

Veiled Egyptian Protesters: Egyptian women clad in veils, defied harem convention and poured out into the streets to demonstrate with the men, as all classes rose up in protest to achieve national liberation and individual independence. And the women for a third cause, liberation from gender repression by Egyptian men and Egyptian mores.

The first demonstration broke out in Cairo on March 9, 1919, after the end of World War I when Egypt was a nation under British imperialist oppression. The protesters had been denied a meeting to discuss political demands and Egyptians took to the streets in significant display to protest against the Protectorate and martial law (imposed by the British in 1914).

Men and women protesters were strongly united and as word about Cairo spread, more demonstrations took place throughout all of Egypt. This national uprising of both genders brought men to a moment of revisiting and relaxing their participation in the harem conventional ways in which they had been raised. The women were in the streets in unprecedented activities and the men needed their help. Through this national movement, men and women, husbands and wives who previously had shared separate existences of divided harem convention in their own homes and personal lives, actually were brought together. One such couple was Huda Shaarawi and her husband.

Huda writes in her memoirs that: "My husband kept me informed of events so that I could fill the vacuum if he were imprisoned or exiled." It was during this period of protests that active feminism was outed by Huda who previously had to conduct her activism secluded from public, political involvement. When the protesters formed the Wafd to help define their agenda, their leader Saad Zaghlul was immediately arrested, and after some protesters had been shot in the streets, Huda wrote her first public letter of protest.

The letter was to Lady Brunyate, an American by birth and wife of Sir William Brunyate the judicial and financial adviser to the Egyptian government. It referred to conversations the two women had previously had where Huda had been assured the British had taken part in World War I to, "do service to the cause of justice and humanity, to protect the freedom of oppressed peoples and safeguard their rights."

Her letter was never answered, but the next month, Saad Zaghlul was released from detention and the Wafd was allowed to travel abroad for negotiations. The day after his release Huda and women representing all different classes were a huge part of a peaceful and hope-filled demonstration. But at the negotiations, the Wafd was pressured by the British government to force Egyptian prime minister Rushdi Pasha to issue a return to order. Huda, well acquainted with prime minister Pasha and, supported by her women followers, wrote to Pasha asking him to resign. The British issued to him a final ultimatum to carry out orders. Rushdi Pasha resigned.

Near the end of 1919, over a thousand Egyptian women from all classes met together and formed the first female political body, the Wafdist Women's Central Committee with Huda as its president, to support the male Wafd, still in its first year of existence. But old gender-disparate customs proved hard to break.

A year later, near the end of 1920, when Wafd male leaders returned from London negotiations with a proposal of terms for independence, it was shown to male groups and organizations but not to the WWCC. The women eventually did review the proposal, found the terms to be inadequate and reported their findings to the press. Huda sent a letter from the WWCC to Saad Zaghlul denouncing Wafd's treatment to the women who had supported the men of the Wafd. She specifically wrote that half the Egyptians, the female gendered half, should not be denied their full rights especially their right to participate in their nation's liberation. Zaghlul responded with a letter of apology. But gender parity within the Wfda was strained.

Near the end of the next year 1921, Zaghlul was deported. The WWCC led by Huda protested his deportation in a letter to the British High Commissioner stating this would not silence the protests as millions of others will continue to speak out against injustice. The women became more militant. Their meetings were banned but ironically these feminist women were able to meet in the privacy of the harem social order and they did.

Under Islamic law, women inherited money and property in their own name with rights of ownership. The WWCC organized an economic boycott against the purchase of British goods and advocated the withdrawal of money from British banks. They campaigned for the purchase of Egyptian goods and the deposit of their money in the new Egyptian bank, Bank Misr. The British eventually issued a declaration of Egyptian independence that would maintain British troops stationed in Egypt and keep Egypt's political future under British authority. The new constitution cited all Egyptians equal before the law, but granted suffrage to men only.

On March 9, 1923, on the fourth anniversary of the first demonstration when veiled women first protested in the streets, Huda with some of these same women, formed the Egyptian Feminist Union with Huda elected president. In May, upon her return from an international feminist meeting in Rome, and before a crowd of women awaiting her at the Cairo station, Huda Shaarawi stepped out onto the running board of the train and removed her veil. This act, signaled the beginning of the end of the harem social system in Egypt. But obsolescent gender inequity is not yet obsolete.

Author's Note: March 8, 2011 marks the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day first celebrated in 1911, and the 30th anniversary of National Women's History Month in the USA first initiated in 1981 by the National Women's History Project. Happy Women's History Month!

Source: *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*, Huda Shaarawi.