizations that allied with each other within the IWSA.

## **The EFU: Origins and Context**

There seems to be some agreement that the transition to the modern involved in part the construction of a domestic sphere for women along with a concept of domesticity which included such things as child-rearing, housework and efficient household management. I would like to propose that the transition to the modern for elite or ruling class women involved first, the demise of the household as a locus of power. It was not so much that a new domestic space was created or that a public patriarchy arose – women always were and continue to be subordinated in the public realm – but rather that political power was moved out of the household and relocated in the institutions of the emerging modern state. Concomitant with the relocation of power into a newly demarcated public sphere was the rise of the New Woman whose proper and natural role as wife and mother relegated her to the domestic realm.<sup>2</sup>

In the eighteenth-century when power was located in households of the Mamluk grandees, women as members of those households had rank, high status, access to wealth and property, considerable influence and even power. The distinction between public and private/domestic is not as relevant to women's status as whether power was located in a clearly demarcated public sphere from which women could be excluded. In the Egyptian case, once power was removed from the household, women were effectively stranded in a space that became almost purely domestic. When this was coupled with a demand that women either should not have a public role at all or only one that was congruent with her primary domestic role and with notions of service to the family, however family was defined, then the options, autonomy and life choices of upper- and ruling-class women were diminished.

At this point, it would be useful to note the argument advanced by Ahmed, namely that equating modernity with an end to veiling, polygamy, female seclusion and gender segregation was the result of Western influence on reformers like Amin and Huda Sha`rawi. Ahmed noted the influence that the Frenchwoman, Eugenie Le Brun, had on Sha`rawi. Ahmed accuses Le Brun of inducting young Muslim women “into the European understanding of the meaning of the veil and the need to cast it off as the first essential step in the struggle for female liberation.”<sup>3</sup> As for Sha`rawi, Ahmed believes that her perspective was informed “by a Western affiliation and a westernizing outlook and apparently by a valorization of Western ways as more advanced and more civilized than native ways.”<sup>4</sup>

It would be pointless to argue that segments of the Egyptian upper-class were not influenced by Western or European culture and ideas. However, the positions taken by women like Sha`rawi should not be attributed solely or even predominantly to an appropriation of Western culture and norms. Rather, I think that what happened to upper-class women like Sha`rawi was that the terms of what Kandiyoti has called the “patriarchal bargain” were radically altered by the changes of the nineteenth century. Kandiyoti has defined the “patriarchal bargain” as women's strategies of maneuver and resistance within systems of male dominance.<sup>5</sup> The eighteenth-century upper-class

household was characterized by polygamy, concubinage, seclusion and veiling and restraints on women's sexual autonomy but, as I have noted elsewhere, women also had rank and status as members of powerful households as well as access to wealth, considerable economic autonomy, influence and even power. The transformation of the warrior grandees of the eighteenth century into the Turco-Circassian ruling elite of the nineteenth, which entailed the relocation of power from the household to the institutions of the modern, centralizing state, had deleterious effects on the status of women. In effect, women were left to face polygamous unions, men's easy access to divorce, and the inability to choose when, at what age or even whether to marry without the compensating factors of life in the eighteenth-century household that I have described above. In addition, women found their ability to change or ameliorate the material conditions of their lives severely diminished. Their capacity to exercise what social historians and feminist historians call "agency" had been severely curtailed. The reforms called for by Sha`rawi and the EFU should be seen as an effort to rewrite the terms of the patriarchal bargain within the context of the new nation state that was taking shape in Egypt.

Egypt's nominal independence, which was declared unilaterally by the British in 1922, changed the terrain on which the struggles for women's autonomy had to take place. Since the state defined the community in terms of Egyptian-ness rather than in religious terms and endowed only males with full citizenship rights, it seems to me that women like Sha`rawi had little choice but to struggle for an expanded role for women in the public realm and for citizenship and legal rights that would allow women to change or enact laws for their benefit as well as to represent women in the new public institutions such as the Parliament. The battle for rights by women was a struggle for power. In the context of the new nation-state, it was a struggle that could no longer take place within the household or even solely within the Islamic court system but had to be waged in the reconfigured public sphere from which women were largely excluded.

The EFU's rejection of the private, domestic sphere as representing women's only role, its insistence on women's right to work and education and its demand for suffrage in order to enact legal and constitutional reform to benefit women were goals that were shared by feminist/suffrage organizations in Great Britain and the United States. Feminists and suffragists were clearly rejecting the domesticated New Woman in favor of the autonomous woman with the right to enter the public world of work, education and politics.

In the literature relating to Sha`rawi and the EFU, there has been a debate about whether the organization should be called "feminist." I believe that there are reasons why we should do so. First, in her memoirs, *Muthakirat ra'idat al-mara al-rabiyya al-haditha Huda Sha`rawi*, the author devoted several sections to various aspects of the international meeting of the IWSA in Rome in 1923. In one section, she recounts how after the meeting, an association of Egyptian women was formed called *Al-ittihad al-nisa'i al-misri*. The contemporary debate over whether this organization was *feminist* has centered on how to translate the word *nisa'i*. The organization was admitted to the IWSA at the Rome meeting with its name translated into French as L'Union Feministe Egyptienne pour le Suffrage des Femmes. As we know from her memoirs, Sha`rawi

spoke and read French and acknowledged that she wrote French much better than Arabic. French and English were the two languages of the EFU. Therefore, it would seem that the official title of the organization either was hers or was approved by her in a language she read, wrote and understood clearly. By the time of the 1923 Rome meeting, feminist and feminism had been in use for several decades and there was very little dispute about their meaning.

Also there is no indication in her memoirs, that she regarded the EFU and its goals for women as being incompatible with Islam. In her discussion of various aspects of the Rome meeting, Sha`rawi included a section entitled “Hukuk al-mara fi al-Islam” that shows that she does not believe her activism violated Islamic norms.<sup>6</sup>

### **The EFU and International Feminism**

Charles Lindholm in his review of six works in *A New Middle Eastern Ethnography* criticized the ethnographers in question for focusing on personal and life histories at the expense of theory building and comparative work.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on Lindholm’s critique, Nadjie Al-Ali has noted the “disconcerting tendency” within Middle East scholarship to look beyond itself in terms of region and of theoretical and methodological fields of study.<sup>8</sup>

Those of us assembled here know the challenges as well as the potential pitfalls of comparative work whether we have undertaken it or not. For historians, there is the formidable obstacle of attaining linguistic competency in the language needed to do research in the archives appropriate to the subject and region we are studying. Next is mastering the secondary literature on the topic, a sometimes daunting task. However, it is my opinion that the theoretical challenge is sometimes more of an obstacle than the methodological. This has been my experience so far in attempting to analyze the international feminism of the 1920s. Approaching the literature on the IWSA through studies of the organization by scholars of Indian or more recently Palestinian women means viewing the organization and its leadership through an Orientalist prism. Charlotte Weber in “Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women” argues that the international feminists represented a feminist version of Orientalism. And, Antionette Burton in her study of British feminists in India and the IWSA has termed them “imperial feminists.” I would like to argue that Orientalism – feminine, feminist, imperial or otherwise – is not an appropriate or particularly useful paradigm for an examination of Western feminists’ interaction with Eastern or “Oriental” women through the IWSA for a number of reasons.

Although the organization was founded by an American and had a Euro-American leadership, its membership included Latin American, African, Egyptian, and Asian members. (Its Palestinian affiliate was composed of European Zionist women.) Undoubtedly, there were members and leaders of the organization who considered Western civilization and Christianity as superior to other civilizations and religions, including Hinduism and Islam.

However, ethnocentrism should not be confused with Orientalism, which is constructed on the dichotomy between self and other in which the other is alien to the self who can see little or nothing of himself in the other. Orientalism is a binary structure in which, as Derrida has explained, the self constructs an “other” against which the former can distinguish itself.<sup>9</sup> One (or the subject) is given a positive value and then constructs an “other” or negative of itself that signifies everything that it does not accept. Said conceptualized Orientalism as a binary structure in which the Western (male) self is superior to the Eastern (male) other. I have argued that the binary structure of Orientalism has its origins in a pre-existing discourse of gender in European society, which articulated the appropriate roles for men and women based in part on their different natures. Derrida’s notion of the self as creating a negative other does not apply to the IWSA as an organization or leaders such as Catt or Aletta Jacobs, the Dutch physician and feminist who accompanied her on her around-the-world tour in 1911-1913. The international sisterhood proclaimed by the IWSA was real as the reports of the meetings of the associations, articles in *Jus Suffragi* and the writings of its leading women attest. While Orientalism was based on the inability of the self to see anything of itself in the other, the concept of sisterhood is based on the recognition of the self in the other. However, also real was the ethnocentrism of feminists like Catt and Jacobs, but ethnocentrism is not Orientalism. The relationship between Western and Eastern women under the umbrella of the IWSA was a complex one in which ethnocentric attitudes about the superiority of Western civilization or Christianity co-existed with a commitment to universal female suffrage, expanded rights for women and global sisterhood.

The term “feminist Orientalist” was used by Joyce Zonana in her article “The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*” to refer to a specific use of Orientalism by women writers including Charlotte Bronte and Mary Wollstonecraft. Using Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* as one example, Zonana describes how Orientalism is put to the service of feminism: “By figuring objectionable aspects of life in the West as “Eastern,” these Western feminist writers rhetorically define their project as the removal of Eastern elements from Western life.”<sup>10</sup> These elements include polygamy, which was equated as sexual slavery, and the harem, which was considered inherently repressive and tantamount to imprisonment. (For those who may have forgotten the plot of the novel, the novel turns on Jane’s discovery that her employer and betrothed, Mr. Rochester, is already married to a mad woman kept a virtual prisoner in the attic with a round-the-clock caretaker.) Zonana explains that the Orient in the writings of Bronte and others is used as a vehicle for Western criticism of itself and for Western self-redemption. However this criticism cannot be stated directly, according to Zonana, because feminism poses a threat to the social order. But, by expressing it as a critique of Orientalism, feminist demands can be made acceptable to an audience wishing to affirm its Western superiority. Thus, the feminist desire to change the status quo can be represented not as a radical attempt to restructure the West but as a conservative effort to make the West more like itself. As persuasive as Zonana’s critique is for women’s writings in the first half of the nineteenth century, I don’t believe it can be applied to the radical and militant feminist women and organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The feminism of Bronte and others that was expressed indirectly through Orientalism had given way to the direct expression of feminist goals to remake

the social order through feminists actions and organizations committed to suffrage and women's rights. The reluctant feminism of the early eighteenth century bears little resemblance to the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), for example, which was founded by Emmeline and Christable Pankhurst. The WSPU's radicalism and militancy on behalf of women's rights was expressed through acts of civil disobedience and hunger strikes when imprisoned.

Antionette Burton, who has labeled British suffragists as "imperial feminists," has taken a more nuanced approach to the actions and attitudes of British women in India. As Burton points out, British imperial feminism grew out of and in reaction to specific historical circumstances including Britain's colonization of India and opposition to suffrage led by the arch-imperialists Lords Cromer and Curzon. In their anti-suffrage writings, Cromer and Curzon argued that suffrage would destroy the family and endanger the progress of the race. They insisted that separate spheres were divinely ordained and sanctioned by nature. They also justified their position by saying that "women were not fit to govern an empire which relied upon military might and masculine strength for its preservation." In response, British bourgeois women in their writings labeled the anti-suffragists as Orientalists who wanted to reduce all women to the status of the "eastern harem slave." Thus, suffragists developed the theme of imperialism as a distinctly male experience of power and elevating the status of Indian women and improving their condition through education and health as the "feminist" version of imperialism. As Burton has noted, the relationship between British feminists and Indian women was not one of equals: "Consciousness of Britain's imperial status and Anglo-Saxon racial superiority led many prominent British feminists to view Indian women as lower on a scale of human development and, most significantly, as in need of salvation by their British feminist sisters. British feminists were thus both deeply committed to and deeply at odds with the notion of 'global sisterhood.'"<sup>11</sup>

This tension between ethnocentrism and a commitment to global sisterhood is apparent in the writings and speeches of other American and European feminists. Generally the focus has been on Catt because of her presidency of the IWSA and because of her around-the-world trip from 1911-1912 that took her to South Africa, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Ceylon, India, Burma, the East Indies, the Philippines, China, Korea and Japan. The purpose of the trip was to investigate the condition of women wherever they traveled and to organize women to work for suffrage. During her trip, she wrote regular articles for the IWSA publication, *Jus Suffragi*, as well as the American suffragist publication, *American Women's Journal*. She reported on the trip and discussed her findings and observations in her presidential address at the 1913 meeting of the IWSA in Budapest. Less attention has been paid to the writings and letters of her companion on the trip, Aletta Jacobs, the first woman physician in the Netherlands and president of the National Suffrage Association of the Netherlands, in part because her articles for an Amsterdam daily newspaper and her letters published in two volumes in Dutch have not been translated until recently. In an article based on Jacobs's travel writings, Harriet Feinberg has distinguished two modes of discourse and the tension between the two. One she calls "encouraging our peers," which assumes some basic equality across cultural, national and religious boundaries, and the second, "lifting up our native sisters," which

undercuts the first by assuming a basic cultural, racial or intellectual superiority on the part of the helpers.”<sup>12</sup>

Jacobs’s letter from Cairo to her close friend and suffrage leader from Hungary, Rosika Schwimmer, describes her and Catt’s meeting with Egyptian women and sheds some light on how she and Catt interacted with the women they met on their journey. Jacobs described how their acquaintance with an Englishwoman living in Egyptian circles introduced them to many “native women.”<sup>13</sup>

Mrs. Catt and I are now trying to form a committee, a suffrage committee of these women, to affiliate at the International Alliance. These women can of course not work for suffrage in their own country, where the men have no rights, but they can do all kind of work and make themselves ready in a few years to take care that as soon as the men get their political rights, that they will not be forgotten. One of these ladies, a rich widow, very bright, will perhaps come to Budapest at the Congress. She has already taken an *abonnement* (subscription) for *Jus Suffragi* to remain in touch with the movement in other countries.<sup>14</sup>

Her pointed comment about men as well as women not having the right to vote in their own country is an implied criticism of the British occupation and as such would seem to exempt Jacobs at least from having the label “feminist Orientalist” attached to her. It also reinforces Burton’s opinion that “... the British feminist experience – not to mention the British imperial experience – were so unique that they precluded any kind of general conclusions about the so-called ‘imperialism’ of modern western feminisms.”<sup>15</sup>

Catt’s writings also display the same sort of tension between ethnocentrism and global sisterhood. Although her travel diary reveals her to be an astute observer and a tireless traveler, they don’t contain much information about her meetings with women or the state of suffrage activities in the areas she visited. However, she did write about her travels for the *American Women’s Journal* and *Jus Suffragi* and she addressed these issues in various speeches and in her presidential address to the IWSA at Rome in 1923. For example, on a visit to London in 1911, she spoke at a banquet in her honor in which she stressed the importance of universal sisterhood linked through an organization comprised of women of all nationalities rather than nation-specific patriotism, which she considered a male phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Writing for the “Foreign Notes” column of the *American Women’s Journal* in 1912, Catt admitted her admiration for Egyptian women who refused marriage and demanded education and other freedoms. At the same time, she argued that it was in the influence of Great Britain that had created a new Egypt and laid the foundation for the rise of a women’s movement.<sup>17</sup> In her speech at the Budapest conference, however, she stressed the indigenous roots of the strong women’s movement in Asia and the fact that “there has been rebellion in the hearts of women all down the centuries.”<sup>18</sup> Catt also thought that Eastern women could organize and direct their own movements with encouragement and practical advice of Western women:

As to the effect that upon the movement in the countries visited, we shall claim little more than that we have blazed a trail which we may point out



to other women willing to carry the inspiration and sympathy of our movement to the women of Asia. They, knowing the way, will be able to accomplish much more than did we. It is our earnest hope that the other women, comprehending the unity of the women's cause, will be led to carry our greetings to the women of Asia, who just now need the encouragement which Western women, emancipated from the most severe mandates of tradition, can give in practical advice to these women, who for many years must continue to struggle under conditions which obtained in our Western world some generations ago."<sup>19</sup>

As the letters, speeches and articles quoted above demonstrate, there is a tension in both national and international women's movements between ideas of Western superiority and a commitment to global sisterhood. It therefore seems appropriate to search for theoretical frameworks in which to consider international feminism other than feminist or imperial Orientalism, such as the hybridity of post-structuralism, the concept of difference in feminist theory and Said's post-Orientalist critique in *Culture and Imperialism* of essentialist thinking in the East and West. Here Said argues that only by understanding our shared history can we counteract the divisive and destructive forces of contemporary movements to rediscover "essential" cultural values.<sup>20</sup>

### **All Roads Lead to Rome**

In her opening address to the members of the IWSA in Rome, president Carrie Chapman Catt said, "We do not come to Rome in this year of 1923 to hold our ninth congress as timid supplicants for small favors."<sup>21</sup> Catt pointed out that the congress represented women of 40 nations at a time when there were only 60 nations in the world, which meant that two-thirds of the nations of the world were represented. The delegates of 25 of those nations were voters and three were members of Parliaments. By far, the strongest link among the women and the organizations assembled at Rome and at previous meetings was the issue of suffrage and the commitment of the IWSA to attaining universal female suffrage. Once suffrage began to be granted to women, beginning with Finland, the IWSA declared that it would continue to work on behalf of women who had not yet received the vote. *Jus Suffragi* in its January 1923 edition, which contained the agenda for the Rome meeting, said, "The Congress will make practical plans for giving help internationally to the women of the unenfranchised countries in their efforts to secure the vote."<sup>22</sup> Women in the U.S. had won the right to vote the year before the Rome meeting.

However, the IWSA also had a feminist agenda that encompassed more than women's rights including the right to work with a fair wage and fair opportunity for responsible and skilled jobs, the right of a married woman to determine how best to adjust to the claims upon her of her humanity, womanhood, wifehood and motherhood; the right to demand one standard of ethics and morals for both sexes, the right to protect her children and the right to her own nationality.<sup>23</sup> As *Jus Suffragi* reported in the May 1923 edition containing the agenda for the Rome conference, "The vote is our first objective; but much remains to be done before, unhampered by shackling prejudice and sentimental taboos, women are really free to share equally with men in all spheres the

responsibility of building a better world.”<sup>24</sup> The agenda for the 1923 meeting included equal pay for equal work in all fields and the repeal of laws that prevent women from working in trade, the legal profession and the civil service; the right of married women to their own nationality and issues related to the maintenance of women and children. In her presidential address, Catt listed the rights that some women had achieved by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the right to education and professional careers, the right of married women to own property and keep their wages, expanded custody rights and the right to unprecedented freedom of action as a result of changes in public opinion.<sup>25</sup>

In 1923, Huda Sha`rawi, Nabawiyah Musa and Saiza Nabarawi attended the IWSA meeting in Rome. Catt acknowledged the women in her presidential address when she said, “We are especially proud to welcome to this Congress delegates from that wonderland of Egypt! In ancient days there were Egyptian queens and women military leaders of great renown; why not heroines today bearing aloft the standard of civil and political equality for modern Egyptian women? Bravo, women of Egypt.”<sup>26</sup>

The edition of *Jus Suffragi* following the Rome meeting describes what took place in Egypt when the delegation returned home.<sup>27</sup> The report was written by Sha`rawi and is headlined, “First Deputies from Women to a Minister.”<sup>28</sup> The article reported on the meeting of the EFU and Sha`rawi’s speech explaining of the objects and demands of the EFU. The speech was read by Fakra Housni because of Sha`rawi’s “indisposition.” Musa read and explained the resolutions adopted by the Rome congress and Mme. Gamila Atila spoke on women’s rights in marriage and divorce. The article states that the group passed two resolutions, which were presented to the president of the council of ministers, the first occasion in which “a group of ladies” officially approached a minister with claims for women. The president received the deputation with “friendly courtesy and promised to support their demands.” The article reported also that the *Bourse Egyptienne* commented on the meeting of the group by recalling the matriarchal position of women in Egypt in pre-Ptolemaic days and describing “how the women went out to work and the men minded the home and children; how the women courted the man and the man brought a dowry; and all that in Egypt’s greatest epoch.”

The EFU demands of 1923 included the following: raising the legal ages of males and females at marriage to 18 and 16, respectively; extending women’s legal custody of children, regulating *talaq* by permitting it only in serious cases and in the presence of a *qadi* who would oblige arbitration, restricting men’s practice of polygamy and abolishing *bayt al-ta`a*, which could force a woman to return to her husband. The EFU was also committed to women’s suffrage.

The demands of British and American feminists were different in certain specifics from the EFU. For example, polygamy and repudiation were not issues for British and American feminists, while property rights and legal personhood were not issues for Egyptian women. However, there was broad agreement on other issues, such as suffrage, education, work, women rights in marriage and to their children and a repudiation of the confinement represented by the doctrine of separate spheres. Thus, Western and Egyptian women could unite on common issues and the need for legal and constitutional reform to

achieve their aims. More generally, what united the (liberal) feminists of the IWSA was their demand for autonomy and equality guaranteed and protected by law.

## **Conclusion**

Seen from our perspective, the EFU in 1923 was standing at the intersection of three worlds: the past, present and future. Elite women like Huda Sha'rawi emerged from households very much like those that existed a century and more ago, characterized by polygamy, concubinage, female seclusion and fictive kinship. In Sha'rawi's present, she and other women rejected the older form of the household/family and worked through the EFU to achieve goals that would transform family life, give women access to the public sphere of education, work and politics and grant women equal citizenship rights in the Egyptian nation. Where the path taken by the EFU would ultimately lead is to her future and our present, namely, the global feminisms of today. Indeed, international feminism has its roots in the IWSA and other international women's movements both in an institutional sense and in terms of the movements' leadership, direction and ideology. The ethnocentrism of Catt and hegemonic position of Western women over movement has been challenged by non-Western women and women of color in the West on a theoretical level as well as within the institutions of the international women's movement, for example, in the organizing and meetings of the United Nations Decade of the Women, 1985-1995. At international meetings such as the ones at Nairobi and Beijing and in other venues including academic journals, we have been the transformation of "international sisterhood" into a movement of "global feminisms."

As for the EFU, it should be regarded not only as the originator of a modern feminist movement in the Arab world but also of the trend within feminist activism known as liberal feminism. A recent article by Valentine Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents," argues that Iran's Islamic Feminists resemble the liberal feminists of the United States in that they accept the given political and legal systems and work within them for reforms aimed at improving women's status. Although the EFU has been described and criticized as secular and Western-influenced, there are similarities between the Islamic Feminism of post-Khomeini Iran and that of Sha'rawi and the EFU. The most important is that in both cases, there is an acceptance of the prevailing political and legal systems and a reformist, rather than revolutionary, ideology and course of action. And, in both cases, the modern nation state is the terrain on which the ideology is being expressed and where the struggles for improvements in women's status are being fought. Labeling one movement "Islamic" and the other "secular" obfuscates what I believe are the more important similarities between the two that can call into question the validity and usefulness of the categories to which they have been assigned.

The legacy of both the IWSA and the EFU are complex and disputed. However, each of them carried within them the seeds of modern feminism and feminist internationalism.

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- <sup>1</sup> Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women: A Document in the History of Egyptian Feminism*.
- <sup>2</sup> For a study of Egypt's New Woman, see Mona Russell, *Creating the New Woman: Consumerism, Education and National Identity in Egypt, 1863-1922*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2 vols., 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> Laila Ahmed, "Between Two Worlds: The Formation of a Turn-of-the-Century Feminist."
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Deniz Kandiyotti, Introduction to *Women, Islam and the State*.
- <sup>6</sup> Mudhkirat ra'idat al-mara al-'arabiyya al-haditha Huda Sha'rawi, Dar al-Hilal, 1981; all of chapter 21, pp. 248-270, is devoted to various aspects of the meeting in Rome and the founding of the EFU; the section on the rights of women in Islam is on pp. 266-270.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles Lindholm, "The New Middle Eastern Ethnography."
- <sup>8</sup> Nadje Al-Ali, "Between Political Epochs and Personal Lives: Formative Experiences of Egyptian Women Activists."
- <sup>9</sup> This explanation of binary structures in Derrida's writings comes from Meyda Yenennnnoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, p. 7.
- <sup>10</sup> Joyce Zonana, "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of Jane Eyre," p. 167.
- <sup>11</sup> Antoinette Burton, "The Feminist Quest for Identity: British Imperial Suffragism and 'Global Sisterhood' 1900-1915, pp. 47-48.
- <sup>12</sup> Harriet Feinberg, "A Pioneering Dutch Feminist Views Egypt: Aletta Jacobs Travel Letters," p. 66.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 69.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 69.
- <sup>15</sup> Burton, p. 68.
- <sup>16</sup> Cited in Burton, p. 62.
- <sup>17</sup> Cited in Burton, pp. 62-63.
- <sup>18</sup> Arnold Whittick, *Women into Citizen*, p. 57.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 55.
- <sup>20</sup> Jane F. Collier, "Intertwined Histories: Islamic Law and Western Imperialism," p. 1
- <sup>21</sup> *Jus Suffragi*, July 1923, vol. 17, no. 9, p. 147.
- <sup>22</sup> *Jus Suffragi*, January 1923, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 50
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, May-June 1923, vol 17, no. 8, p. 114.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, January 1923, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 50.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, July 1923, vol. 17, no. 9, p. 147.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 148.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, August 1923, vol. 17, no, 10, p. 165.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. The article is signed Huda Charoui.