Daughters of the Nile

Daughters of the Nile:

Egyptian Women Changing Their World

Edited by

Samia I. Spencer

Preface by Melanne Verveer

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

SAMIA I. SPENCER

After two years of close collaboration with 37 outstanding compatriots, it is with great anticipation that all of us look forward to seeing in print the fruit of our amicable yet intensive labor. This book is the collective undertaking of many friends and acquaintances whose enthusiasm, imagination, and connections allowed the project to develop and come to life. Azza Heikal in Paris was first among those who encouraged me to pursue an idea that I casually mentioned to her in spring 2014. In fact, her book *Immeubles Heikal* was, no doubt, a source of inspiration. It related the childhood memories of neighbors of different backgrounds who grew up in Alexandria in buildings owned by her family and are now scattered around the world.

Having spent most of my academic life studying French women in the Enlightenment and beyond, it occurred to me to bring together women who share a common experience as Egyptians and now live in different parts of the globe, or who spent part of their lives beyond their country's borders before returning to settle in their native land. Azza encouraged me to invite mutual friends who would in turn recommend other acquaintances. Among the early supporters who expanded the circle are Magda El-Nokaly, Safaa Fouda, Mahassen Ghobrial, Ioanna Mavrides, Nermine Mitry, Faiza Shereen, and Abla Sherif. They made sure that the pioneers they introduced to me would respond positively to my invitation and follow through with their commitment. I owe them much appreciation for their eagerness and assistance.

An early contributor who must be singled out is Seheir Kansouh. From the start, she has been a firm believer in the importance of the project and has continued to provide staunch and unwavering commitment for more than two years. Through her prominent position at UNDP Cairo and her frequent travels around the globe, she has acquired an amazing professional network. Alone, she recruited nearly half the contributors, put me in touch with them, and convinced them to take part in a venture whose leader they did not know. Throughout the process, she remained steady and confident in its successful outcome, even when I had serious

doubts. She stayed in close contact with me, sending frequent messages to check on daily progress and offering help to secure missing or delinquent materials. Her unparalleled care and warm friendship were matched only by her boundless generosity and hospitality. She came twice to visit me in Paris, and in June 2015, she opened her heart and her home in Cairo to more than a dozen contributors with whom I met, and who had the opportunity to get acquainted with each other. This book owes Seheir its depth, breadth, and much of its life.

I would also like to express my profound gratitude to the contributors without whom the book would not exist. They took precious time away from their demanding responsibilities to respond to my call and concentrate on an unexpected task, unrelated to their professional and family obligations. They had to focus carefully on the past and analyze their journeys in light of the present. They shared their life experiences openly and honestly, some actually revealing very personal and very intimate details. For many authors writing in English was a challenge because it is neither their native language nor one they handle with ease. Even among those who are fluent in English or were educated in English schools, the task was complicated because they may be skilled at drafting financial reports or scientific papers, but not at writing in a narrative style. I am grateful to all for agreeing to share their fascinating stories with a larger readership, and for allowing me to edit their submissions and rework their chapters.

Behind the scene, several friends and acquaintances provided substantial support and assistance. They include Mari and Terry Ley of Auburn University, who carefully read and provided insightful comments on part of the manuscript; Moez Doraid, Director of the Coordination Division at UN Women in New York, and Ahmad H. Fawzi, Director of UN Information Service in Geneva, for suggesting important contacts; Mona Makram Ebeid for putting me in touch with Melanne Verveer; Hedayat Islam and Fatenn Kanafani for recommending an illustration by Alaa Awad for the cover; and Jocelyn Mims of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, and my son Sam Spencer of Champaign, Illinois, for finding a most unusual and creative way to deliver a hard copy of the full manuscript to Jack G. Shaheen.

At Cambridge Scholars Publishing, it was a real treat to work with Anthony Wright, Courtney Blades, Sophie Edminson and Amanda Millar. Their gentle cooperation, understanding, and advice were crucial in bringing to a happy conclusion a long and complicated project.

Last but not least, although the name of my husband, William A. Spencer, does not appear in the Table of Contents, his participation and

technical skills were invaluable. He spent countless hours formatting texts and pages, embedding and touching up photos, checking proofs, preparing zip files, and communicating with the typesetter and the publisher: he can legitimately claim parenthood of the book.

May I add that none of us engaged in the book project for personal or material gain. The 38 of us worked very hard to produce a special volume that we offer as a gift to Egypt, and dedicate to all Egyptians, women and men. Profits from book sales will be donated to two charities: one half will go to Hanna Aboulghar's *Banati* ("my daughters" in Arabic), an NGO that cares for girls in street situations; the other half will be awarded to Marie Assaad's *Association for the Protection of the Environment*, an NGO that seeks to improve the quality of life in the garbage collectors' area of Cairo, the Zabbaleen.

In closing, I would like to extend sincere thanks to readers who purchase the book. On behalf of those whose lives will be touched by the proceeds, heartfelt appreciation is hereby expressed to the generous benefactors.

Auburn, Alabama, September 2017

PREFACE

MELANNE VERVEER

FORMER US AMBASSADOR FOR GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES

Daughters of the Nile: Egyptian Women Changing the World is a collection of autobiographical presentations by a cross-generational group of Egyptian professional women that provides an important example of the history of achievement of women in the Middle East—all the more important because of the negative stereotypes and ignorance that often color today's discourse. It also provides many inspiring lessons for life for women the world over. From time to time, I have had the privilege to get to know and work with women in Egypt, and I count among them many personal friends, including a few in this book. In my contacts with them, I was impressed with their indomitable spirit, their remarkable leadership in government, international organizations and civil society, and their deep desire to improve the quality of life in their country and beyond.

The women depicted in this book—from nonagenarians to Millennials—have strived to develop professionally, to balance work and family, not without difficulties, and to make a difference, often against pushback and adversity, including patriarchy and discrimination. As one determined author wrote: "I owe it to my gender to demonstrate that women can aspire to any profession and perform eminently." Some contributors have played key roles in advancing women's progress by overcoming barriers in the professions, and in society more broadly. Although a diverse group from different religious and social backgrounds and circumstances, they were, for the most part, privileged to attend good schools, and supported by families that valued education and had a profound influence on their development. One recounts that her father believed that it was more important to educate girls than boys because if a woman ever found herself in a difficult situation, she would be able to leave it and take care of herself. Another father urged his daughter to pursue challenging positions.

The autobiographies come from women who have succeeded in a range of professions, from engineering, medicine, diplomacy and banking, to politics, business, aerospace and academe. At a time when society recognizes the importance of attracting women to the STEM field

(science, technology, engineering and math), it is crucial to note that many Egyptian women were engaged in pioneering work in these areas long before women in most other parts of the world. Their stories include their work as trailblazers in marketing, as the first women deans of engineering schools in the US and Canada, as central bankers, and as the first woman to sit on the board of the Egyptian Stock Exchange. They also include the story of two young sisters who with no previous experience in business established one of the most innovative independent bookstore chains in Egypt.

Success did not come easily for most. Some were widowed at a young age, lost a child, or were confronted with corruption, favoritism and bribery that not only curtailed their prospects but their country's as well. For example, one was ranked third worldwide in Taekwondo but not selected for the country's Olympic team because of favoritism in the sports federation. Later, she went on to become a Senator. An Egyptologist was told she could not do field work as a woman archeologist, living away from family and mingling with men. Discrimination, of course, was not confined to Egypt. When she moved to the United Kingdom, her professor told her: "I don't take girls on my team." Others described the bias in politics, but did not give up and remained committed to their goals. Those working to advance women's opportunities were aware that a large portion of breadwinners in their country are women, yet they are often discriminated against and marginalized—not unlike their sisters in many other nations. A mother of two small children whose husband had died at the age of forty was asked by a future employer in Europe how she would "manage with two young boys." Shocked by his query, she asked if he would ask the same question of a single dad, and turned down his offer.

Many contributors were personally affected by the political upheavals and conflicts in Egypt—whether the 1952 Revolution that brought Nasser to power, the 1956 Suez crisis, the 2011 Revolution, or the 2013 popular uprising that toppled the Muslim Brotherhood. In the 1960s, some were uprooted and left Egypt in order to escape the strife and destabilization. In these cases, their stories are written from Canada, the US and other places they call home today, but the influence of their Egyptian heritage remains profound. They also struggled, as women still do everywhere, to balance their professional lives with their family obligations. A few authors wrote about careers that seemed doomed, others had to put their plans on hold as they followed their husbands to new assignments, and others yet wrote about the challenges of being new moms. This is a theme that recurs in

their personal recollections—a struggle well recognized by women in similar circumstances throughout the world.

As someone who has written about the way that women are increasingly using their growing power for purpose, I was inspired by the stories about commitment and the desire to change the world for the better. One contributor wrote: "The meaning of one's life is determined by the contribution one makes." Even in retirement, she felt that she still had a great deal to give. Another talked about the importance of paying back to one's country the debt one owes. There are countless examples of women engaged in mentoring, helping young Egyptians, assisting entrepreneurs, working across the religious divide to promote interfaith understanding and tolerance, creating and building women's organizations, developing a national strategy for micro-finance that could transform the lives of the poorest of the poor, working to end female genital mutilation, advocating for progressive legislation and gender equality—feminists who understood that feminism is liberation for all. I was taken by the example of those who were working to help the garbage collectors of Cairo, the Zabbaleen, enhance their skills and enable them to have a better life. Thanks to a contributor living overseas that community found a market abroad for the products that the women had learned to make.

It is also noteworthy that women were on the frontlines of the 2011 Revolution—Christians and Muslims side by side aspiring for a new Egypt. They were also active in working to end the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood shortly thereafter. Although the situation in Egypt and the region remains challenging, it is women like those whose stories are told in this book who will be responsible for building a better future for all.

Daughters of the Nile offers the wisdom derived from a purpose-filled life overcoming adversity and striving to reach one's potential. In the words of a successful Egyptian woman: "Set your goals high and work hard to follow your dream. You can make a difference. You can improve the world around you." This is great advice for readers everywhere—in Egypt, in the Middle East and beyond.

Washington, DC, August 2016

INTRODUCTION

SAMIA I. SPENCER

Egypt fascinates, perhaps more so than many other countries. Children in schools around the world learn about the pharaohs and fantasize about them. Visiting the pyramids, the Sphinx, Luxor, or admiring the innumerable Egyptian monuments scattered around the globe, Nefertiti in Berlin, Rosetta Stone in London, or King Tutankhamun in Cairo or in a roving exhibit are on many wishlists. The largest and most famous museums in the world, even modest ones, proudly flaunt and display their ancient Egyptian holdings. Fascination with Egypt is not limited to individuals and museums, it extends to entire countries, France is a case in point.[1] One needs to look no farther than Paris to see the evidence: an Egyptian obelisk standing in Place de la Concorde, a metro station entirely decorated in ancient Egyptian style, amazing collections exquisitely arranged in the Louvre, annual exhibits devoted to Egyptian art, history, culture, or new discoveries; not to mention invaluable collections of Egyptian artifacts at the Bibliothèque nationale, hundreds of publications celebrating Franco-Egyptian relations, and many associations promoting friendship between the two nations.[2]

The fascinating history, culture and mythology of ancient Egypt highlights its kings and queens, women and men portrayed full size side by side, as equal partners, each playing a different role and assuming distinct responsibilities. What about their descendants: contemporary Egyptian women? Who are they? What do we know about them? What is their status in society? What have they contributed to the development of their nation and the world? Other than Nefertiti or Cleopatra, most people would be hard pressed to mention an Egyptian woman by name, much less to speak of accomplishments, although Egypt's female artists, singers, and movie stars are celebrities in the Arab world. Where could one go for responses to the questions above? A Google search produced much material on women in ancient Egypt, with names and functions of its queens and goddesses, but little on modern times. Wikipedia, the popular source of information today, acknowledged the inadequacy of its two-part entry on Egyptian women, one titled "Women in Ancient Society," the

other "Modern Status." The first ended with the rise to power of ancient queens, the second leaped forward a few millennia to open with statements on veiling and gender segregation, and quoted two dozen articles and reports detailing their regressive condition.

What happened to Egyptian women during the thousands of years separating these two parts? Wikipedia readers remain uninformed. Academic sources on Egyptian women were somewhat more fruitful, referencing publications on such topics as attitudes toward emancipation of women resulting from changing political situations (Gran 1977), the segregated patriarchal systems in the 18th and 19th centuries (Hatem 1986), the early twentieth-century feminist movement (Badran 1988), or contraception and fertility rates among different social classes (Mahler 1996). Once again, none addressed the professional achievements of women in contemporary society.[3]

Perhaps this is because in recent decades the media paid little or no attention to Egypt. Readers old enough may remember Sadat's historic visit to Israel in 1977 and the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords between the two countries; but then, women were not an issue. However, since 2011 and the ill-named "Arab Spring," images of Egyptian women have flooded TV screens and print media showing them among crowds of shouting demonstrators. Reporters have focused on their trials and tribulations, depicting them as victims of police violence, gang rape, virginity tests, honor killings, and female genital mutilation (FGM). No wonder people outside the region could only deplore their lot and pity their fate!

Listening to the news and reading the papers, I felt like the late Jack G. Shaheen who, for years, watched "hordes of TV Arabs parade across the screen. It was a disturbing experience, similar to walking into those mirrored rooms at amusement parks where all you see is distorted self-images."[4] The unflattering portrayal, and the biased and truncated reports are one of the main reasons for the undertaking of the present volume. Looking around me and speaking with friends, I saw different Egyptian women, unlike those shown in newspapers and on TV—a group the media clearly overlooks and ignores, intentionally or unintentionally. They are extraordinary pioneers and achievers whose successes and accomplishments have been recognized and honored by some of the highest national and international institutions and governments. Why are they not in the limelight? Why have the media—one of the most important sources of information, education, and enlightenment—disregarded these outstanding innovators and groundbreakers? Why has the news focused exclusively on a segment of the population that perpetuates arrogant

colonialist attitudes, outdated stereotypes, and obsolete Orientalist clichés? I could not begin to comprehend their motives, nor did I try to analyze their intentions.[5]

Instead, it occurred to me that it was time to take a positive step to try to correct the flawed images, and remedy the grave omissions. When I started to discuss the idea with a handful of close friends, their response was not only enthusiastic, it was overwhelming. The project was born, and it would be simple. I would ask a few successful Egyptians to write their stories, in which they would recall their upbringing, the values instilled in them, and the principles that guided them throughout their lives. They would also speak of the difficulties they encountered as they rose to the top of their professions and mention the honors they received. The objective was three-pronged. The first aimed at attempting to break the monolithic stereotype of Egyptian women as loud, uneducated and uncivilized, dressed in loose unattractive garb, submissive, and dominated by men. The second sought to make the world aware of modern Egyptian champions who are improving the quality of life in the societies and broader environments in which they live and work. The third purpose, just as important as the first two, was to provide positive role models for new generations of women and men in Egypt and beyond, inspire them to set their goals very high despite the obstacles they may encounter along the way, and show them that the sky is not the limit.

These goals would be achieved by including a broad sample of women born in different parts of the country, raised in distinct family settings, currently at various stages of their careers, and practicing in diverse fields and occupations, both within and outside Egypt. Every effort was made by the friends who joined me in this initiative to identify professionals who had broken glass ceilings and paved the way for other women to follow. Initially, a sample of about 15 to 20 contributors was anticipated, but as the word spread and other achievers and pioneers were identified, the book ended with nearly twice as many chapters—a number both large and small. While it is greater than planned, it is also very small considering that the 38 achievers featured in this book represent only a fraction of the outstanding Egyptian women who are making the world a better place.

As chapters arrived and I began to edit them, I found many surprises and unanticipated results, including some similar and opposite experiences. The combined effort of the friends who helped to identify the contributors allowed diversity to be achieved on the geographical, educational, and professional levels. The book includes stories of Egyptian women of various national origins and religious backgrounds; some grew up in Egypt, while others were raised abroad where their diplomat fathers

were posted. Nearly half the contributors currently live in Egypt; the other half reside in Canada, France, Switzerland, the UK, and the US. Some readers may wonder why these women and countries were selected. Simply because it is where we had friends and acquaintances who were able and willing to take part in the project.

Regarding the participants' education, it was expected and confirmed that all would be well educated, recipients of Bachelors, Masters, or PhD degrees. The proportion of doctorates—half the authors—was much higher than anticipated (20/38), but the findings revealed astonishing results that need to be emphasized and highlighted. Egyptians were the very first women to receive PhDs in Engineering in Canada, and to serve as Deans of Colleges of Engineering. They were among the first to obtain graduate degrees in Engineering in the US as well, where an Egyptian was the first woman to chair a Department of Aerospace Engineering—all having received the Bachelor of Engineering degree from Egyptian universities. Another Egyptian engineer broke more than one glass ceiling when she was elected President of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME). As an Egyptian-Canadian, she was the first person from outside the US to be elected to the top post of that international professional organization of more than 130 000 mostly male members, and the first from the Middle East. Evidently, Egyptian women were studying Engineering in Egypt in the late1960s and early1970s, far ahead of women in some of the most developed nations in the world.

It is not only in engineering that our compatriots broke glass ceilings and achieved records. For example, one contributor was the first woman to serve as Deputy Secretary General at the World Council of Churches in Geneva; another was the first African inducted into the Taekwondo Hall of Fame and the youngest ever appointed to the Egyptian Senate; and yet another was the youngest in the world to reach the position of sub-governor of the central bank of her nation at age 36, before being recruited by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington, DC. The only person to have concluded the sale of a Greek bank during the recent Greek financial crisis through a subsidiary in Egypt is one of our authors. "The most beautiful voice on New York radio" belongs to an Egyptian lady, and the first Chair of the International Committee on the Right of the Child at the Center for Human Rights in Geneva is a contributor to this book. The 2014 Stars Award for Child Protection in the Middle East and North Africa—selected from 277 competitors and awarded in London by President Bill Clinton—went to an NGO founded by a fellow citizen. Likewise, the first person to obtain a US Department of Defense contract for her employer to refurbish the equipment of military laboratories in

Belarus was an Egyptian woman. Indeed, our contemporaries are worthy of their predecessors, the brilliant queens and goddesses of ancient Egypt.

The authors' professional accomplishments and successes were achieved in nearly all professions: academe, the arts, banking, development, diplomacy, economics, engineering, entrepreneurship, finance, government, medicine, public relations, science and technology, social services, sports, international relations, and international organizations, all reaching the zenith in their respective fields. Five in the group were recognized in 2016 among "the 50 Most Influential Women in the Egyptian Economy." Despite the differences in personalities, conditions, and circumstances, all share certain values: they are committed and passionate about their professions, have an unflinching belief in the importance of education and hard work, and are armed with staunch determination to overcome the obstacles that stand between them and their dreams.

For many, reaching their goals was excruciatingly difficult, whether for tragic family reasons or strict professional rules. Some lost their fathers or spouses along the way and unexpectedly found themselves assuming responsibility for younger siblings or children. A contributor who became a widow at a very young age still vividly remembered the extent of her distress more than twenty years after the passing of her partner. She used powerful words to describe her grief: "I wished I were Indian to be cremated with my husband." Several cases also stand out as exceptionally hard, for other reasons. How could a woman diplomat married to a career diplomat achieve her professional goals and preserve their family life, while her husband is posted abroad and Egypt prohibits the employment of husband and wife in the same embassy? For this determined lady, it took tenacity and resolve to reach the top of her profession. These were also the qualities that allowed two contributors to overcome various family and personal circumstances, and pursue doctoral studies despite obstacles and interruptions. A photo shows one of them in cap and gown surrounded by her grown-up children, the other received the PhD the same day her daughter graduated from high school. Another case relates to the strict weight regulations of a young athlete's sport. She had to starve herself and go to bed crying out of hunger—the price to pay to achieve her dream.

Because of the large age spread among the contributors—the oldest, in her mid-90s, was assisted by her granddaughter in the drafting of her chapter, and the youngest is in her late 20s—the changing history and culture of Egypt since the mid-twentieth century appears in the background between the lines, although one author sought to provide a clearer and more elaborate backdrop. Several participants, who came of

age in the 1960s, during the dark socialist regime and dire economic conditions under President Nasser, left their native land in search of a brighter future elsewhere. On the other hand, those among a younger generation, who started their careers under President Sadat's "open door" policies, found greater potential in their own nation. Several authors spent part of their early years in Alexandria, a cosmopolitan town unlike any other until the late 1950s/early 1960s. Readers will no doubt notice some overlap in their chapters, as they all long for a liberal, tolerant, broadminded, and urbane society, and a charming and elegant city, both of which exist only in our memories today.

Forgotten or unknown habits, practices, and historical events occurring in the mid/late twentieth century, in both Egypt and other parts of the globe, are also discussed in the 37 stories. For example, many readers may not know that European women went to Egypt to seek employment as nannies in upper-class Egyptian families, or that a Marxist Revolution overthrew the Emperor of Ethiopia. Discrimination and affirmative action were addressed in astonishing ways in the US Deep South, while Switzerland did not allow foreign students to be accompanied by their spouses and children. A Canadian scientific research center was built with no ladies' restrooms because no women were ever expected to work there. There was a time before cell phones when international calls required advance reservation for specific time and duration, with no guarantee they would go through.

For more than half the participants who made their careers either entirely or partially outside Egypt, the question of identity was crucial. For some, the transition to another country and culture was fairly smooth, as they were welcomed in the new homeland. Others endured discrimination, loneliness, and conditions to which it was hard to adapt. After 9/11, with increased hostility toward Arabs and Muslims, some among those who were well integrated in distant countries were disquieted and shamed, although they could not be blamed for the heinous crime. They felt compelled to act, to break the stereotype of the Arab and Muslim as a terrorist, and built bridges between the different cultures and religions, in order to create a better informed and more tolerant environment. For their efforts to improve the quality of life in their community, they were later recognized and honored.

Although Egyptian women are the main focus of this book, Egyptian men also came out as winners, breaking the stereotype of the Middle-Eastern sexist macho male. Many successful women credited their achievements to their loving and supporting fathers or husbands who inspired them, encouraged them, and stood by them as they reached their

full potential. In some cases, the exceptional attitudes of these Egyptians were far more progressive than those of most males, whether in the East or the West. For example, an Egyptian husband in the late 1960s offered to keep and care for a six-month-old baby so that his wife could complete medical training in a different part of the country. Another sacrificed his own career so that his partner could pursue her own educational and professional goals. These extraordinary Egyptian men deserve to be applauded and recognized, even as they rest in their graves today.

For all the daughters of the Nile in this sample, Egypt is deeply rooted in their hearts. A few who made their career in a different country have chosen to spend their golden years in their birthplace; those who live abroad are committed to serve their native land in one way or another; and those who continue to sip from the Nile are devoted to improving the quality of life for their fellow citizens. This overview of their accomplishments aims to whet the curiosity of readers as they begin to explore the fascinating stories of some extraordinary women. It is my hope that this modest initiative will inspire other writers, researchers, and scholars to pursue the path it has opened, for there are many more treasures to unearth, many more issues to investigate, and many more pioneers to spotlight.

Paris, September 2017

Notes

[1] Among the many books on Franco-Egyptian relations, Robert Solé's *L'Egypte passion française* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997) remains one of the most comprehensive and best documented.

[2] For more information on Egyptian artifacts held by various French institutions, see Azza Heikal's chapter (191-200).

[3] References for the articles cited above are the following: Judith Gran, "Impact of World Market on Egyptian Women," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 58 (June 1977): 3-7; Mervat Hatem, "The Politics of Sexuality and Gender in Segregated Patriarchal Sytems," *Feminist Studies* 12.2 (1986): 256-74; Margot Badran, "The Feminist Vision in the Writing of Three Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Women," *Bulletin (British Society for Middle-Eastern Studies*) 15.1-2 (1988): 11-20; K. Mahler, "Lower Egyptian Fertility Linked to Later Marriage, Increased Method Use," *International Family Planning Perspectives* 22.4 (1996): 179-81.

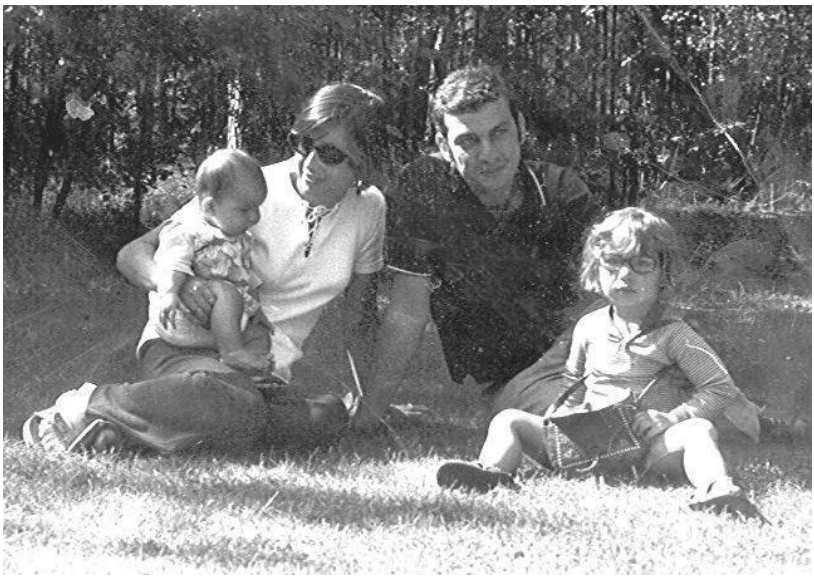
[4] Jack G. Shaheen, *The TV Arab* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1984), 4. In his outstanding analysis of Arabs in the media, Shaheen's attention is focused on Arab men, there is not much on women; in fact, "women" is not even an entry in the Index.

[5] For studies on the biased stereotypical representation of Arabs in US popular culture, see also Jack G. Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs. How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: The Olive Branch Press, 2001), and *Guilty. Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (New York: The Olive Branch Press, 2008). Noha Mellor has written extensively on Arab media and Arab identity. Among others, see *The Making of Arab News* (Lanham, PA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); *Modern Arab Journalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); or *The Egyptian Dream: Egyptian National Identity and Uprising* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

BETWEEN EGYPT AND SWEDEN: A PASSION FOR IMPROVING THE LIVES OF EGYPTIAN CHILDREN

HANNA ABOULGHAR

I was born in 1968, in the small town of Alvesta in southern Sweden, to a Swedish mother and an Egyptian father. Egypt had just lost the 1967 war against Israel, and my parents thought it would be safer for my mother to give birth in her hometown. At six-months, she took me to Egypt where I have lived ever since.



The older child, Hanna, with her parents Kristina and Dr. Mohamed Aboulghar, and her younger sister Mona, in the garden of their Alvesta Home, summer 1971

Growing up in Egypt, in a home with two very different cultures greatly affected my perspective and world views. The Swedish model of social justice that seeks to achieve equality and fair chance for all makes me particularly sensitive to social injustice and inequality in Egypt. At the same time, I identify myself as Egyptian, and appreciate the warmth of Egyptian culture and its close social networks that bond people together. This makes it hard to be angry or unaccepting of my country's flaws; rather, it has the effect of making me hold tighter to my Egyptianess.

I was educated in a British-Egyptian school that caters mostly to upper middle-class children. At that time, it was one of the best in Egypt, but in retrospect its curriculum appears limited and outdated. I went on to get my General Certificate of Education (GCE), which offered a taste of a more vibrant educational model, and it was also a way to avoid the rigid Egyptian high school examination. In 1986, I entered medical school at Cairo University, my dream since I was 8-years old. There, too, the system was archaic, based mostly on knowledge by rote, with little emphasis on practice or clinical skills. The student body was polarized, divided into groups defined by religion and socio-economic status. The general atmosphere exuded competitiveness and tension. Except for the Muslim Brothers and a few Socialists, politics had limited place on campus.

Upon graduating five years later, I was offered a three-year residency in the Department of Pediatrics at the Cairo University Hospital. The first year was excruciating, as newcomers were in charge of 40 patients as well as management of the departmental personnel, with minimal input from their seniors. The daunting task was frustrating, in light of our limited experience and skills. At the end of the residency, Master's degree in hand, I joined the Neonatology Department at the Faculty of Medicine. By then, I was married and the mother of two beautiful daughters, and also pursuing doctoral studies that were successfully completed in 2000. Deeply involved in motherhood with kids in kindergarten, having started a private practice, I should have been comfortably ensconced in uneventful routine—but that was not going to be.

The Middle East was in turmoil. Israeli forces had attacked the West Bank, surrounded Yasser Arafat's headquarters, and cut off his power. The Arab world was raging from yet another humiliating slap on the face, felt by many as a personal affront. It took then-President Hosni Mubarak over a week to come out with a meek response. The University was storming with infuriated students, and I attended my first ever demonstration. Anger at the international injustice toward the Palestinians was mixed with resentment at the corrupt Egyptian regime. I believe that the first spark that led to Egypt's 2011 Revolution may have been ignited in 2001.

It is around that time that I began to notice the many children who lived on the streets of Cairo, with or without parents. The difference between their situations and the privileged lives of my daughters started to make me feel uncomfortable, even guilty. That sentiment intensified when I read about a young boy who went to sleep under a truck, seeking warmth on a cold winter night; the next morning he was ran over when the driver moved the vehicle. I had the urge to do something to help, and looked for people or organizations that could support my efforts. There was only one non-government organization (NGO) that worked with children in street situations (CSS); it was founded by an Englishman and run by an Egyptian Board. Together, we established the first shelter for girls in street situations, in the poor Cairo neighborhood of Imbaba.

In 2005, I was elected to the Board of the NGO, and served for three years until it split. The Executive Manager sought to control the NGO and, through her powerful connections at the Ministry of Social Affairs, toppled the Board and took charge with some of her allies. For me, it was a moment of personal defeat to see the Center that I had toiled untiringly to develop, and in which my family had strongly believed to the extent of buying the building, taken over by people I did not trust. Simultaneously, similar situations were unfolding at both the University and the private hospital where I worked. A new generation of young and energetic people, hoping to change a stifled system that had no room for reform or innovation, was blocked by rigid and recalcitrant elders. The political landscape was turbulent as well, insurgency was ignited by *Kefaya* (an Arabic word meaning "enough")—a resistance movement seeking to counter Mubarak's plan to hand over Egypt to his son and his business friends. On campus, the "9th of March" was a group of faculty defending academic freedom. These were only two among many that opposed the Mubarak regime. Police and security used all means at their disposal to subdue the protestors, and, to a great extent, they succeeded. For the first time in my life, I felt as though Egypt was turning its back on me.

In the meantime, I had connected with Samih Sawiris, a prominent businessman who offered to build a large shelter for girls in the Cairo suburb "6th of October" (so named after the date of Egypt's triumph in the 1973 war against Israel). He asked me to see the project through in collaboration with his mother, Yousriya Loza Sawiris, a longstanding philanthropist who presided over another charitable organization. Within a year, *Banati* Foundation was established in 2010 as an independent entity ("Banati" is an Arabic word meaning "my daughters"). We laid out the plans for the building and management, and developed a method to deal with girls in street situation by working with the few people who had

experience in that field. Among the 40,000 or so active Egyptian NGOs, only ten worked with CSS, and only two had shelters for girls.

One of my closest and most reliable associates is Hind Samy, the bravest woman I know. She has dedicated her life to street girls, doing whatever it takes to save them: visiting and talking with them, supporting them emotionally, mediating between them and their parents, taking them to the hospital, and acting as the mothers they never had. Hind has also cared for some who were wounded from assault or rape; identified bodies of girls killed on the street; helped teenage mothers to deliver their babies; and, on some of these occasions, she was interrogated by the police. Although she comes from a traditional family, Hind is open-minded and compassionate, and treats these girls who are generally scorned by Egyptian society at large with respect, neither condemning nor judging their decisions or promiscuity. A creative person, she always manages to find solutions for their problems; fortunately, her family firmly believes in her mission, often lending a helping hand.

Another person who has dedicated his life to the cause is Abdelsamie Labib, the shelter manager and the father figure for the girls. Contrary to Hind, he is traditional and conservative, even authoritarian at time; yet, he manages to inspire safety and security. Abdelsamie is loved and respected by the girls and their families. Over the years, he and I have developed a bond of trust and understanding that bypasses our different backgrounds and mentalities.

At Banati, there are three types of intervention. One is the Reception Center where Hind and her outreach team are based. It is located in an old part of the city, and open weekdays 9 AM to 5 PM. The mobile unit of the Center is equipped with a fridge for food storage, an examination bed for the nurse, and foldable tables and chairs to be used in parks and recreation areas for children's activities. When Hind and her team go out in the mobile unit, they target populous areas, and circulate in groups of two, always mixed gender for safety. They have maps showing where they are likely to encounter children in street situations (CSS). They approach the girls, talk with them, and offer them a sandwich or a cup of tea. Generally, the youngsters accept, but reveal very little information about themselves. It takes many visits and long conversations before they open up and trust the social worker enough to agree to go to the Banati Reception Center. There, they meet the rest of the team, and receive hot meals, clothes, bath, and medical care when needed; but more importantly, they are surrounded with love and affection.

Over the past five years, a Psychological Awareness and Intervention Protocol has been developed by our psychologists and psychiatrists in collaboration with UNICEF. Banati is proud to have achieved this project,

which serves as a blueprint for other NGOs invested with similar missions. The process starts with social workers discreetly investigating how the girls ended up on the street. Once authorized by the girls, social workers visit the parents or guardians, an undertaking usually requiring travel to distant places or dangerous areas of Cairo, Alexandria, or beyond. The attempted visits are often in vain since girls sometimes provide incorrect information, even after lengthy sessions with the team. When a family is contacted, and its socio-economic situation determined, a written report is submitted, in which are outlined the reasons for the child's escape from home. The most frequent cause is abuse, physical, sexual or mental; in some cases, it is due to a couple's breakup, with each parent forming a new family, neither of which is interested in the offspring from a previous marriage. Most victims come from very poor families. Whenever possible and safe, we try to reunite daughters with parents, and follow-up on them, to make sure no harm is done. We provide psychological support to the families, and, where appropriate, we put them in touch with an NGO that provides micro loans to help them start their own small business. In some cases, we have even succeeded in arranging basic housing.

Some may argue that the work of the Reception Center is unimportant since most children go back to the street at the end of the day. This brings up the question of defining importance and success. Should they be measured only when a girl is fully reintegrated into her family or housed in a shelter? If that were the case, worldwide statistics point to a success rate of about 30%. My argument, however, is that children who frequent a Reception Center are less likely to engage in violence or criminal activity, and more inclined to stay safe and healthy, even when they remain on the street. I strongly believe that such factors should be taken into consideration when evaluating our achievements.

An important group that we treat—approximately 60% of the children in the Haram City Shelter located near the pyramids ("Haram" is an Arabic word meaning pyramid),—consists of second-generation street children, born to girls who became pregnant on the street, resulting from rape, prostitution or sexual promiscuity. Many do not know who fathered the child, and are at great risk of death, illness, accidents and malnutrition on the street. We usually follow the girls during pregnancy, and invite them to visit the Shelter. Once they feel comfortable enough, we suggest they remain permanently in the Shelter, with an open-door policy allowing for visitors and permission to leave, as long as they notify us.

The Haram City Banati Shelter was donated by Samih Sawiris, our principal sponsor. The Sawiris Foundation covers some of the running costs for both the Reception Center and the Shelter through renewable

yearly donations. At Haram City, girls live in rooms of eight, each has her own bed, and a closet for her personal effects. The rooms are arranged in pairs, with a living room and a balcony in-between, the idea being to raise the girls as a family of 16 members of varying ages who can look after each other. There is a caregiver in each room; unfortunately, some stay only for a few months or a couple of years before returning to their village. Their departure can be devastating for the children. It is the main reason for emphasizing bonding between the children, and with the more permanent staff members, such as Hind and Abdelsamie.

Activities at the Shelter are designed and aim for rehabilitation. We deal with children who suffer from various types of trauma, including bereavement, anxiety, hyperactivity, addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder, and attention deficit, among others. They have often been victim or witness to repeated physical and sexual abuse. Those who have been on the street for longer periods are impervious to discipline. It is difficult to convince them to follow a daily time routine of sleep, meals and personal hygiene, or to give up smoking, sexual habits, and glue sniffing. The rehabilitation workshops offer a variety of arts and crafts, pottery, gardening, animation, music, singing, sewing, and origami. We are particularly gratified when the girls are publicly recognized and rewarded for their achievements. For example, one of ours won First Place for Photography in *The National Geographic* Egypt Competition in 2011; our band was repeatedly invited to perform at the Cairo Opera House; and, in 2015, Banati participated in the International Tournament for Children at Risk in Amsterdam.

All rescued children receive an education appropriate for their situation. Those below school age go to one of our four nurseries, one of which is a Montessori facility. Other students go to local public or experimental schools. In-house literacy classes are offered for those without legal papers who cannot attend regular school until they receive official documents. A community school set up by a nearby sister NGO also accommodates some of our girls. Our educational system includes a creative learning program called *Sawaseya* (an Arabic word meaning "equality and sharing"), designed to teach science through experimentation. It is particularly popular among children from other schools, as we often invite students from local and international institutions to visit, in order to bridge the gap between the girls and the outside world. Throughout the year, we take them on daytrips to various sites, and during the summer they spend a week at the beach, thus providing an opportunity to strengthen the bond among them and with staff members.