Book Review

**Daughters of the Nile: Photographs of Egyptian Women’s Movements**

Edited by Hind Wassef and Nadia Wassef
Reviewed by Kamal Labidi

Feminist research has often been described as “research by, about, and for women.” But Daughters of the Nile edited by two active members of the Cairo-based non-governmental feminist organization, the “Research Center for the New Woman” is for anyone who does not want to be kept in the dark, as far as women’s contribution to the struggle for the independence of Egypt or the march on the thorny road to social and political rights from 1900 to 1960. Many Arab countries have paid a heavy price for overlooking the political and military dimension of resistance to colonial occupation and for denying them basic rights after independence.

Hind and Nadia Wassef provide the reader with a useful and informative survey of the emergence of photography in Europe and its immediate invasion of the Middle East “at a time of exploration and imperialism.” In the latter half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of European photographers flocked to Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul and Jerusalem and roamed through the region to capture “its exotic splendor for a hasty European public.” The authors explain how in these photographs “women were constructed as sex objects and metaphors for the Orient itself (and its connotations of the sexual and dominated other).” Egyptian women’s rights activists soon realized that the photographs could be used to mirror their struggle for emancipation and that the press is an important tool that could further their cause: “When Huda Sha’rawi and Zea Nabrawi publicly unveiled, they provided the photographers with opportunities for wider circulation. Women began counting the press for its power to disseminate images.”

The book opens with pioneering women who “through their lives and work achieved ‘firsts’ that enabled later generations to follow in their footsteps.” They came from different social and geographical backgrounds, like Princess Fatma Ismail who sold some of her jewelry to contribute to the construction and the management of the Egyptian University, Na’ima al-Ayyubi, the first Egyptian woman to graduate from the Faculty of Law; Zaynab Fuad, founder of one of the early design workshops; and Umm Kalthum who rose to the top of the world of Arab music after moving from a small village in Upper Egypt to Cairo. Others came all the way from what later became Lebanon and Syria, such as the two writers Amisa Shartumi and Alifa Shartumi as well as the actress and publisher Fatima (Rose) Al-Yusif.

The second chapter “Feminists Making History” contains photographs of women who identified themselves as human rights activists, such as Huda Sha’rawi and Zea Nabrawi. Some used journalism and poetry to promote women’s rights such as: Alexandra Avetino, Malak Hefni Nasif, Labiba Hashem, Aisha Taymouriyya and Mary Zyaida. Others campaigned for women’s rights through the Egyptian Feminist Union, like Eva Habsi al-Ma’ali, who became in 1928 the first Egyptian woman to enter the American University in Cairo.

The following chapter focuses on the role played by women in the social field, particularly their participation in fighting illiteracy and resisting the British occupation and helping the Palestinians who took refuge in Egypt in 1948. Chapters four and five show how women used journalism and poetry to promote and enhance women’s voices in government, community and household decision making. “I have participated in other workshops before, but none as intensive or exciting as this one,” said a Cameroon women’s activist who studied from this manual. “I have now come to understand that even ‘ordinary’ women can be leaders, and this is very empowering,” a Moroccan literary teacher said after using this handbook. A Jordanian workshop facilitator attributes her nomination to a local council seat to the lessons she learned from Leading to Choices and to the friends she made during the training workshop. The women who use Leading to Choices are realizing that they have skills they never knew they had.

Leading to Choices is a timely and significant contribution to training resources designed to enable women to effectively contribute to important public and private decision making processes. The handbook is different from other resources in that it guides the participant not just through personal development and confidence building exercises, but also through activities that help women to build upon community resources and act as effective facilitators and motivators of individuals and groups. “A good leader,” the handbook states, “is a leader who can capitalize on the ideas and skills of as many individuals as possible.” She must be a good communicator and use her personal skills to “listen, build consensus, create shared meaning and foster learning partnerships at work, at home and in her community.”

The handbook is divided into 12 workshop sessions. These sessions move the participants from self investigation, developing the self for leadership; to best ways of communicating and decision making; to answer. Workshop participants conclude many sessions by designing action plans that address the issues raised and like they could not.

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investigated during the discussions. The handbook includes tips for facilitators on building consensus among participants, directing conversation, stimulating discussions and leading group activities. Portions of the handbook can be extracted and adapted, depending on the goals of the users, or the entire handbook could be used from start to finish in a 5 day or 36 hour training workshop. The handbook is equipped with evaluation forms, case studies and a list of leadership training resources and organizations from around the world.

Women’s Learning Partnership, a creator of this handbook, is working with NGOs in different countries to customize Leading to Choices to relate to their particular community needs and challenges. They are adapting the handbook to include culture-specific scenarios that reflect local concerns and priorities and translating the handbook from English into local languages such as Arabic, French, Hausa, Persian, Russian and Uzbek. Some groups are also using the handbook to inform male NGO heads about effective ways to lead and to develop a well-functioning and successful organization.

Facilitators in workshops in Nigeria noted that after using Leading to Choices, participants gained mutual respect for each other’s opinions. Facilitators in Pakistan reported that women had learned to think of themselves as leaders and were eager to put into practice the information and skills they had acquired through the workshop. At a leadership workshop in Jordan, participants discussed the many obstacles that women face in achieving leadership positions, such as unequal opportunities with men, lack of support and encouragement from their communities, and the stereotype that women are incapable of maintaining a leadership role. The women at this workshop identified possible solutions to these obstacles and emphasized that women are qualified to occupy leadership positions if they have equal opportunities.

Just as Leading to Choices promotes a collaborative leadership style, the handbook was produced in a collaborative way. Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP), an NGO based in the United States that works to empower women and girls in the Global South to re-imagine and restructure their roles in their families, communities and societies led the initiative in cooperation with: l’Association Democratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), one of the largest NGOs in Morocco that works to defend and promote the human rights of women, and to foster equitable policies and social practices; the BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights (BAOBAB) in Nigeria that promotes human rights and legal rights for women under religious, statutory and customary laws; and the Women’s Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), a coalition of women leaders and groups in Palestine that works to eliminate discrimination against women and to promote a democratic society.

To empower women is to increase their control over the decisions that affect their lives both within and outside the household. There is no single or right path to women’s empowerment or development as leaders, but using Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women is one important way to achieve these goals.

If you are interested in receiving a copy and/or using this handbook for workshops, please contact: Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP), 4343 Montgomery Avenue, Suite 201, Bethesda, MD 20814, USA, Phone: 1-301-654-2774/Fax: 1-301-654-2775, Email: wlp@learningpartnership.org, Web:www.learningpartnership.org.