

REFLECTIONS OF AN EARLY EGYPTIAN FEMINIST IN A CHANGING WORLD: MALAK ḤIFNĪ NĀṢIF'S POSITIONS ON WOMEN'S WAGE LABOUR

SERENA TOLINO¹

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the intersection of gender and labour history, reflecting on how early feminist sources can contribute to our understanding of labour in the Middle East. It does so by focusing on a speech by Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif (1886-1918) on women's wage labour. The chapter begins with an overview of existing scholarship on gender and labour history in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Egypt. It then focuses on the life of Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif before moving on to the specific speech that allows for an in-depth exploration of her approach to women's wage labour. By analysing her perspective, the chapter represents a first step in bridging the gap between feminist sources and labour history.

¹ Professor for Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Bern (serena.tolino@unibe.ch). ORCID: 0000-0001-7740-5805. This research was funded in part by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) within the Starting Grant TraLL: Tracing Labour in Islamic Legal Traditions (grant number 211681). Open access funding was provided by the University of Bern and swissuniversities. Open access license: CC BY-NC-ND.

KEYWORDS

Labour History, Gender Studies, Modern Egypt, Egyptian Feminism, Women's Work

1. INTRODUCTION

Massimo Campanini, to whose memory this work is devoted, had many research interests, as this rich collection shows. One of the most prominent was the modern and contemporary history of Egypt: it is not by chance that his book *Storia dell'Egitto contemporaneo*, published in Italian in 2005 by Edizioni Lavoro,² had been translated a year later into Arabic by al-Mağlis al-‘alā li-l-ṭaqāfa.³ Another of his main research interests was the history of Arab thought. In this article I try to combine these two aspects, bringing them together with my own research on gender and labour. I will do so by looking in particular at a well-known Egyptian intellectual and early feminist, Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif (1886-1918). I will focus here on a specific speech given in 1909, where she touched upon several topics that were relevant in that period for the early Egyptian feminist movement, including women's wage labour, on which I am focusing here.

While approaching research on labour in Egyptian history, I was struck by the paucity of scholarship looking at the intersection of gender and labour. This article is a first attempt to reflect on whether (and how) early feminist sources could contribute to a better understanding of Egyptian labour history. After a short mapping of the state of the art on the history of gender and labour on the Middle East, and particularly on Egypt, I will focus on Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif's life and then specifically on her approach to women's wage labour, before coming to my conclusions.

² Campanini 2005.

³ Kāmbānīni 2006.

2. LABOUR HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: AN OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD⁴

Labour history almost represents a black spot in studies on the Middle East and Islam. While some research has been already carried out, there is still a tremendous amount of primary sources from both the pre-modern and the modern period waiting to be analysed. Indeed, even though the meanings attributed to labour may have changed over the centuries, it is clear that in different historical periods people, including women, had the need to work to make a living. We can analyze historical forms of labour more easily if we use a broad definition, such as the one proposed by global labour historian Marcel van der Linden in 2021, who defines work as “the purposive production of useful objects or services”, a definition that stresses two elements: “Work is both a purposive activity, and work creates objects or services that are useful to the people for whom the work is done”.⁵

Still, other than a few normative overviews,⁶ scholarship on labour in the Middle East remains scarce, especially with reference to the pre-modern period, where most research has been devoted to crafts, manual activities⁷ or guilds.⁸ The bulk of scholarship on labour in the Middle East has focused on the emergence of the working class⁹ or of class consciousness after industrialization,¹⁰ a view that excluded research on other forms of labour. Let us think, for example, of the coerced labour of enslaved people that was a fundamental pillar of the economic

⁴ Part of this sub-chapter appeared in the unpublished funding application for the project TraIL: Tracing Labour in Islamic Legal Traditions, submitted to the SNSF Starting Grant scheme in February 2022 and approved in November 2022. I would like to express my gratitude to Laura Emunds and Laura Rowitz, both from the University of Bern, for their invaluable support in preparing the application.

⁵ van der Linden 2012: 65.

⁶ Rehman 2010; Haarmann 2003.

⁷ Faroqhi 2002.

⁸ Baer 1964, 1980; Faroqhi 2006; Goitein 1967; Goblot 1979; Massignon 1925, 1952; Raymond 1973-1974; Shatzmiller 2013.

⁹ Beinín 2001; Lockman 1994.

¹⁰ See Zürcher – Quataert 1995 for the Ottoman world and Turkey and for specifically Egypt, Beinín – Lockman 1987.

and social history of the Middle East well into the modern period but that has been usually ignored by both scholars of slavery¹¹ and labour historians.

In particular, it is the field of economic and social studies, and in particular Development Studies,¹² which looked at labour in the Middle East, something in line with the standard narrative of many Marxist historians, that distinguished three modes of production and associated each with one dominant form of labour relation (ancient: slavery/feudal: serfdom/capitalist: wage labour).¹³ This approach reflects a narrow view of labour focusing on the industrial worker,¹⁴ a view that is problematic because it neglects the fact that in many instances people worked for monetary or other forms of remuneration well before the emergence of the capitalist system.

Women and gender history helped to reassess the importance of labour as both an economic activity and as a cultural element, initially focusing only on gainful employment but later also on housework and domestic activities, thus contributing to the problematization of an understanding of labour that focuses only on wage labour.¹⁵ This is also true for the Middle East. For example, looking at biographical dictionaries, *hisba* manuals and literary sources, Maya Shatzmiller was able to compile a list of existing occupations and trades in pre-modern Islamicate societies, reconstructing for example how women were active in commercial activities,¹⁶ in real estate activities or patronage,¹⁷ but also as doctors, midwives, wet nurses, secretaries, teachers and hairdressers,¹⁸ tax collectors, brokers or peddlers, sex workers,

¹¹ The few exceptions include Franz 2017; Morony 2003; Zilfi 2010.

¹² Assaad – El Hamidi 2009; Hijab 1988; Kızılkaya – Azid 2017; Kongar – Olmstedt – Shehabuddin 2018; Moghadam 1993.

¹³ De Vito – Schiel – van Rossum 2020: 5.

¹⁴ Lucassen 2018: 23.

¹⁵ See for example Betti 2016; Bracke 2013; Salvatici 2004, 2020; Sarasúa 2008, 2019; Steedman 2013; Tilly – Scott 1988; Todd 2005.

¹⁶ Shatzmiller 1994: 351-352.

¹⁷ See Shatzmiller 1988, 2001, 2007 but also Deguilhem 2006; Zarinebaf-Shahr 2006.

¹⁸ Shatzmiller 1994: 353-355.

musicians, singers and dancers. Focusing on Jordan, Amira Sonbol applied ‘an archaeology of law’ that starts from the *ṣarī‘a*, passing via local and tribal norms, to arrive to contemporary law and demonstrated that women’s labour, “was not something questionable, but, to the contrary, taken for granted”.¹⁹

More scholars focused on the modern period,²⁰ looking for example at the impact of gender on the industrial labour force,²¹ or at sex work, in the pre-modern,²² early modern²³ or modern period.²⁴ However, in general it is evident that on the one hand gender history (at least as far as Middle Eastern Studies are concerned) has often neglected discussions about work and that, on the other, labour history has often neglected the contribution of the feminist movements. Focusing on how Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, also known as Bāḥiṭat al-Bādiya, contributed to the debate on women’s wage labour, I argue for the necessity to bring these two fields of research together on a systematic basis.

3. THE LIFE OF MALAK ḤIFNĪ NĀṢIF ...

At the end of the nineteenth century Egypt was undergoing a number of important changes: now part of the British Empire, it had entered the global market system. The extensive production and export of cotton created a new agrarian elite, and also a new middle class was emerging. Notwithstanding Egypt’s mostly remaining a rural country, members of the elite moved increasingly to the cities: as pointed out by Margot Badran, “by the end of the century, the population of Cairo had increased by two-thirds, while Alexandria, center of the cotton exchange and

¹⁹ Sonbol 2003: 11.

²⁰ Kabadayı 2013; Karakışla 2005; Khalapyan 2013; Quataert 1991, 1994; Vardağlı 2013; Zarinebaf-Shahr 2001 for the Ottoman Empire and/or Turkey; Clancy-Smith 1999 for North Africa; Baron 1994, in particular 144-167; Hammam 1980; Tucker 1985, in particular 16-101 for Egypt; Wick 2015 for Palestine.

²¹ Balsoy 2009; Hammad 2016.

²² Leiser 2017; Martel-Thoumian 2005; Tolino 2022.

²³ Baldwin 2012; Semerdijan 2008.

²⁴ Biancani 2017, 2018; Hammad 2011; Kozma 2017.

commercial life, had grown twenty-fold”.²⁵ New economic and professional opportunities emerged, in particular for men, but things were starting to change also for women.

It is in this context that the life of Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif should be understood. Born in Cairo on 25 December 1886, into an upper-middle-class Egyptian family living in the neighbourhood of al-Ġamāliyya,²⁶ Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif was a writer, a poet and a teacher.²⁷

Her father, Muḥammad Ḥifnī Bey Nāṣif, was an Azharī who had close ties to Islamic reformism,²⁸ and was fascinated by the reformist ideas of Muḥammad ‘Abduh. Her mother, Saniyya ‘Abd al-Karīm Ġalāl, was a well-educated woman²⁹ who was unfortunately often ill. That meant that Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, being the first daughter, often had to take care of her six younger siblings.³⁰ Both parents encouraged her to study and attend the newly founded women’s section of the ‘Abbās Primary School and to then continue her education. After receiving a teaching certificate in 1903 from the College Saniyya,³¹ she started to teach at the same school.³²

Even though elite women were also educated in the past, the way they were educated was changing in this historical moment: upper-class women continued to be instructed at home, as before, but now, under the growing influence of the West, their teachers often came from Europe. Instead, “[m]iddle-class women were meanwhile the first to attend the new state schools for girls”.³³ Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif belonged to this group and, alongside Nabawiyya Mūsā (d. 1951), to “the first generation of women to

²⁵ Badran 1988: 11.

²⁶ Bräckelmann 2004: 69.

²⁷ Yousef 2011: 73. See also Abdel Kader 1987: 64-65.

²⁸ Yousef 2011: 73.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bräckelmann 2004: 69.

³¹ Ahmad 1992: 182.

³² Yousef 2011: 73.

³³ Badran 1988: 11.

attend the Saniyya School and become school teachers and published writers”.³⁴

In 1907 ‘Abd al-Sattār al-Bāsil Pasha, a prominent man, proposed marriage.³⁵ After her marriage, Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif gave up teaching and followed her husband to al-Fayyūm, in the west of Cairo, where she discovered that he had already a wife and a daughter,³⁶ who he asked her to tutor.³⁷ Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif was not happy in her marriage, and focused on writing. In 1908 she started to write under the pseudonym Bāḥiṭat al-Bādiya (The Searcher of the Desert),³⁸ and soon began to publish in *al-ḡarīda*,³⁹ the main newspaper of the Umma party,⁴⁰ directed by Luṭfī al-Sayyid (d. 1963),⁴¹ one of the founders of the party.⁴²

In 1909 she was invited to give a series of lectures on the role of women in the rooms of the Umma party,⁴³ including the one I am focusing on here, that was later included in *al-Nisa’iyyāt*, a collection of some of the speeches and essays she published in *al-ḡarīda* between June 1908 and April 1910 under the same title, that appeared in 1910.⁴⁴ Between 1910 and 1913 Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif did not participate to public life as extensively as before. She explained her silence by an illness she suffered from,⁴⁵ but in 1911 she gave “a famous speech to the Legislative Assembly giving a ten-point program for the improvement of women’s

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Abdel Kader 1987: 65.

³⁶ Ahmad 1992: 182; Bräckelmann 2004: 70.

³⁷ Abdel Kader 1987: 65.

³⁸ Bräckelmann 2004: 72.

³⁹ Ahmad 1992: 171-172.

⁴⁰ The party was strongly influenced by Islamic reformism. It advocated for the adoption of Western ideas within an Islamic reformist framework. The party also advocated for an Egyptian nation-state strongly influenced by Western modernist ideas, that would gain independence gradually.

⁴¹ Abdel Kadir 1987: 68.

⁴² Yousef 2011: 73.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Bräckelmann 2004: 79. Other editions appeared in 1925, 1962 and 2017. Here I am using the 2017 edition.

⁴⁵ Bräckelmann 2004: 74.

position, for which she demanded legislation”.⁴⁶ She died at the age of 32 in 1918, and her funeral was attended by a number of important personalities of the time.⁴⁷

4. ... AN EARLY EGYPTIAN FEMINIST ...

Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif belonged to the early Egyptian feminist movement and was strongly connected to Hūdā Šaʿrāwī (d. 1947), Nabawiyya Mūsā (d. 1951) and Mayy Ziyāda (d. 1941). While she was certainly influenced by Qāsim Amīn, she also declared “that she did not belong to his way of thinking”.⁴⁸ Indeed, while the history of feminism is often situated within Egyptian reformism and connected to Qāsim Amīn, as pointed out by Margot Badran:

Feminism was not created for women by men. We know this was underway in the last third of the nineteenth century, if not before, from women themselves, from their memoirs, the journals they founded and to which they contributed, their books and oral histories. Women had already been engaged in their feminist exploration for at least a decade when Qasim Amin’s book, *Tahrīr al-mar’a* (The Liberation of the Woman) commonly credited with the start of feminism in Egypt was published in 1899. The feminism of Egyptian women was indigenous, not Western as commonly claimed, and the feminists were not confined to a single class, the upper class, as often asserted.⁴⁹

The speech I am focusing on was given, according to *al-Nisa’iyyāt*, at the presence of hundreds of women.⁵⁰ As summed up by Laila Ahmad:

The feminist subjects that Nassef gave priority to were education – she was a graduate of the Sannia Teacher Training College and worked as a teacher prior to her marriage – and educational reform and reform in the marriage laws and the conjugal relationship. In particular she denounced the evils of

⁴⁶ Abdel Kadir 1987: 67.

⁴⁷ Bräckelmann 2004: 77; Abdel Kadir 1987: 67.

⁴⁸ Abdel Kadir 1987: 66.

⁴⁹ Badran 1988: 12.

⁵⁰ Nāṣif 2017: 77. Bräckelmann 2004: 73.

polygamy and men's unrestricted license to divorce their wives, early marriage for girls, and marriages with too great a disparity in age between the spouses.⁵¹

And indeed, all these topics are mentioned in this speech. She begins by mentioning the complaints of men towards women and the complaints of women towards men:⁵² to what can this be ascribed? She observes that there was a current conflict or antagonism (*ḥuṣūma*) “between us and men”⁵³ whose origins are seen differently by men and women. While men claim this is due to “the lack of education of women and our wrong formation”, women claim this is due “to the arrogance and pride” of men.⁵⁴ Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif call for overcoming this crisis, because “God did not create man and woman to hate and repel each other, but God created them to be love each other”.⁵⁵ In another passage of the text Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif mentions an aspect that irritates her: namely the fact that men “claim that they feel pity for women”, whereas what women need is not pity but respect.⁵⁶

Not surprisingly, given her background, much of Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif's speech is devoted to education, that she embeds into the emerging ideology of domesticity and motherhood that were taking shape at the time. Opposite to those arguments that would want education to be detrimental to the role of women as mothers, she believed education would make women better mothers, an argument that was often present in the emerging nationalist discourse. Indeed, as Omnia Shakry puts it, motherhood “figures centrally in turn-of-the-century modernizing discourse and was essential to the nationalist project”.⁵⁷ Educated women would be better mothers in Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif's opinion; she asks, for example: “don't you see the peasants and the

⁵¹ Ahmad 1992: 182. For Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif's position on early marriage see also Baron 1991: 281.

⁵² Nāṣif 2017: 77.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Id.: 77-78.

⁵⁵ Id.: 78.

⁵⁶ Id.: 82.

⁵⁷ Shakry 1998: 127.

ignorant women, who leave their child cry for hours without moving?”⁵⁸ This is a perfect representation of the denigration of mothers of lower class that was typical of her age. As Omnia Shakry wrote: “Within the Egyptian colonial setting, untutored ‘ignorant’ mothers were problematized by both colonial administrators and indigenous modernizing reformers as particularly unsuited for the preparation of a new generation.”⁵⁹

Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif’s nationalist ideology is also fully imbued with discussions on western hegemonic modernity. Here, continuities between colonial and anti-colonial ideologies are striking.⁶⁰ As pointed out by Reina Yousef,

In Nasif’s work, the European serves several functions: a model, a competitor, and a potential corruptor (although, instructively, seldom a patriarchal threat). In many ways, Nasif did indeed internalize aspects of European superiority, particularly when it came to family practices, *tarbiya* (child-rearing), and education.⁶¹

For example, according to Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif it is because of their “eastern habits” that Egyptians do not continue to study.⁶²

The relation between education and *tarbiyya* is central in Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif’s speech, as it serves to “make women useful members of the body politic and should prepare them for their roles as wives and mothers”.⁶³ For example, she mentions that girls’ education should also include how to run a household, basics of health care and education of children, something that would also make Egyptian women more attractive to Egyptian men.⁶⁴ Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif also discusses the question of betrothal and marriage, advocating that future fiancés should be given the opportunity to meet and get to know each other, provided it is in

⁵⁸ Nāṣif 2017: 82.

⁵⁹ Shakry 1998: 127.

⁶⁰ For more on this see Shakry 1998.

⁶¹ Yousef 2011: 77.

⁶² Nāṣif 2017: 82. In one of her writings she specifically compares European and Egyptian women.

⁶³ Shakry 1998: 146.

⁶⁴ Nāṣif 2017: 82.

the presence of a bride's *maḥram*. She argues that failing to do so might lead Egyptian men to seek marriages with European women rather than Egyptian ones.

Not surprisingly, Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif also discusses veiling. Her position on veiling has been often seen as “a symbol of Nasif's inherent traditionalism”,⁶⁵ and understood within her attempt to put “the basis of a feminism that did not automatically affiliate itself with westernization”.⁶⁶ However, it is also to be mentioned that (un)veiling was not a priority of the Egyptian feminist movement. Indeed, as pointed out by Margot Badran, “notwithstanding their feminist critique of segregation and female seclusion, it was a function of feminist strategy not to call for immediate unveiling and an abrupt end to the old system”.⁶⁷

Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif's conservative position on the veil was based neither on religious nor on economic reasons but rather on social aspects.⁶⁸ Laila Ahmad mentions that:

She was opposed to unveiling, though not for the usual conservative reasons: she neither believed that religion dictated anything specific on the matter to women nor that women who veiled were more modest than women who did not, for true modesty was not determined by the presence or absence of a veil.⁶⁹

She argued, instead, that women were used to veiling, and that, considering how men of the time would react, it would not be wise for them to unveil.⁷⁰ In her speech she supports instead the idea of an *izār* that covers the body, emphasizing that in her opinion the head should be covered and a long overcoat should be used, as the women of Istanbul used to do.⁷¹ The model of the Turkish woman is also mentioned later as the perfect compromise between the Egyptian woman, still “imprisoned” in the home, and

⁶⁵ Yousef 2011: 79.

⁶⁶ Ahmad 1992: 179.

⁶⁷ Badran 1988: 14.

⁶⁸ Abdel Kadir 1987: 66.

⁶⁹ Ahmad 1992: 182.

⁷⁰ Id.: 180.

⁷¹ Nāṣif 2017: 85.

the European woman, who in her opinion, is excessively free⁷²— a position that well represents what Badran defines as the “uneasy position between conservatives and liberals” that feminists at the turn of the century, including Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif, were occupying.⁷³

5. ... AND HER REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN’S WAGE LABOUR

A long part of the speech is devoted to women’s wage labour. The topic would become quite relevant for the early Egyptian feminist movement. Indeed, while women were working before, the number of women entering the wage work-force started to increase during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This “sparked a debate in the press on proper work roles for men and women”.⁷⁴ As pointed out by Beth Baron, “the central issue was not, however, whether women should work, but whether they should enter the wage labor force in number or work at home”.⁷⁵

There were several reasons for this structural change: the entrance of Egypt into the global market caused the introduction in Egypt of cheap goods imported from Europe. This led to the decline of crafts and household-based manufacture, which caused the breakdown of traditional craft and trade guilds. Moreover, subsistence agriculture also declined in favour of intensive cash crop cultivation. Agriculture and household-based manufacture were quite fundamental for the economic sustenance of many households, and their collapse caused many men to enter the wage labour market and to move to the cities.⁷⁶ Quick urbanization also meant that the job market became more and more competitive for men but also for women, who often had to contribute to the finances of the family. Besides that, it should not be forgotten that many households were headed by women, who, with the rise of the nuclear family, often did not have the support of the extended

⁷² Id.: 86.

⁷³ Badran 1988: 14.

⁷⁴ Baron 1994: 145.

⁷⁵ Id.: 144.

⁷⁶ Id.: 145.

family.⁷⁷ Feminists addressed the topic in different ways. To use Badran's words:

The feminists promoted the cause of work for women on different levels. First, they reminded patriarchal adversaries that the majority of Egyptian women already worked out of necessity. In the countryside they worked alongside men. In the cities they were forced into menial jobs which frequently exposed women to sexual exploitation.⁷⁸

Feminists argued for an increase in work opportunities for women, which would reduce the chances of sexual exploitation, and also advocated for the nationalization of the workforce, in line with nationalist demands.⁷⁹ It comes therefore as no surprise that Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif also spoke about the topic. For example, Nabawiyya Mūsā wrote on the topic too, and in 1920 devoted a treaty to *al-Marʿa wa al-ʿamal* (Woman and Work).⁸⁰ What is surprising, though, is that Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif already wrote about women's wage-work in the first decade of the century, before huge numbers of women entered the wage-labour market. It is indeed in the late 1920s and 1930s onwards in particular that Egyptian feminists took a position on the topic,⁸¹ i.e. when the campaigns of the Egyptian Feminist Union, founded in March 1923, had begun to bear fruit.

I do not want to argue that Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif was the first Egyptian woman to speak about women's wage work. However, the fact that she, like Nabawiyya Mūsā, was among the first women to access advanced state education and work as a teacher undoubtedly played an important role in her early interest in the topic, even at a time when the feminist movement primarily focused on women's suffrage and education.

When discussing women's wage labour, Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif refutes one of the main arguments used by those against it; namely, if women entered the workforce, then they would

⁷⁷ Badran 1988: 17.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Id.: 13. See also Mūsā 1920.

⁸¹ Badran 1995: 164.

compete with men and leave aside the functions for which God created them.⁸² On this point, Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif responds by noting that, on the contrary, men were the ones competing with women: women used to spin, weave, sew, and clean the house—tasks that are now being performed by innovations introduced by men.⁸³ For example, she states that:

The woman before us used to sift the wheat, to mash it and to grind it on the mill with her hands, then to bring it and to knead it and she prepared bread from it. Then they invented the so-called ‘*al-ṭābūnā*,’⁸⁴ and they used men in it. They relieved us from that much work, but they deprived us of our working.⁸⁵

Something similar happened for sewing, with the invention of sewing machines, with cleaning, with the introduction of brooms, or with water collection, with the introduction of pipes and faucets, all innovations that made “the work of maids and poor women” superfluous.⁸⁶ Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif specifies that she does not intend to complain, as she is well aware that these innovations have eased women’s work. However, she wants to address the argument that views women as competing with men in the job market. She sees this competition as a consequence of the changes that men have already introduced.⁸⁷

Moreover, in her view the issue of women’s work must be understood together with that of individual freedom (*al-ḥurriyya al-šaḥṣiyya*): those who want to become doctors must be able to do so, just like those who want to become merchants, provided that there is no damage to other people involved.⁸⁸

To the argument that women would neglect their family if they worked, Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif responds very cautiously, not losing sight of a traditionalist view of the family. She is very

⁸² Nāṣif 2017: 78.

⁸³ Id.: 79.

⁸⁴ The huge oven used in bakeries.

⁸⁵ Nāṣif 2017: 79.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

careful to specify that she is certainly not asking women to give up housework or neglect child-rearing in order to study to become lawyers, judges, or locomotive drivers, but emphasizes that these tasks typically take at most half a day, leaving women enough time to study and become what they would like to be.⁸⁹ She also answers to the point according to which women would leave their jobs because of pregnancy or childbirth, and she states: “there are women who are not married, women who cannot have children, women who have lost their husbands or have been repudiated and did not find a family sustaining their children, or those who have to support the family because their husbands’ work is not enough”.⁹⁰ In this sense, she shows an understanding of what women of different classes than her own were undergoing.

Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif also denies categorically that women “were created for the home”, while men “were created to earn a living”,⁹¹ pointing out that there is no “decree” from God on that, therefore men cannot claim to have that knowledge.⁹² It is political economy that requires a division of labour, but this does not mean that women’s work would affect that negatively and even so, she sees this is a matter of choice. In her view, “had Adam chosen to cook and clean, and Eve to seek sustenance, that would be the system in place now”.⁹³

Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif also notes how some Amazigh men sew their own clothes and take care of the house while the women work in the fields, sometimes showing the same strength as the men.⁹⁴ This confirms for her that the specialization of work by gender is not a matter of necessity but of convention, and that the perception of women as “weak” in their work is due to a lack of practice rather than any intrinsic factor, as demonstrated by the hard work of women in the countryside who work as hard as

⁸⁹ Id.: 80. For a translation in German of the entire passage see Bräckelmann 2004: 135-136.

⁹⁰ Nāṣif 2017: 80.

⁹¹ Idem. See also Bräckelmann 2004: 128-129.

⁹² Nāṣif 2017: 80.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

men.⁹⁵ She stresses the necessity to make women stronger, something that she does not believe depends on nature. She points out, for example, that working women, referring mainly to lower- or lower-middle-class women, tend to have better health, more energy, and children who are not only healthier but also more intelligent, as opposed to the children of the elite, despite the fact that working women are believed to neglect their children.

At the end of her speech she lists ten demands for the improvement of women's situation. Not surprisingly, many of them are connected to education: for example, her first demand is for a teaching of the "religion", namely the Sunna and the Quran. She asks then for the introduction of primary and secondary education for women and of preparatory schools for all; for the introduction of a theoretical and practical teaching on the principles of a good housing, health, child-rearing and first aid. She also demands the inclusion of a quota for women to study medicine and education; the freedom for women to study whatever they want; the education of girls from an early age in "honesty, seriousness, hard work and patience". The observance of *šarī'a* also has a prominent role: she demands that it be respected in matters such as engagement and marriage. She also demands the prohibition of marriage between two people who have never seen each other in the presence of a *maḥram*, as well as the introduction of dressing and social customs similar to those of Turkish women. Some principles of nationalism are also mentioned: for example, she demands the preservation of the interests of the country and obtaining self-sufficiency with regard to goods and people (the issue of self-sufficiency should obviously be seen as one of the central aspects of nationalism). Last but not least, she asks "the men, our brothers, to enact this project of us".⁹⁶

This did not seem to work out: indeed, even "reformist" intellectuals such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (d. 1973) or Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (d. 1956) emphasized that the best work for

⁹⁵ Id.: 81.

⁹⁶ Id.: 92.

women was within their home.⁹⁷ However, history was on the side of Egyptian feminists: in the 1920s and 1930s women actually started to work in large numbers at Bank Miṣr or in the Maḥalla al Kubrā companies, and in 1933 a law was promulgated regulating women's work in industry and commerce,⁹⁸ confirming that things had changed and that women's wage labour, despite the opposition, was becoming a reality.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif was a woman from an upper-middle-class family. The speech I focused on here obviously touches on some of the central aspects of the feminist movement of the time: the question of the veil, education, the relation with the West, and then the question of woman's wage labour. All of them are strongly embedded into the emerging of a new nationalist ideology that assigned a specific role to women, that of educating the children of the nation.

We should not forget that the question of women's wage labour becomes so central because there were men (and women) of the emerging middle or upper classes who did not see it as appropriate for a woman of their own class to work outside the home.⁹⁹ Lower-class women had been working outside the home for centuries, and there was no massive objection to that. Malak Ḥifnī Nāṣif's showed, however, that she was also aware of the needs of lower-class women. In some instances, she talked about lower-class women in a way that we could define at the very least as judgmental, especially when discussing motherhood; in other instances she was more sympathetic to their struggles. This shows that, even though upper-middle-class women were not necessarily sympathetic to the challenges of lower-class women, they did not completely ignore them.

Reconstructing the history of workers is an uneasy task, as we do not have many sources written by them. Reconstructing the history of working women is even more challenging: the

⁹⁷ Badran 1995: 171.

⁹⁸ Baron 1994: 153.

⁹⁹ For an overview of these discussions see Baron 1994: 144-167.

intersection of class and gender made them even less visible. This is confirmed by the paucity of sources produced by them that have survived. Therefore, in light of this structural challenge, it may be strategic to also integrate sources produced by the upper-middle-class women into our analysis. Reflecting on these sources can help to shed light not only on women's wage-labour, but also on mechanisms of interclass solidarity that may in some instances have brought women together, notwithstanding the different needs they had and the different challenges they faced.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdel Kader, S. (1987) *Egyptian Women in a Changing Society, 1899-1987*. Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ahmad, L. (1992) *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Assaad, R. – El Hamidi, F. (2009) "Women in the Egyptian Labor Market. An Analysis of Developments, 1988-2006". In: R. Assaad (ed.) *The Egyptian Labor Market Revisited*. Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 219-255.
- Badran, M. (1988) "The Feminist Vision in the Writings of Three Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Women". *Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies)*, 15 (1/2), 11-20.
- Badran, M. (1995) *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Baer, G. (1964) *Egyptian Guilds in Modern Times*. Jerusalem, Israel Oriental Society.
- Baer, G. (1980) "Ottoman Guilds. A Reassessment". In: O. Okyar – H. İnalcik (eds.) *Social and Economic History of Turkey (1071-1920)*. Ankara, Hacettepe University, 95-102.
- Baldwin, J. (2012) "Prostitution, Islamic Law and Ottoman Societies". *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 55, 117-152.
- Bal soy, G. (2009) "Gendering Ottoman Labor History: The Cibali Régie Factory in the Early Twentieth Century". *International Review of Social History* 54, supplement 17: Ottoman and Republican Turkish Labour History, 45-68.

- Baron, B. (1991) "The Making and Breaking of Marital Bonds in Modern Egypt". In: N. Keddie – B. Baron (eds.) *Women in Middle Eastern History. Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 275-291.
- Baron, B. (1994) *The Women's Awakening in Egypt. Culture, Society, and the Press*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Beinin, J. (2001) *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Beinin, J. – Lockman, Z. (1987) *Workers on the Nile. Nationalism, Communism, Islam and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Betti, E. (2016) "Gender and Precarious Labor in a Historical Perspective. Italian Women and Precarious Work Between Fordism and Post-Fordism". *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 89, 62-83.
- Biancani, F. (2017) "Prostitution in Cairo". In: J.-Mi. Chaumont – M. Rodríguez García – P. Servais (eds.) *Trafficking Women 1924-1926: The Paul Kinsie Reports for the League of Nations*, vol. 2 (Historical Series 2). Geneva, United Nations Publications, 55-61.
- Biancani, F. (2018) *Sex Work in Colonial Egypt. Women, Modernity and the Global Economy*. London, I.B. Tauris.
- Bracke, M. (2013) "Between the Transnational and the Local: Mapping the Trajectories and Contexts of the Wages for Housework Campaign in 1970s Italian Feminism". *Women's History Review*, 22 (4), 625-642.
- Bräckelmann, S. (2004) *„Wir sind die Hälfte der Welt!“. Zainab Fauwāz (1860-1914) und Malak Hifnī Nāsif (1886-1918) – zwei Publizistinnen der frühen ägyptischen Frauenbewegung*. Würzburg, Ergon Verlag.
- Campanini, M. (2005) *Storia dell'Egitto contemporaneo. Dalla rinascita ottocentesca a Mubarak*. Roma, Edizioni Lavoro.
- Clancy-Smith, J. (1999) "A Woman without her Distaff. Gender, Work, and Handicraft Production in Colonial North Africa". In: M.L. Meriwether – J.E. Tucker (eds.) *Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*. Boulder, Westview Press, 25-62.

- De Vito, C.G. – Schiel, J. – van Rossum, M. (2020) “From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History”. *Journal of Social History*, 54 (2), 1-19.
- Deguilhém, R. (2006) “Consciousness of Self: The Muslim Woman as Creator and Manager of *Waqf* Foundations in Late Ottoman Damascus”. In: A. El-Azhary Sonbol (ed.) *Beyond the Exotic: Women’s Histories in Islamic Societies*. Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 102-115.
- Faroqhi, S. (2002) *Stories of Ottoman Men and Women. Establishing Status, Establishing Control*. Istanbul, Eren.
- Faroqhi, S. (2006) “Guildsmen and Handicraft Producers”. In: S.N. Faroqhi (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 3 (The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603-1839). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 336-355.
- Franz, K. (2017) “Slavery in Islam. Legal Norms and Social Practice”. In: R. Amitai – C. Cluse (eds.) *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000-1500 CE)*. Turnhout, Brepols, 57-141.
- Goblot, H. (1979) *Les Qanat. Une technique d’acquisition de l’eau*. Paris, Mouton.
- Goitein, S.D. (1967) *A Mediterranean Society. The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, vol. 1 (Economic Foundations). Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Haarmann, U. (2003) “Arbeit im Islam”. In: M. Bierwisch (hrsg.) *Die Rolle der Arbeit in verschiedenen Epochen und Kulturen*. Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 137-151.
- Hammad, H. (2011) “Between Egyptian ‘National Purity’ and ‘Local Flexibility’: Prostitution in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in the First Half of the 20th Century”. *Journal of Social History*, 44 (3), 751-783.
- Hammad, H. (2016) *Industrial Sexuality. Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt*. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Hammam, M. (1980) “Women and Industrial Work in Egypt: The Chubra el-Kheima Case”. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 2 (1), 50-69.
- Hijab, N. (1988) *Womanpower. The Arab Debate on Women at Work*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

- Nāşif, M. H. (2017) *al-Nisa'ıyyāt*. Windsor, Hindāwī.
- Kabadayı, M. E. (2013) "Working from Home: Division of Labor among Female Workers of Feshane in Late Nineteenth Century-Istanbul". In: D. Köksal – A. Falierou (eds.) *A Social History of Late Ottoman Women: New Perspectives*. Leiden, Brill, 65-81.
- Kāmbānīnī, M. (2006) *Tārīḥ Mişr al-Ḥadīḥ. Min al-Nahḍa fī-l-Qarn al-Tāsi'* 'aşar ilā Mubāarak. Al-Qāhira, al-Mağlis al-'Alā' li-l-Taḳāfa.
- Karakışla, Y. S. (2005) *Women, War and Work in the Ottoman Empire. Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women, 1916-1923*. Istanbul, Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Centre.
- Khalapyan, H. (2013) "Theater as Career for Ottoman Armenian Women, 1850-1910". In: D. Köksal – A. Falierou (eds.) *A Social History of Late Ottoman Women: New Perspectives*. Leiden, Brill, 29-46.
- Kessler-Harris, A. (2004) "Reframing the History of Women's Wage Labor: Challenges of a Global Perspective". *Journal of Women's History*, 15 (4), 186-206.
- Kızılkaya, N. – Azid, T. (2017) *Labor in an Islamic Setting: Theory and Practice*. London, Routledge.
- Kongar, E. – Olmstedt, J. C. – Shehabuddin, E. (eds.) (2018). *Gender and Economics in Muslim Communities. Critical Feminist and Postcolonial Analyses*. London, Routledge.
- Kozma, L. (2017) *Global Women, Colonial Ports. Prostitution in the Interwar Middle East*. Albany, SUNY Press.
- Leiser, G. (2017) *Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World. The Economics of Sex in the Late Antique and Medieval Middle East*. London, I.B. Tauris.
- Lockman, Z. (ed.) (1994) *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East. Struggles, Histories, Historiographies*. Albany, SUNY Press.
- Lucassen, J. (2018) "Workers. New Developments in Labor History since the 1980s". In: U. Bosma – K. Hofmeester (eds.) *The Lifework of a Labor Historian. Essays in Honor of Marcel van der Linden*. Leiden, Brill, 22-46.

- Martel-Thoumian, B. (2005) « Plaisirs illicites et châtements dans les sources mamloukes fin ix^e /xv^e-début x^e/siècle ». *Annales Islamologiques*, 39, 275-323.
- Massignon, L. (1925) « Enquête sur les corporations musulmanes d'artisans et de commerçants au Maroc ». *Revue du Monde Musulman*, 58 (2), 1-13.
- Massignon, L. (1952) « La Futuwwa ou pacte d'honneur artisanal entre les travailleurs Musulman au Moyen Age ». *La Nouvelle Clio* 4, 245-250.
- Moghadam, V.M. (1993) *Modernizing Women. Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder, Lynne Rienner.
- Morony, M.G. (ed.) (2003) *Manufacturing and Labour* (The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 12). London, Routledge.
- Mūsā, N. (1920) *Al-Mar'a wa al-'Amal*. Al-Askandariyya, Al-Maṭba'at al-Waṭaniyya.
- Shakry, O. (1998) "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-century Egypt". In: L. Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 126-170.
- Quataert, D. (1991) "Ottoman Women, Households, and Textile Manufacturing, 1800-1914". In: N. Keddie – B. Baron (eds.) *Women in Middle Eastern History. Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 161-176.
- Quataert, D. (1994) "Ottoman Manufacturing in the Nineteenth Century". In: D. Quataert (ed.) *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500-1950*. Albany, University of New York Press, 87-121.
- Raymond, A. (1973-1974). *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vols. Damascus, Institut français d'Études Arabes de Damas.
- Rehman, K. U. (2010) *The Concept of Labor in Islam*. Trans. by K.G. Naziri. Bloomington, Xlibris.
- Salvatici, S. (2004) "La storia delle donne e di genere: Dall'universale al globale". *Saggi e interventi*, 11, 111-119.
- Salvatici, S. (2020) "Donne e lavoro nell'Italia contemporanea". *Contemporanea*, 1, 149-159.

- Sarasúa, C. (2019) "Becoming Mainstream? Placing Women's Work in Economic History". In E. Asquer et al. (eds.). *Vingt-cinq ans après: Les femmes au rendez-vous de l'histoire*. Rome, École française de Rome, 371-383.
- Sarasúa, C. (2008) "Technical Innovations at the Service of Cheaper Labor in Pre-industrial Europe. The Enlightened Agenda to Transform the Gender Division of Labor in Silk Manufacturing". *History and Technology*, 24 (1), 23-39.
- Semerdjian, E. (2008) *Off the Straight Path. Illicit Sex, Law and Community in Ottoman Aleppo*. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press.
- Shatzmiller, M. (1988) "Aspects of Women's Participation in the Economic Life of Later Medieval Islam. Occupations and Mentalities". *Arabica*, 35 (1), 36-58.
- Shatzmiller, M. (1994). *Labour in the Medieval Islamic World*. Leiden, Brill.
- Shatzmiller, M. (2001) "Islamic Institutions and Property Rights: The Case of the 'Public Good' Waqf". *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 44 (1), 44-74.
- Shatzmiller, M. (2007) *Her Day in Court. Women's Property Rights in Fifteenth Century Granada*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- Shatzmiller, M. (2013) "Human Capital Formation in Medieval Islam". *Workers of the World*, 1 (3), 49-68.
- Sonbol, A. El-Azhari (2003) *Women of Jordan. Islam, Labor and the Law*. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press.
- Steedman, C. (2013) *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Work, Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, L. – Scott, J. (eds.) (1988) *Women, Work, and Family*. New York, Routledge.
- Todd, S. (2005) *Young Women, Work and Family in England 1918-1950*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Tolino, S. (2022) "Sex-Work in Pre-Modern Cairo: Between Prohibition and Regulation". In: C. De Angelo (ed.), *Fede, speranza e dialogo. Atti in memoria di Agostino Cilardo*. Lugano, Agora & Co., 189-207.

- Tucker, J. (1985) *Women in Nineteenth-century Egypt*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Van Der Linden, M. (2012) "The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History". *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 82, 57-76.
- Vardağlı, E. T. (2013) "Searching for Women's Agency in the Tobacco Workshops. Female Tobacco Workers of the Province of Selanik". In: D. Köksal – A. Falierou (eds.) *A Social History of Late Ottoman Women*. Leiden, Brill, 47-63.
- Wick, L. (2015) "Trajectories of Gendered Labour". In: S. Altorki (ed.) *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*. Malden, Wiley-Blackwell, 172-187.
- Yousef, R. (2011) "Malak Hifni Nasif: Negotiations of a Feminist Agenda between the European and the Colonial". *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 7, (1), 70-89.
- Zarinebaf-Shahr, F. (2001) "The Role of Women in the Urban Economy of Istanbul, 1700-1850". *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60, 141-152.
- Zarinebaf-Shahr, F. (2006) "Women, Patronage, and Charity in Ottoman Istanbul". In: A. El Azhary Sonbol (ed.) *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies*. Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 89-101.
- Zilfi, M. C. (2010) *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Zürcher, E.J. – Quataert, D. (eds.) (1995) *Workers and Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic*. London, I.B. Tauris.