

“Women and Islam” Weekend Workshop
March 4-5, 2017
Lesson Plan: First Feminists of Egypt:
The Early Twentieth Century

LESSON TITLE:	FIRST FEMINISTS OF EGYPT: THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY
AUTHOR:	Joan Brodsky Schur
GRADE LEVEL:	Grade 10 Adaptable for Grades 7 to 12
OVERVIEW OF LESSON:	This lesson provides a document-based study of Egyptian Muslim feminists in the early 20 th century. It enables students to assess the movement’s goals within the context of Egyptian society and through the voices of its leaders. Students assess their goals in relation to the British imperialist Lord Cromer. Based on this lesson, students will be able to compare Egypt’s women’s movement to others they may learn about in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere in the world.
SUBJECT AREA:	History, Social Studies, Sociology
COUNTRY/REGIONAL FOCUS:	Egypt. The Modern Middle East.
TIME REQUIRED:	Four 50 minute classes, with three homework assignments. To shorten: Combine Activities 3 and 4. Optional assessment assignments for homework.
MATERIALS REQUIRED:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handouts A B C D: Whole class in print or online. • Documents 1 through 7. Specific documents to assigned students in print, or available online to all. • Timeline for all students • Graphic organizer 1 and 2 for all students • Agendas 1 and 2 to all students • Graphic organizer 3 for those completing the assessment option: compare feminist movements.

BACKGROUND:

While most students in the United States learn about the founding mothers of American feminism, few will learn about the founding mothers of feminisms elsewhere in the world. Egypt’s women’s movement deserves special attention, as it gathered cohesion and momentum in the early decades of the twentieth century. Its campaign was led by privileged women, those who had obtained some degree of education and who could thus profit from Egypt’s flourishing press. From this vantage they had a window into the world even from the harem or *sacred space* within the home, where they were expected to remain. Gradually these women found a

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voice by sharing ideas in salons in the homes of prominent women, by writing for the press — sometimes under pseudonyms so as not to shame their families— and by establishing their own publications, and organizations. Some of these were designed to help women of the lower classes. For example, the New Women Foundation (1919) was founded to teach working class women hygiene, literacy and crafts. The focus of this lesson is Muslim women, but Christians of different denominations, from Maronite Christians to Copts, were actively engaged in this struggle alongside Muslims. Women also had the support of a variety of men, from fathers to brothers, many in the upper echelons of society.

The movement coincided with efforts to throw off Egypt’s colonial status. For centuries a province of the Ottoman Empire, by the early nineteenth century Egypt was strong enough to establish its own dynasty under Mehmet Ali (Muhammad Ali). But Britain stepped into the vacuum left by a weakened Ottoman Empire, occupying Egypt in 1882. Lord Cromer was appointed Consul-General of Egypt (1883 to 1907) by a British government determined to control the Suez Canal, its shortest route to imperial India. Other motives included profiting from Egypt’s cotton plantations, and making good on loans to Egypt by restructuring its bankrupt economy. Control of Egypt was justified by Britain’s civilizing mission. Cromer saw Egypt as inherently inferior, as symbolized by polygamy and the seclusion of women; thus, women were in need of being rescued from their religion. Britain claimed Egypt as a protectorate at the beginning of World War I.

The Egyptian Wafd Party was created in 1919 to advocate for Egyptian independence. When Britain exiled the Wafd party’s leader, demonstrators — including Egyptian women from all religions and walks of life— took to the streets in the Egyptian revolution of 1919-1922. Huda Shaarawi, whose husband was a party official, became president of the Wafdist Women’s Central Committee and courageously led elite women (rarely seen in public) in street demonstrations. With a new political order on the horizon, she and other privileged women advocated for an array of women’s rights, including the right to vote in a new republic. The cause of women’s rights could now be seen as patriotic. However, to their disappointment, the new constitution of 1923 failed to advance the cause of women.

In response, Shaarawi formed the Egyptian Feminist Union, which she and two other leaders of the EFU represented at the International Woman Suffrage Alliance in Rome (1923). Upon their return to Egypt they publically removed their veils, thus symbolizing their claim to full participation in the public realm, previously reserved for men. Unveiling would take on yet other meanings, however. Because of the support for unveiling by the British colonizers, later Muslim feminists would renew the wearing of the hijab as (among others things) an act of anti-colonialism.

Egypt’s first feminists argued their cause from a variety of perspectives. Nationalism was one of them. Shaarawi wrote in her autobiography, “Let it never be said that there was a woman in

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Egypt who failed, for personal reasons, to perform her duty to the nation (126).” If women were educated and freed from prior societal constraints, they would make a stronger nation for all. They also argued from within a Muslim perspective claiming that their religion granted them rights no longer being accorded to them. Scholars debate whether the Egyptian women’s movement was primarily influenced by imported and “superior” ideas from Europe and the United States, or driven instead by indigenous factors and goals, or a combination of both. Their work in translating documents into English makes a lesson such as this one possible.

CURRICULUM CONNECTION:

This lesson can be incorporated into classes on the Modern Middle East, social movements, colonialism, and feminism. It can be used as a point of comparison when teaching about feminist movements in the United States or elsewhere.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What were the goals of Egypt’s first feminist movement?
- How can we evaluate the demands of Muslim feminist movements in Egypt relative to their success by the mid-1950s?
- How did colonialism affect the perception of feminist movements in Egypt?
- How can we compare feminist movements in historical and social context?

LEARNING GOALS

- Students will gain an understanding of the historical context of Egypt’s first women’s movement, its female leaders and their goals.
- Students will understand some of the societal impediments to achieving these goals as well as assess strategies used to overcome them.
- Students will analyze primary source documents written by women of the era from which they will deduce key features of the movement.
- Students will learn to support their answers and claims in writing with evidence from a written text.
- Students will work in cooperative groups to strategize and prioritize goals.
- Optional Assessments: Students will write essays that incorporate evidence drawn from historical sources, timelines and primary sources.

■ **STANDARDS:**

Common Core State Standards *Standards for Reading*

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1**
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2**
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6**
Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Standards for Speaking and Listening:

- **Comprehension and Collaboration:** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Standards for Writing

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9**
Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4**
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

C3 Framework: College, Career and Civic Life for Social Studies State Standards (NCSS)

Dimension 2: History

- **D2:his.1.9-12** Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- **D2.His.2.9-12** Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- **D2.His.3.9-12** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- **D2.His.4.9-12.** Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

Dimension 2: Sociology

- **D2.Soc.16.9-12.** Interpret the effects of inequality on groups and individuals.
- **D2.Soc.18.9-12.** Propose and evaluate alternative responses to inequality.

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National Center for History in the Schools Standards (UCLA)

Era 7

World History

- Standard 3A: The student can analyze the objectives and achievements of women’s political movements in the context of World War I and its aftermath. [Analyze cause-and-effect relationships] 7-12
- Standard 3D: Assess the effects of woman suffrage on politics [Evaluate the implementation of a decision]
- Standard 6A: Identify patterns of social and cultural continuity in various societies and analyze ways in which peoples maintained traditions and resisted external challenges in this era of expanding Western hegemony.

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United States History 9-12

- Standard 3A: The student can analyze how the emergence of the “New Woman” challenged Victorian values. [Examine the influence of ideas]

PRE-ASSESSMENT:

Explain that you are going to play a guessing game. Can students match the following countries to the dates when they gave women the right to vote?

Countries: Turkey France New Zealand, United States, Switzerland, Egypt.

Dates: 1893 1920 1934 1945 1957 1971

Then reveal the answers, New Zealand 1893, USA 1920, Turkey 1934, France 1945, Egypt 1957, Switzerland 1957.

Ask students what they knew or thought they knew when they made their guesses. Did anything surprise them? (They might be surprised that the predominantly Muslim countries of Turkey and Egypt gave women the vote before various European countries. Ascertain what students know about the first wave of American feminists; about feminist movements in any other country? Some students from other countries may know about the history of their country of birth, for example. Now explain that they will learn about the first women’s movement in Egypt in the early decades of the twentieth century.

PROCEDURE:

Tell the class that they will be assigned to a drafting committee. Each committee will write a seven-point list of women’s demands to be incorporated into Egypt’s constitution of 1923. Students on each committee will be representing the views of Egyptian Muslim women with

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whom they have “spoken.” To do this, each student will read and respond to something written by one Egyptian woman for homework and present her views to the group. These are women who were among the fortunate few who could read and write. In 1907 only 1.4% of Egyptian women could do so — those of prosperous urban families who could hire tutors, often from Europe, or afford to send their girls to missionary schools. Based on these women’s voices each group will write a list of seven demands to “submit” to the all-male Egyptian Congress formulating Egypt’s constitution.

Activity 1. 50 Minutes.

Distribute/share on line Document A the previous night for homework and ask students to answer the questions in writing. Document A is an excerpt from a novel by Naguib Mahfouz. Document B (to be distributed during this class) is a description from the autobiography of Harvard scholar Leila Ahmed, whose native country is Egypt. Both describe the harem in the families of upper class Egyptian homes.

Distribute the Timeline for reference throughout this lesson. It provides some historical context for Egypt’s feminist movement.

Pose questions from the homework as well as these:

- Most of Egypt’s early female advocates for women came from upper-middle and upper-class families. Why is it important to understand the lives they were expected to live?
- Ask students to share how they *felt* about Amina in the Mahfouz excerpt.
- Read aloud Document B by Leila Ahmed. Ask students if they have a different impression of the harem based on her experiences. What has been the effect of the Harem life on Amina, on Ahmed’s grandmother and aunts? How can the differences between what the two authors present be reconciled in any way?
- Based on these discussions of the harem and its effects, what lessons could female leaders learn about the pace of social change and how to affect it?
- Why do students think that only upper class women were housebound? (Secluding women indicated that their labor was not needed, a sign of wealth. Lower class women had to work in fields and factories, unencumbered by restrictive dress. They were prey to men’s advances, whereas upper class women were “protected”.
- Ask students to think of the ways in which literate women could have had a voice without physically entering the public realm. Distribute the Timeline and let students look for ways women empowered themselves up to 1919. For example, they could write for publications, attend salons in women’s homes where news and new ideas could be discussed, attend gender-segregated lectures, and so forth. Remind students that the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 was held in the *home* of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Early abolitionist women were castigated when they spoke to “promiscuous” i.e. mixed gender audiences.

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- This first generation of feminists was from among the elite. How might that later affect the perception of the movement among rural and working class women?

Distribute Document C: Background reading.

These two short secondary sources provide students with background on the time period in Egypt and the context of Islam and women. These should be kept for reference and read at home, or in class if you have time.

Prepare for tonight’s homework and tomorrow’s class:

- Distribute/share online Documents 1 through 6, Graphic Organizer 1.
- Explain that all committee members need to familiarize themselves with the lives and opinions of leading Egyptian feminists, who came from the middle and upper classes, as did the fictional character Amina from *Palace Walk* and Leila Ahmed’s grandmother. Each committee will learn about the lives and views of feminist leaders from a set of six primary source documents.
- Assign one of the six documents to each student on a committee such that all documents are represented on every committee. For homework assign students to read their document, answer questions about it in writing, and prepare Graphic Organizer 1. The graphic organizer is designed to help students present the life and ideas of their feminist to their committee in just a few minutes.
- For a class of 24 create 4 groups, for 30 create 5. If you have a different number of ask some capable students to take on responsibility for two of the documents in their groups of less than 6.
- ⇒ Variation: Turn the reading of documents into a jigsaw activity during the next day’s class time to provide students with extra support from one another. For example, everyone assigned to Document 3 will meet first to read and answer questions together. Then the committees will be reconvened. This will likely take another class period.

Activity 2. 50 minutes.

Explain that in 1922 Egypt won nominal independence from Britain. The time had come to write a constitution. Convene the committees and explain that each committee’s goal is to make an impact on this constitution as it pertains to the lives of women.

Distribute Agenda 1 to the chair in each group (appointed by you or elected). Circulate around the room as students “present” the life and ideas of one Egyptian female leader as per the agenda.

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Distribute Document D for tonight’s homework entitled *I Would Decree* by Malak Hifni Nisif. Students will use this document as a model to create a similar one with seven demands (Nasif has ten). Assign students to read the document and answer questions about it for homework.

Option: To shorten this lesson ask that students prioritize their demands as per Agenda 2 as they hear reports on each feminist, rather than in a separate class.

Activity 3. 50 minutes

In class reconvene committee groups. Distribute Agenda 2 to each chair and ask that each committee follow it. Remind students that demands should be based on the primary sources students read. Be certain that groups understand that they should *prioritize* their demands with the first being the most important, and that for each demand they should write a compelling statement following the *because*.

When committees are finished ask to hear the top two priorities of each one. If they differed, ask students to defend their choices.

Further take a survey by querying, “How many groups included a demand about polygamy? About higher education? About age at marriage? Ask for a show of hands after each question.

About what demands do students concur; where do their differences lie and why?

Activity 4. 50 minutes

Distribute document 7 excerpts from Lord Cromer’s book *Modern Egypt*, published in 1908. This part of the lesson is designed to demonstrate the effect of imperialist rhetoric on the consequent legacy of feminism in Egypt.

The text can easily be read aloud during class, with the questions following excerpts A through E posed by the teacher to stimulate class discussion.

Hopefully by this point in the lesson students will have listened to the voices of the women represented in Documents 1 through 6, felt their sincerity, and accepted the validity of at least some of the women’s own criticisms of Egyptian society.

How might the Cromer readings cast those documents in a different light? What impact might it later have that these women were among the elite?

Project or read aloud the following two quotes. Ask students for their reflections.

- *Further, colonialism’s use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of*

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being an ally of colonial interests. That taint has undoubtedly hindered the feminist struggle within Muslim societies.

Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992
(167)

- *Like the Islamic revivalists and modernists, they [the Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1928] rejected taqlid* and upheld the right of itihad.* They followed modernists in their acceptance of change through legal reform, though not accepting its application in modern family law reforms, which they regarded as Western in inspiration and intent.*

**Taqlid*: Unquestioned imitation or following of tradition

**Itihad*: Independent analysis and interpretation of Islamic law.

John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998
(153).

ASSESSMENT:

Final Assessment: Ask students to consult their Timelines for dates 1919 through 1957. How many of their seven demands were met by 1923? By 1957? Which of the seven were not met? Then ask students to write an essay in which they assess the success of the woman’s movement in Egypt on a scale from one to ten. Analyze which strategies might have been most successful in making gains. What factors impeded further gains?

Assess student homework on work on their assigned document and for Documents A, B, and D. Did the work reflect an ability to extract relevant information from primary sources, to write clearly, and to deduce information implied but not stated? Did they utilize Graphic Organizer I effectively to make their presentation?

Assess student’s ability to work cooperatively in their committees as well as in whole discussion. Did they express themselves clearly, contribute ideas and help to strategize.

EXTENSIONS

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- Use Graphic Organizer 3 to compare Egypt’s woman’s movement to one you are studying in class, or wish that students want to research. Based on the chart students can create posters, slide shows, or write comparative essays.
- Write an essay in which you compare the courage of Amina in the excerpt from *Palace Walk*, to women Huda Shaarawi in 1919 as described in Document 2. Which woman was braver?
- Compare Huda Shaarawi’s actions in 1919 described in Document 2 to women in Egypt’s Arab Spring demonstrations of 2011. What impact did women have on subsequent events?
- Read the autobiography of Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*. Compare her coming of age to that of Leila Ahmed decades later as she describes in her own autobiography, *A Border Passage* (see resources) .
- Compare the experience of Egyptian women to that of Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi in her memoirs, *Dreams of Tresspass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Perseus Books, 1995).
- For research: How many of the demands of this first women’s movement are still unmet today? The most recent Egyptian Constitution passed to date was in 2014. (Ask students to remember that laws can be implemented to a greater or lesser extent.)

RESOURCES:

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