CHAPTER 3

Mechanizing Women: Industrial Workers or Women Adrift?

Four female workers, Amina Hammam, Wahiba Khattara, Fatima Murgan, and Fatima al-Khuli, worked out a plan to go home to their village of Kafr al-Sarim after work on October 31, 1940. They met by the doors of the shop floor after their shift and left together. The women's plans changed when they arrived at the gate, where Company guards dragged them to the police station and the court convicted them of theft. While searching the four women at the gate, the female guard Ruqayya ʿAbd al-Raʾuf had caught the four women wrapping pieces of Crepe Georgette, an expensive cloth, around their waists and inside their underwear.[1]

The journey of these women from village to courthouse via the industrial shop floor, their aspiration to acquire an elegant cloth, and the hands searching their underwear sum up important aspects of the proletarianization and urbanization that thousands of women experienced in interwar Egypt. This was a time when the textile industry was expanding—large and small factories alike were being established, and handloom workshops were being mechanized. Female capital and labor were critical forces that fueled the expansion.

Dispelling the misconception that Islam and Islamic culture forced women to be segregated and confined to the household and put up barriers between women and factory work, archival research has shown women's strong participation in industrial work and economic activities in Middle Eastern history.[2] Before and throughout the nineteenth century, women and girls in this region worked in the domestic textile industry for the market as well as for family consumption. The number of females working at home in textile craft sectors and as factory laborers sharply increased in the nineteenth century, and in factories the gender division of labor followed no clear-cut pattern.[3] One indication of the absence of a uniform Middle Eastern and Islamic value system regarding the participation of women in the workforce was the regional varia-

tion in the gender distribution of labor in the manufacturing sector.[4] Judith Tucker details the roles that women played in nearly all aspects of the economy in nineteenth-century Egypt, from petty trade to the administration of *waqf* (endowment) and *iltizam* (an Ottoman tax-farming system); she notes that the economic activities of women underscored the blurring divisions between rural and urban economies.[5] In Egypt, the simultaneous processes of state-sponsored modernization and integration into the global economy had lower-class women and girls working outdoors, outside the house, in factories, in public work projects, and in construction. While upper-class women could segregate themselves and connect with the outside world through servants and intermediaries, lower-class women had to work.[6]

As part of the female labor force, local al-Mahalla women traded agricultural products and foodstuffs in the urban marketplaces, worked farms, and contributed to domestic handloom weaving. Only women in elite religious families were locked in their homes and not allowed to talk to male guests unless hidden behind a curtain.[7] Unlike these women, women from all other classes were interacting with the rest of the community as property owners, *waqf* managers, textile workers, vendors, midwives, health care providers, and prostitutes. Men and women followed Islamic cultural norms, but in accord with local understandings of those norms.[8]

In 1947, midway through the twentieth century, 10,153 out of 17,149 women—almost 60 percent of the adult female population—worked outside the home (see table 3.1). Considering that women were active in all economic sectors, one can question the accuracy of these figures. The number of women working in agriculture was almost equal to the number of men, and 12.5 percent of all those involved in commerce were women. In domestic services, traditionally a feminine job taken on by women of all ages but particularly by children and unmarried women, the number of female domestic servants exceeded the number of their male counterparts. The majority of domestic servants worked in other people's homes cleaning, cooking, and caring for children. Maids usually had to live with their employer, and many suffered physical and sexual abuse.[9] Married women who took up domestic work tended to specialize in particular services, such as doing laundry, baking bread, and breast-feeding babies. These women performed these jobs in limited hours during the day, very often in their own homes, and provided services to so many families that they could not be counted as a personal servant of any one family. Their clients were not always better off than they were themselves.

With their professional skills, female bakers and pot polishers were booked in advance by those who sought their services. Thus, they enjoyed a social status higher than that of domestic servants. Women from the lower classes

Table 3.1. Working Men and Women in al-Mahalla by Economic Sector, 1947

Sector	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*
Agriculture	2,446	2,670	5,116
Industry	1,379	25,423	26,802
Commerce	604	4,206	4,810
Personal service	3,202	2,277	5,479
Unclear/unproductive	2,522	7,319	9,841
Unemployed	6,996	5,902	12,898

Source: Maslahat al-Ihsa' wal-Ti'dad, *Ti'dad Sukkan al-Mamlaka al-Misriyya 1947*, part 1, vol. 12, *Muduriyyat al-Gharbiyya* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Amiriyya, 1953).

were empowered, however, by the rapid developments associated with the establishment of the Company and the population growth of the town. Factory work offered them a new type of work for wages.

On Separate Tracks of History

Despite the strong presence of women in factories since the rise of modern industry, the history of labor and the history of women in the Middle East are still separate terrains of inquiry. Labor history, the history of male workers, pays scant attention to female laborers, and the history of women pays scant attention to female industrial workers.[10] The most notable exceptions are Judith Tucker's work discussing the legal ramifications of women's work—specifically, how men used women's work as a pretext to deprive them of the custody of their children in nineteenth-century Egypt—and Donald Quataert's works dealing with ethnicity as a factor in the gradual acceptance of women's factory work.[11] Quataert also hints that female wage labor that increased a family's income improved women's position in the family in parts of Anatolia. The experiences of female factory workers as social and economic actors inside the factory and the family have largely been left out of scholars' historical inquiries. Although they attempt to challenge the distance between labor history and women's history, recent works on Ottoman female workers do not go beyond the sexual division that led factories to place women in less important, lower-paying, more intensive, and more time-consuming positions than men.[12] In studying female workers at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religion, Erdem Kabadayi concludes that Ottoman factories divided labor not along ethnic lines but along a gender-religious line.[13] Yet he limits his focus to work division, solidarity, and wages, without discussing working-class culture as a lived experience both inside and outside workplaces.

Based on the belief that gender has been fundamentally important in shaping working-class history and culture, this chapter provides a gendered history of the textile industry in al-Mahalla al-Kubra.[14] The experiences of female industrial workers in that provincial Egyptian town were part of the larger experience of Egyptian and Middle Eastern women who made it to the shop floor, a movement that, from the mid-nineteenth century, enabled manufacturers to compete with European products. Women and their households mediated the resilience of Middle Eastern industry in the world economy, and historians should understand changes in the household division of labor in that region as adaptations to changing market opportunities, both domestic and international.[15] In becoming factory workers, women in the Middle East had an experience that paralleled the experiences of women in the industrial West and Japan, where classed and gendered identities intersected. Women in these distant worlds underwent a multifaceted proletarianization while also being subjugated to a coercive industrial hierarchy and facing capitalist structures and patriarchal culture in and out of the factory.

The literature on labor history and working-class formation defines "proletarianization" as the process of increasing the number of "people whose survival depended on the sale of labor power."[16] Hence, proletarianization was a common experience among given populations of people whose paths systematically connected through collective action.[17] Scholars can best understand the intersections and tensions between the class and gender identities of working-class women, and men as well, as the result of a collective identity emerging in response to specific contexts.[18] The tensions between their identity as members of the working class and their identity as women could not be revealed by examining the forms of their activism and their relationship with male-dominated labor organizations. Yet underscoring the collective action in labor activism provides definitions too narrow to capture the rich experience of female industrial workers that led to fluid, rather than fixed, class and gender identities. Women's experiences in the broader social contexts outside their workplaces must be examined. In the Egyptian experience, proletarianization and urbanization arose simultaneously in Cairo, Alexandria, Shubra al-Khayma, Kafr al-Dawwar, and al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Thus, I focus on female industrial workers in al-Mahalla and their adaptation to industrial and urban life, not exclusively on workplace-based collective action. Their experi-

ences must be examined at the intersection of the organization of production, the household division of labor, and women's individual and collective choices to act based on their gender and/or class identity.

Women who chose to work in textile factories, or were driven to do so, ventured into new territories outside their homes and beyond the previous work domains of domestic services and agricultural labor. They went through a process of subject formation in which they were never passive. Their transformation in the industrial milieu set female industrial workers apart from the working-class women among the urban and rural poor. Against the backdrop of the accelerating mechanization of the textile industry in al-Mahalla during the interwar period and the shift from handlooms to mechanical looms, factory work opened up opportunities for women to achieve socioeconomic mobility even as it subjected them to sexual harassment and social stigmatization. Women acquired the skills to operate modern machinery, rose to the social rank of the salaried urban population, and gained experience in dealing with a factory system whose owner and top managers were anonymous to them. Yet they had the lowest status and payment among the workers in the male-dominated industrial hierarchy, and their morality became subject to community suspicion and mistrust.

Many of the female workers emigrated from the countryside and lived by themselves far from their families, at least until they got married. They were seeking neither the self-fulfillment nor the gender emancipation called for by the educated, elite Cairene women of the day.[19] While more women worked in large modern factories, female workers pursued a new gender role and participated in rapid social transition. To support their kin and to stave off poverty, they remained dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters in the family, but in becoming economically independent, women liberated themselves from the repressive patriarchal standards of community and kin. My argument on the hybrid gender role of female workers challenges the limitations of the two models on which historians rely to interpret the history of working women: the liberation model and the family economy model. Based on studies of Western women, the liberation model suggests that economically independent women have greater liberty than economically dependent ones.[20] The family economy model emphasizes continuity rather than change in the role of working women inside the family and argues that wage-earning in itself has neither constituted liberation nor improved women's social position and their relationship to their families.[21] According to this approach, the emotional and economic realities of working-class life do not prepare women to assume a role independent of family loyalty.[22] The female workers of al-Mahalla were neither powerful nor powerless. In negotiating with other social forces, including the males in their households, a patriarchal culture, and the state and community, they were sometimes successful and at other times defeated. In either event, they were significant players in shaping the developments and changes in al-Mahalla as they sought to obtain socioeconomic power for themselves.

At Work, Off the Record: Women Weaving the Textile History

Working outside the home for wages was nothing new for the women of al-Mahalla. Egypt's integration into the world economy as a cotton producer in the second half of the nineteenth century attracted local and foreign investment, which put the unprotected local industry under pressure. In the textile industry, which employed the majority of townspeople, men and women cooperated in the face of competition and adapted to change. Women cleaned and spun cotton and wool and dyed and wound yarn for the handloom factories, but performed these tasks at home rather than inside the factories. Many wives and daughters helped the males in their family operate small textile factories by weaving, dying, wrapping, and pressing textiles. Not all females in a household were paid for their work, but sometimes they earned some cash outside the household budget. Without the free labor of women in the family, many small textile factories would not have survived the competitive market.

A significant and dynamic sector of the textile community, women largely paralleled their male counterparts in their business habits. With Egypt's integration into the global economy, women showed as much flexibility and adaptation to changes in the textile industry and the market as did men. When silk still held a privileged place in the economy, women worked in silk textiles. When cotton wholesaling became the most lucrative trade, women participated despite the high risks and high capital requirements. On the lowest rung of the textile ladder was straw-mat weaving, in which women were also active. The records fail to show that wives often financed their husband's business in silk and cotton by selling their jewelry and copper pots. Women also provided unpaid labor to businesses. No official statistics or census data show how many women owned or managed textile factories in al-Mahalla during the study period, yet court records hint at the presence of female entrepreneurship in the textile industry. For instance, in some cases customers sued female factory owners and managers over business disagreements. ʿAli al-Sayyid al-Dumyati sued Shalabiyya Nunu, who operated, with her husband, Muhammad Sharaf, a cloth-pressing and -wrapping workshop (*madaqq*) in the al-Shawafiʿiyya neighborhood. Al-Dumyati accused Nunu of selling the cloth, worth 2,844

Table 3.2. Women Working in Textile Industry Occupations, 1947

Industry	*Number of Female Workers*
Cotton ginning	34
Cotton spinning and weaving	75
Wool spinning and weaving	13
Silk manufacture	4
Unspecified spinning and weaving	921
Other	12
Total	1,059

Source: Ministry of Finance, Statistical Department, *Population Censuses Conducted in Egypt, 1947* (Cairo: Government Press, 1953).

Table 3.3. Male and Female Workers in the Textile Industry and the Textile Trade in al-Mahalla, 1897–1947

	Textile Industry			*Textile Trade*		
Year	*Males*	*Females*	*Total*	*Males*	*Females*	*Total*
1897	2,591		2,591	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1907	3,715	87	3,802	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1917	3,167	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	390[a]
1927	4,067	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1937	10,480	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1947	22,311	1,059	23,370	362	5	367

Source: Ministry of Finance, Statistical Department, *Population Censuses Conducted in Egypt, 1897, 1907, 1917, 1927, and 1947* (Cairo: Government Press, 1898–1953).
Note: n.a. = not available.
a. The source does not specify how many males and how many females worked in the textile trade.

piasters, that he had brought to her workshop for pressing.[23] Such evidence contradicts the narrow, but common, notion of businesswomen as exceptional. As far as these records reveal, gender played a limited role in female-owned textile factories, and women who owned and operated factories pushed gender boundaries and were bosses over male laborers. They dealt on a daily basis with male and female workers, yarn brokers, and customers. They handled business transactions, marketed and distributed products, and acquired raw materials, and they routinely faced problems such as labor disagreements and theft. A woman named Ihsan Hamuda Tawakul owned and managed a weaving factory in which she employed several male workers. She had to call upon the power of the state to recover yarn stolen from her factory. The perpetrator turned out to be one of her male workers, Sa'd Abu G'abal, who received a one-month jail sentence.[24] Some female factory owners, particularly those who inherited their factory or who lacked business experience, preferred to sell or rent their factory rather than manage the operation themselves.[25]

The central location of al-Mahalla in the middle of cotton plantations in the Nile Delta opened the town to new industrial and commercial activities and created seasonal jobs for poor men and women in the ginning factories. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Europeans, Syrians, and non-Muslim Egyptians established seven ginning factories.[26] Even more ginning factories were founded after the establishment of the cotton market, the Halaqat al-Qutn, in al-Mahalla in 1912; the largest ginning factory was established by Bank Misr in 1924.[27] Women and children formed a large part of the workforce in these factories, which offered seasonal jobs. Harold Butler, deputy director of the International Labor Office, saw children younger than ten years old working in traditional and modern factories. He reported that most of the females working in ginning factories were fifteen- to nineteen-year-old girls, who should have been covered by child labor laws, and elderly women hired in an ancillary capacity to clean and sweep.[28]

Women and children worked under harsh working conditions in these seasonal jobs in the ginning and cotton pressing factories. Some women and girls were crushed to death by machines in the darkened factories. Following one such incident in Alexandria, a court ordered all government agencies to prohibit females under age ten from working after dark, in order to prevent such accidents.[29] Although women and children became the first group of workers protected by the first Egyptian labor law, which limited women's work to nine hours per day, ginning factories nevertheless made women work between fourteen and eighteen hours without a break every day of the week during a season that lasted from October to March or April. For this work, female

workers, who mostly came from nearby rural areas, received daily wages as low as two to three piasters.[30]

Like most working-class women in other parts of the world, women in the Egyptian textile industry have been invisible in the historical records kept since the late nineteenth century.[31] None possessed sufficient education or sophistication to write or dictate an account of their experiences or perspective. At the same time, official documents mostly left them out, and the population censuses documenting economic participation and productivity did not include their work. Besides ignoring women, these censuses, at best, provided only hints that women were active in different businesses. Any mention of women in a particular job category in a census indicates that women were noticeable enough in that category to be categorized. Thus, I use censuses here as indicative rather than as a source of accurate figures. The 1907 census counts only eighty-seven women working in textiles—a figure that might represent only some of the women who worked in ginning factories—and the 1927 census tallied 15 percent of industrial workers in Egypt as male and female children.[32] Male bureaucrats produced these censuses, which reflect class and gender biases against acknowledging women's real contributions.[33]

Joel Beinin rightly hypothesizes that female industrial workers were undercounted in the early-twentieth-century censuses, owing to state authorities' ambivalence toward women working for wages in the public sphere and uncertainty about how to categorize a new urban social group.[34] For example, the 1907 census, which enumerated industrial workers for the first time, counted only fifteen women working in the entire tobacco industry (thirty-seven cigarette factories). Meanwhile, contemporary sources confirm that there were twenty female workers in one factory.[35] The census indicated that in 1947 there were 1,379 women employed as industrial workers who lived in al-Mahalla, while Company records confirm that about 2,000 women worked for the Company alone. The census figures do not include females who worked in smaller factories for wages or as unpaid labor in households. Factory owners tended to hide workers from state officials to avoid legal obligations, particularly because many of the girls were underage.[36] An eyewitness in the mid-1940s reported that most female workers in al-Mahalla's textile industry were between the ages of thirteen and twenty.[37] Some male and female workers were as young as nine.[38] Recent statistics reveal no remarkable progress in counting the female labor force and its economic contribution. In the 1990s, the sociologist Malak Zaʿlok estimated that working women were responsible for 31 percent of national production, while the official census estimated women's contribution at 10.9 percent.[39]

Official records and censuses are notoriously inaccurate and biased, but there is another reason why women's economic contributions were ignored or underestimated. Women themselves, and their communities, did not fully appreciate the importance of documenting their contributions and consequently did not bother to inform—and even deliberately misled—those who collected data for censuses and other official statistics. Legal documents throughout the first half of the twentieth century tended to report women based on their marital status rather than their profession or occupation. Al-Mahalla's court records, for example, often described female defendants as a virgin, a widow, divorced, or the wife of a given male, even when the court was trying a woman for professional misconduct. The male bureaucrats who wrote and compiled these documents, the women's families, and the women themselves were all responsible for identifying women in the records based on marital status and obscuring their professional positions. Moreover, because working-class women usually had no formal education and, of course, did not hold a government job, many did not think of themselves as working women. In addition, many of the female industrial workers, including those who worked for the Company, took little pride in their jobs and tended to deny their professional occupations. Some never socially acknowledged their history of working after they quit and married. Industrial expansion may have facilitated the hiring of women in factories, but cultural proscriptions continued to limit women's ability to develop consciousness of and pride in their social and economic contributions.

In industrial towns such as al-Mahalla and Shubra al-Khayma and around Cairo, the social stigmatization of female factory workers led many of them and their families to hide the fact of their work. The Egyptian labor activist and historian Taha Saʿd ʿUthman, who had firsthand experience alongside female workers in the 1940s, notes the irony of hiding women's work in factories, even though many came from poor rural villages where women's work with men in agriculture was accepted and even expected.[40] Having been forced to send their daughters to work in factories during the economic hardship of the interwar period, World War II, and the postwar period, poor families might have felt ashamed to be exposing their poverty and their need to allow their women to spend most of the daytime outside the house surrounded by strange men, which the community equated with sexual looseness. To avoid social embarrassment and escape ridicule from relatives and neighbors, families hid the fact that their daughters had become factory girls. Some women and their families were open about their factory work, and even proud of it, because such work was more lucrative and dignified than domestic services.[41] But in al-Mahalla, many families—particularly those who aspired to marry off their daughters to government servants rather than journeymen blue-collar

workers—continued to hide their daughters' work in textile factories until the late 1970s.

Despite the lack of sources that preserved working women's own voices, the available sources, particularly the court records, did preserve at least parts of women's experiences. We must read them against the grain, however, because those records, by their nature, document troubled situations rather than normal daily social interactions, and because they do not reflect women's points of view.

Modern Female Workers

Modern industrialization opened doors for more women to work in factory jobs, earn wages, and become financially independent. As booming al-Mahalla attracted men seeking opportunities, women also came to work in the textile industry and other sectors. Although the first wave of immigration associated with the Company brought mostly men to al-Mahalla, subsequent decades saw equal numbers of male and female migrants arriving in the town. Some men who settled in al-Mahalla brought wives, sisters, or mothers to live with them, and many unmarried women, whether never married, widowed, or divorced, emigrated for work opportunities, particularly in the textile industry.

In 1930—still the early days of the Company—women formed most of the labor force in the gauze factory aside from the supervisory positions. That factory was the first production line to operate, and it enjoyed government support. The Health Ministry endorsed the Company's bid to provide 22,000 kilograms of gauze and 49,550 kilograms of medical cotton worth EGP 10,677.[42] The factory continued to be successful, and the Company won a similar bid with the Public Health Department in 1930–1931 even though its bid was higher than bids from foreign producers. The Ministry of Awqaf (Charity Endowment) also preferred the Company's products over imported medical cotton to supply its ophthalmic hospitals. The Company benefited from the government's preference for Egyptian products even if they were 10 percent more expensive than foreign products.[43] The government's support allowed the Company's gauze factory to run the European-owned competing factory in Alexandria out of business. In 1932 the Company bought that factory and transferred its machinery to al-Mahalla.[44] The government support also raised the Company's national profile. King Faruq visited the factory in 1937, and the press published photos of female workers during the royal visit to highlight the Company as a modernizing force.[45]

Table 3.4. Male and Female Populations of al-Mahalla, 1927–1947

Gender	*Population Size*	*Annual Percentage Increase*
	1927	
Male	22,492	1.9
Female	23,150	2.1
Total	45,642	2.0
	1937	
Male	33,138	4.7
Female	30,154	3.0
Total	63,292	3.9
	1947	
Male	60,965	8.4
Female	54,793	8.2
Total	115,758	8.3

Source: Ministry of Finance, Statistical Department, *Population Censuses Conducted in Egypt, 1947* (Cairo: Government Press, 1953).

Table 3.5. Married and Unmarried Female Populations of al-Mahalla, 1937 and 1947

Year	*Married*	*Never Married*	*Divorced*	*Widowed*	*Unspecified*	*Total*
1937	12,016	1,903	379	3,010	24	17,332
1947	21,544	13,813	560	4,793	565	41,275

Source: Ministry of Finance, Statistical Department, *Population Censuses Conducted in Egypt, 1937 and 1947* (Cairo: Government Press, 1940 and 1953).

During the rapid expansion that followed, the Company hired more women. By the mid-1940s, it employed 2,000 female workers, most of them urban poor and peasants from the surrounding villages. Female industrial workers in al-Mahalla varied in their origins and family associations. The *Mahallawiyya* workers had grown accustomed to the urban life and knew the traditions of the textile industry. Half the female workers lived in al-Mahalla, and the rest commuted daily from their home villages nearby. Others came from farther away and had to live on their own in al-Mahalla. Some women could not afford rent and living costs in the town, however, and walked as far as twelve kilometers between the Company and their villages because of a lack of transportation.[46]

Those who came from rural areas and chose to reside in al-Mahalla had various motivations to join the workforce at a textile factory. Not all were running away from their family or being forced by their family to work. Al-Mahalla attracted rural girls looking for a source of income and a different type of life. Urban life fascinated some, and they hoped the city would provide them with more than they had in the countryside. They hoped to gain more freedom and autonomy, to have a more civilized and easier life, and to live with less patriarchal family control. They also hoped that, as urban women, they would be able to have fancier clothes and enjoy the food, drink, entertainment, and pleasure that the city offered.

A large number of women worked in the small factories that opened after World War II with the acceleration of the transition from handlooms to mechanized looms. After the war, the Company updated its machinery and sold old machines to handloom weavers, who had made large profits during wartime. The success of the small textile factories encouraged many entrepreneurs to buy imported or locally made machines and consequently to hire more workers, including women, to operate them. It was not difficult for the textile industry to recruit female workers of all ages from among poor urban and rural women. For poor urban women, working at the Company or in a small factory was more secure than working as a peddler and more dignified than working as a domestic servant. For rural women, factory work was easier than working in the fields all the day under the sun. The idea of moving to a different town for work was not unusual to the rural poor. For decades they had experienced the *tarahila* (migrant labor) when labor contractors recruited men and women from overpopulated villages in the Delta and shipped them to the cotton fields in faraway locales to work for a few weeks.[47] During these trips, men and women worked for long hours under the harsh summer sun or in the cold during the winter.

The mechanization of small textile factories offered work-at-home opportunities to poor mothers who needed to earn wages while taking care of their children.[48] In addition to winding yarn for handloom factories, stay-at-home women cleaned up the cut thread from the cloth, hemmed sheets and handkerchiefs, and fixed torn thread bobbins. Women received low wages for doing these time-consuming jobs. Factory owners allowed them to collect waste thread and sweep up the cotton lint (*zughbar*), which they either sold or used for stuffing low-quality quilts, mattresses, and pillows. Although working at home was time-consuming and brought in little cash for the family, working-class women who performed these jobs were never subject to proletarianization—they never had to adapt to the factory work schedule, organization, or culture. Their relationship to factory owners and managers resembled the relationship between recipients of charity and patrons.

The Modernization of Inequality

Even though the Egyptian bourgeoisie, in adopting capitalism and aspiring to industrialization, did not intend to challenge social notions about the inferior position of women, factory work, by its nature, provided opportunities to redefine gender boundaries and achieve gender egalitarianism. No women served on the Company's board or in high administrative positions, a fact that never attracted any attention at a time when the feminist pioneer activist Huda Hanim Shaʿrawi was among the founders of the Company.[49] Women fell into the blue-collar rank and file; no woman enjoyed the status of a trained technician or highly skilled worker (*usta*), positions reserved for men. Female workers performed janitorial work, such as cleaning shop floors, in addition to production work, and all their supervisors, in all sections, were male. Small mechanical textile factories also observed this gender-based work division. The Company did hire a few educated women as nurses and social workers and rewarded them with decent salaries.[50] Some women also served as inspectors who searched female workers at the gates.[51]

Turning women into industrial workers who labored side by side with men did not require a total departure from the traditional work divisions in the textile industry. In the handloom industry, most women did preparation work, such as winding yarn, while men operated the handlooms. The modern industrial organization emphasized a gender-based work division and assigned most women to women-only sections. The vast majority of women at the Company operated machines for making socks and underwear and sewing

machines in addition to doing preparation work. The chairman of Bank Misr, Hafiz ʿAfifi Pasha, gave the standard explanation that women were good at tasks that required patience and good taste.[52]

The Company actually preferred assigning female workers to time-consuming tasks, such as winding and netting, owing to their lower wages. Labor recruitment and the work division inside the factory reproduced, rather than challenged, the traditional gender relations in society as a whole. The Company hired older widows and divorced women who were mostly poor urbanite *Mahallawiyya*. For example, the fifty-year-old widow Huriya ʿAbd al-Dayim and thirty-year-old Fatima Abd al-Galil Darwish, a divorcée, worked at the Company in 1945.[53] Fikriyya Muhammad Mansur was a divorced sixteen-year-old when she worked at the Company in 1938.[54] Yet most female workers were unmarried and left work upon marrying. In its early years, the Company refused to hire married women and fired married women who had pretended to be single if the administration discovered their true marital status.[55] It also expected female workers to quit working after marriage, and it fired them if they did not quit voluntarily.

Company administrators and factory owners did not want to accommodate pregnant women or nursing mothers. The labor law of 1933 obliged employers to give women time off for the last month of pregnancy and the first month after childbirth. The Company saw this legal obligation as an interruption that caused a decrease in production. It initially preferred to replace pregnant women with new and even lower-paid girls. Later, when the Company realized that this policy led to the loss of these women's skills, it began encouraging its female workers to continue working after marriage, so that it could retain their expertise rather than have to replace them with untrained workers. Institutionalizing the policy of keeping experienced female workers after marriage, Hafiz ʿAfifi Pasha announced that the bank and its companies were willing to accommodate female workers during pregnancy and childbirth.[56]

After its establishment in 1943, the trade union provided financial help to female workers at the time of marriage in the form of a cash sum that correlated with the worker's number of years of union membership. The maximum sum ever offered was EGP 5 to one female worker. In the first nine months of 1947, the union paid a total of EGP 780 to 270 newlywed female laborers.[57] Some women took that financial help as compensation for the mandatory membership fees and quit working at the Company. In small textile factories, it became customary for the owner to donate some cloth and money to female workers when they married. All parties considered this donation a gift but understood that marriage ended the female worker's employment. If the worker got divorced or became a widow, the factory owner would welcome her

back to work. This tradition achieved several purposes. For factory owners, it was better to rehire an already trained worker than an inexperienced girl. It also showed the factory owner's commitment to helping poor women in his community. Small-factory owners also allowed widows and married women who needed to work but had to stay at home to care for young children to collect torn yarn to rewind at home for fixed fees.

The unofficial policies for firing and hiring married women and women's preferences for quitting upon marriage indicate that neither factory owners nor female workers appreciated women's work in changing the gender regime. Egyptian capitalism sought women's employment in the textile industry to exploit them as lower-paid laborers, while it dismissed any responsibility toward married working women. At first, the Company followed suit: it terminated the employment of married women so that it would not have to give full payment to a less energetic pregnant woman or to an exhausted nursing mother. When that practice led to a loss of valuable expertise, the policy shifted to keeping women after marriage, not as a progressive measure to empower women and help them change their gender roles, but out of economic necessity. The situation in small factories was worse. To escape their legal obligations to provide certain work conditions, hours, and benefits, employers refused to register female and minor laborers. Once Egyptian law started to define employers' liabilities in the 1940s, al-Mahalla court records started to document cases in which textile factory owners had hired women and children without mentioning them in their records. Bank Misr factories were among those violators of the law.

To encourage women to join its workforce, the Company fulfilled its legal obligation to follow a nine-hour workday schedule for women. Meanwhile, the Company violated labor laws and made its male and child workers work for twelve hours per day. Although the Company showed little concern for its workers' quality of life, it did respond to anxieties over the mingling between men and women in the workplace. Following a different schedule ensured female workers' separation from the mass of male workers. They started their shift at eight in the morning, one hour after the morning shift began for male workers, and worked until five in the afternoon, three hours before the male night shift began. Females also had a different schedule for lunch breaks.

Unfortunately, written sources do not document the voices of any women who had firsthand experience with this work routine. Neither the publications of the Company nor the mouthpiece of the Company's trade union, *ʿAmil al-Mahalla*, ever ran an article by a female worker or about women workers, although these publications published many photos of upper- and middle-class women consumers and buyers of the Company's products. In contrast,

the contemporary leftist press published articles about the horrific work and living conditions of al-Mahalla female workers in the mid-1940s, accompanied by photos of these conditions.[58]

Negotiating Hard Working Conditions

Like their male rank-and-file coworkers, female workers were subject to disciplinary systems and productive-subject formation. Although the Company followed the law in terms of offering a nine-hour workday and no night shifts for women, female workers faced hard working conditions. These conditions were made even harder by the lack of systematic training in job skills and safety procedures. Many suffered accidents due to a lack of training on gigantic machinery, the absence of safety procedures, or the recklessness of untrained coworkers. For example, the female worker Buthayna Yusuf suffered an injury when a male worker accidently hit her with a cart loaded with boxes.[59]

Work conditions created an explosive environment in which female workers fought among themselves just as the male workers did. Often fueled by exhaustion and lack of experience, violent confrontations occasionally broke out among women on the shop floors. Female workers, mostly young girls, could get violent while trying to negotiate disagreements on the distribution of thread reels among machine operators. Fourteen-year-old Nargis Himida ʿAbd al-Latif, from the village of Mit ʿAssas, Samanud, hit her coworker Fatima Suleiman with a reel and injured her head.[60] On July 2, 1936, the fifteen-year-old female worker Zaynab al-Mursi Abu al-Suʿud hit her coworker in the socks factory, Tahiyya ʿAbd al-Fattah. Owing to their youth and work circumstances, the court treated Abu al-Suʿud with leniency and only fined her ten piasters.[61] Female workers wielded work tools in their fights as much as they hit and bit each other. Al-Tahira ʿAbd al-ʿAll Sallam, who lived near the Company on Wabur al-Nur Street, hit and bit her coworker Badriyya ʿAsskar during a work shift on June 2, 1942.[62] These occasional violent moments show that exhaustion and anxiety due to chaotic work conditions undermined cooperation and sisterhood among young female workers. Female laborers also occasionally engaged in violent confrontations with their male coworkers over work duties. Sixteen-year-old Hadyan Sayyid Ahmad Gad, whom the court identified as a virgin (a category for a never-married woman) and who worked in the winding section shop, fought with a sixteen-year-old male coworker, ʿAziz Suleiman.[63] Court records did not show the reason for their confrontation.

Despite the explosive work environment, the Company did not provide anything close to adequate on-site medical aid to workers. If a worker fell ill or was injured, she had to wait until the end of the shift, when her coworkers would take her home. During his visit to the Company in 1946, the labor lawyer and activist Mustafa Munib reported that the Company did not provide any medical aid during work hours and that he witnessed a twelve-year-old female worker lying down with a fever for more than three hours until her coworkers took her home at the end of the shift.[64]

The Company restricted supervisory positions to males, who did not exempt women from the arbitrary disciplinary system. Male *afandiyya*, *ghafar*, and supervisors employed violence in disciplining female workers, sometimes injuring them. The courts prosecuted the supervisors and foremen for hitting female workers.[65] The attendance supervisor Murqus ʿAbd al-Malik injured the female worker Zanuba Fayruz Suleiman in the eye when he threw her identification card and copper seal (*khitm*) at her face.[66] Female laborers also suffered violent treatment from the guards, whose abuses could be excessive.[67] When *ghafir* Ibrahim al-Sayyid Khalifa appeared before the court for kicking Anʿam Mahmud Shahin in her stomach, the judge expressed his outrage because the victim was pregnant.[68]

In response to the untenable working conditions and poor wages, some female workers stole from the Company to "negotiate" a better deal and secure fair income, to satisfy their need for basic clothes or desire for fancy clothing, or simply because theft was possible. They hid the stolen cloth in their underwear or wrapped it around their waist underneath their clothes.[69] Female workers of different ages, marital statuses, and geographical origins tried to steal from the Company, and some were discovered, arrested, and convicted for stealing Company property. A full survey of the cases of those convicted of theft in 1938 and 1945 reveals that they included female workers between the ages of seventeen and fifty, at least one virgin, two divorced women, and one widow. Two convicted women lived in al-Mahalla, and the rest came from the nearby villages of Samanud, Kafr al-Sarim, and Mit ʿAssas.[70]

Female inspectors searched female workers at the exit gates after every shift. The Company also authorized male guards to search female workers with the consent of Company police officers. Guards would take aside any woman who looked suspicious for a personal search and shamelessly stare at her body, including her private parts and underwear. A guard noticed that the female worker Hamida Ismaʿil ʿInab had a swollen thigh. He took her to the office of the Company's police officer, where he searched her and found a piece of cloth in her underwear.[71] Guards had to express their suspicions about a female worker before they could be justified in personally searching

her; nonetheless, the humiliation for the woman was extreme, particularly if she proved innocent. Unfortunately, we have no personal accounts of these searches from either a searched woman or a male guard, but one can imagine how a female worker felt when she had to surrender her body to the hands of a strange man who touched her under the gaze of other strangers. Those who shared memories as I collected oral histories for this study denied that they had ever been suspected of theft or had ever been personally searched by a guard. These testimonies by themselves are telling. Moreover, we cannot assume that all male guards enjoyed conducting personal searches of female workers. Some might have felt their masculine power over the female worker or sexual excitement, but others might have felt guilty or ashamed for violating religious and moral codes against touching the body of a woman who was not his wife, sister, or mother.

Despite the inspections and searches by male and female inspectors and guards, some female workers managed to leave the Company with pieces of cloth. One female worker, Zaynab Muhammad Mitwalli, succeeded in passing the Company's gates several times hiding pieces of Company property. She was a forty-five-year-old widow. The Company's guards never caught her until the police received an anonymous letter revealing her thefts. When the police searched her house, they found the booty, mostly unfinished pieces of cloth not yet ready to go to market for public sale.[72] We do not know how many laborers succeeded in carrying out stolen items, but ongoing theft and discoveries of Company cloth in the homes of female workers indicate that many got away with their booty.

Uncovering Women Workers

Management at the Company did not impose any uniform or dress codes on female workers, as it did with male workers. Dress among women workers varied but was mostly modest regardless of their age, including preteen girls. Rural women wore a *tarha*, a loose head veil, and urban women wore a headscarf and *milaya laff*, a black overwrap on top of their clothes (neither completely closed nor blatantly open). Because these garments were not practical while they operated machinery, women took off the *tarha* and *milaya laff* inside the shop floor until the end of the workday. The women put them back on when they left the shop floor, when they went to another section in the factory or to the bathroom, and when they went home. Despite the modest clothing, some female workers provided sexual services to male coworkers and supervisors.[73] Women may have engaged in consensual sexual interactions

either under pressure or sometimes voluntarily as a means of acquiring promotions or protection. Bosses and foremen took advantage of the women working under their supervision, and any woman who resisted was subject to arbitrary punishment.[74]

The coercive industrial organization and hierarchy under which thousands of men and women, both adults and children, were concentrated at work and at home, subjected to the power of unfamiliar men, intensified sexual harassment, consensual sex, and abuses of power to receive sexual services. Inside factories, the power differential complicated the situation, not only between bosses and the rank and file but also between male and female coworkers. The lack of defined responsibilities and roles allowed foremen to abuse their positions, to take bribes, and to receive sexual services from male and female subordinates in exchange for recommending promotion, saving them from downgrading, and covering up mistakes.[75] The stronger side of the relationship might have been coercive and seductive, but we should not underestimate the occasional willingness of the weaker side—women and male children—to provide sexual services not just to avoid punishment but also to seek advantages. According to Fikri al-Khuli, many bosses and foremen took advantage of the women working under their supervision.[76] The hope of attracting one of their coworkers or bosses as a husband must have motivated some women.

Female workers may have developed romantic relationships with male coworkers and bosses, but they also experienced sexual abuse. The records do not tally incidents of rape or sexual abuse, mostly because the female victims themselves tended to hide these abuses. It is universally true that women subjected to sexual harassment often experience feelings of guilt, fear, confusion, anger, inadequacy, powerlessness, shame, betrayal, and denial, and that when their harasser enjoys a powerful position, their feeling of helplessness intensifies.[77] In a society that did not forgive a woman who lost her virginity, silence was the most viable option for women subjected to sexual abuse. And they were not alone: we know that young male workers were also sexually abused, both at the Company and in boardinghouses.[78] Some male workers openly accused male bosses of punishing them for refusing to provide sexual favors.[79]

The silence of historical records about women's experiences with sexual exploitation in workplaces was the language of power. Thus, the lack of documentation is unsurprising and should not lead to the improbable conclusion that sexual abuse did not occur. Sexual harassment against female workers occurred out of sight of the middle- and upper-class Egyptian feminists, who might have thought that sex was too messy a subject for a public discussion or feared that discussing such practices would hurt their case for improving women's access to education and work. Sexual harassment was an expression

of the anonymity of city life and faceless relationships in expanding towns. Capitalists who benefited from women's cheap labor might have suppressed discussion of sexual harassment to avoid the risk of losing them. Records frequently documented incidents of verbal and minor physical harassment inside the Company and outside its gates against female workers, particularly those that generated violent confrontations between workers who were attempting to molest women and those who interfered to protect them. One nineteen-year-old worker, Abd al-Maqsud Shaltut, was harassing a group of female workers while sitting in front of his shop floor inside the Company on August 20, 1938. His coworker Salim Ramadan tried to stop him, and consequently they got into a fight. Later in the day, Abd al-Maqsud and four workers assaulted Ramadan.[80]

Although policemen might have protected female workers against sexual harassment, they could not always successfully deter harassers. Bidayr Muhammad Shaqwir, who was a supervisor in the final finishing section (*tajhiz naha'i*), harassed female workers, along with his coworkers, when they were leaving the Company at the end of the shift in 1945. The policeman Muhammad 'Abdul Mun'im intervened to stop them and decided to drag Shaqwir to the police station. The latter verbally abused and hit the policeman, while the policeman used excessive force to arrest him.[81]

To face sexual harassment without legal protection in public spaces undermined female workers' autonomy and underscored their need for male protection. As in the cases mentioned here, some female workers were too vulnerable to defend themselves and needed the protection of male coworkers who were eager to stop their harassing coworkers. Some male relatives had to escort women between home and work to protect them.[82] Frequent sexual harassment by groups of male coworkers prompted Ibrahim Ali Khalaf to escort his sister Nabawiyya to and from work every day. That arrangement did not deter Company workers 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Sayyid al-Ni'na'i and Muhammad Sami al-'Isawi from harassing her. Al-Ni'na'i and al-'Isawi were twenty-one and twenty years old, respectively; al-Ni'na'i lived on Sa'd Zaghlul Street and al-'Isawi on Abu al-Hassan Street, far from each other. Nevertheless, they accompanied each other after work, having apparently planned a harassment expedition. The two siblings got into a fight with the two male harassers, and policemen intervened. The court fined each harasser fifty piasters for injuring Ibrahim Ali Khalaf on the head.[83]

Some female workers attempted to independently defend themselves. It was common for female workers to commute in groups as a means of protection and companionship, and this practice gave some women the courage to stop harassers.[84]

Regardless of the Company's attempts to separate female and male laborers in the workplace and have them work different shift schedules, commuting workers met on a daily basis on the trains. Hostility and harassment were not the only forms of interaction that took place between men and women on board; some interactions led to bonding, romance, and even marriage. In addition to love and physical and emotional attraction, poor male workers found female coworkers to be good candidates for marriage, on the assumption that working women could save enough to help with expenses. Traditionally, families started to buy household articles, particularly kitchenware, for daughters when they were young to reduce the financial load when they married. Working girls from poor families could usually afford more household items than their unemployed peers, which made the former more attractive to poor suitors. The Company workers were also in a better position to invest their savings in buying Company cloth at fixed prices. In sum, interactions between men and women in these industrial milieus (inside and outside the factory) took many different forms, ranging from coercive sexual engagement and harassment to emotional bonding and marriage.

Female workers displayed their adaptation to urban life and their aspiration to elevate their class by imitating middle-class women, on weekends in particular. They wore Western dresses that, unlike *galabiyya*, were tight around the waist, and they gave up the *milaya laff* and *tarha*. They adorned their wrists with watches, wore makeup, and carried handbags, which were fashionable only among the Westernized middle class; urban or rural lower-class women never used them. Their imitation of middle-class fashion reflected an aspiration to differentiate themselves from other urban working-class women. In adopting Western dress and makeup to attract potential husbands, however, they were taking up a double-edged sword. This look might have attracted males who shared their aspiration to achieve middle-class status, but it also emphasized their sexuality in a Westernized fashion; this less modest form of dress was more likely to provoke sexual harassment or upset other women who associated makeup with being sexually loose.

Some traditional urban working-class women wore *milaya laff* interchangeably with Western dress, depending on the occasion and place. Some women wore *milaya laff* on top of clothes that might be colorful and seductive, or they wrapped *milaya laff* around their waists and hips in a way that outlined their curves and figure. The overwrap revealed parts of the body, such as a bare arm, and the headscarf could be left loose enough to slip half off. Frequent stops would then be required to take off the scarf, tie it again, and rewrap it, all in a series of alluring gestures that were likely to attract the attention of passersby.[85] Today people of al-Mahalla still use the phrase "spreading the

milaya laff" to describe a woman being foul-mouthed in a street fight. This expression signals that people looked down on women who left their *milaya laff* loose, showing parts of their arms and bust. The court cases of al-Mahalla show that the *milaya laff* was such a valuable possession during the period under study that women often turned to the police for help in restoring them whenever they were stolen.[86]

The Egyptian anthropologist Sawsan El-Messiri argues that urban working-class women's interest in the details of dress emerges from the great value placed on femininity in Egypt and women's desire to be sexually attractive.[87] This observation might be valid, but at the same time urban Egyptian women throughout most of the twentieth century scorned cosmetics as fraudulent, calling makeup "the white and red." They refrained from using it and considered it a blatant invitation to males to make advances. A man sued his neighbor couple because they told him that his wife wore white and red cosmetics (makeup) when she went out to be "fucked in the street as a whore" (*sharmuta*).[88] Female workers' newly adopted tastes in fashion and dress, their aspiration to and imitation of the middle class, and their freedom to attract a coworker or boss as a husband contributed to a social construction of female industrial workers that focused on the attributes of chastity. Although female workers must have varied in their moral codes and levels of modesty, all of them were susceptible to the stigma of being promiscuous and sexually loose.

Amplifying this stigma was the fact that not every female who came to al-Mahalla looking for opportunity gained or kept a job. Consequently, some women ended up as streetwalkers and would provide sexual services in exchange for shelter in the alien city.[89] The phrase *banat masaniʿ* (factory girls) was almost equivalent to the American phrase "women adrift" in the early twentieth century and the Lebanese expression *banat al-karhane* (factory girls) in the late nineteenth century.[90] In the Lebanese experience, when thousands of unmarried female villagers worked in silk factories in Beirut far away from home, the Maronite clergy and elite criticized female laborers as immoral because they worked in factories that employed both men and women.[91] Women suffered social stigmatization, and the phrase *banat al-karhane* began to conflate "female workers" with "prostitutes." Although no religious establishment opposed women's factory work in al-Mahalla, the social stigma actually led many female workers later in life to hide the fact that they had worked at the Company or a textile factory before marriage.

Regardless of their geographical origins, sharing the experience of living away from their rural families, following the same work routines under the same conditions, and living and working together led to the development of a subculture among female industrial workers. Female workers, many under

the age of fifteen, came from outside al-Mahalla and had to live there without their families. Despite their youth, they had to independently negotiate harsh living conditions and share rooms and houses with strange men and women. Unable to afford gender-segregated accommodations, they rented rooms inside houses where single men lived. Female workers had to adapt to sharing a domestic life with nonfamily members. Residing in al-Mahalla gave them the opportunity to be autonomous, but it also forced them to sacrifice some privacy in the shared living spaces and made them more vulnerable to assault. As Liat Kozma observes about khedival Egypt, lower-class women's presence outside the home did not imply lack of supervision or control over them; state authorities and local communities kept an eye on young or unmarried women, and neighbors and family played a central role in monitoring their conduct and mobility.[92] The experience of living independently under the scrutiny of the community could empower these women as much as it could overwhelm them, particularly those who were very young or alienated.

These young women sometimes failed to amicably resolve disagreements and differences with roommates and housemates. The fifteen-year-old female worker Botas Mashʿal got into a fight with a sixteen-year-old male coworker, ʿAttar Rashid al-Laythi. They were housemates in the workers' slums of ʿIzbat Abu Gahsha. Driven by anger, the teenage housemates deliberately destroyed each other's belongings. Mashʿal destroyed ʿAttar's quilt by slashing it with a knife, and ʿAttar destroyed Mashʿal's clothes with a sharp tool. The court fined each of them twenty piasters.[93]

Despite their often volatile living conditions, female workers built up social networks and collegial bonds to protect and support each other in the absence of their families. They pooled resources and rented shared rooms, visited each other, accompanied each other during commutes, hung out together in the town's main street on weekends, and exchanged clothes.[94] One can speculate whether sexual intimacy developed among some female workers who spent so much of their time together. Chapter 4 cites evidence of homosexual practices among male roommates and coworkers, but unsurprisingly, no concrete evidence answers the question of whether any of the female workers were lesbian or felt attracted to female roommates and coworkers. Women workers in al-Mahalla were mostly illiterate; thus, they neither wrote about their experience nor wrote letters at the time. Lesbian sexuality is not mentioned in the court records, but this lack of evidence does not mean there was no same-sex intimacy among women; in any event, sexual intimacy among women in private would not have been disturbing to the community. We can also conceptualize the lives of many of these female industrial workers as having been "lesbian-like." Employing Judith Bennett's use of that term to broaden the investiga-

tion of lesbianism beyond actual sexual practices, we find that many female workers in al-Mahalla lived in single-sex spaces, had opportunities for same-sex love, were autonomous from male control, and lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support others.[95]

We should not idealize relationships among female workers or claim that sisterhood always prevailed over jealousy and antagonism. Shared accommodations and living spaces contributed to bonding but also to resentments and disagreements. Female coworkers and roommates felt jealousy toward each other and fought among themselves just as they cooperated and bonded. The court fined two female workers and housemates, Hanim al-Sayyid and Amina al-Ibyari, EGP 2 each because they hit and bit each other.[96] The thirteen-year-old female company worker al-Garya ʿAli ʿUthman, who came from Mit Ghamr in the Delta, shared a room with her coworker ʿAliyya Amin al-Gammal. When ʿAliyya's watch disappeared, she accused al-Garya of stealing it, along with fifty piasters, because al-Garya had shown jealousy and frustration over not being able to acquire a similar watch. The two roommates got into a bitter fight and ended up in the police station. Interestingly, their nineteen-year-old male coworker ʿAbd al-Hayy ʿAli Kishk, who lived in al-Mahalla with his family, was arrested for having the stolen watch. He claimed that al-Garya had given it to him so that he could sell it for her, but he chose to keep it with his father. The court acquitted al-Garya because there was no proof that she had committed any theft, while ʿAbd al-Hayy was convicted for hiding a stolen watch. Because he was young, the court chose to treat him with leniency and sentenced him to a two-month suspended jail sentence.[97] The dream of acquiring a watch and fancy clothing sent a seventeen-year-old female worker, Ihsan Muhammad al-Ansari, to jail for two incidents of theft in 1938. Ihsan was an unusual case among female workers in that respect. She stole clothes from the house of Muhammad Abu al-Nasr and a watch from the house of Muhammad Muʿawwad.[98]

Class and Gender Identities

Although women were involved in the collective struggle for workers' rights, participating in the leadership of the labor movement and being present at strikes and protests, they did not do so in numbers proportional to the total number of women in the textile industry in al-Mahalla. Because women had access only to jobs that were segregated by sex, female activists may have differed from their male counterparts in having a gendered relationship to collective labor actions. Male workers looked suspiciously at female coworkers,

and employers considered female laborers a reserve from which both to replace males for lower wages and to break strikes.[99] Male labor leaders might have discouraged women's participation in the collective movement. Excluding women from labor leadership speaks of the social culture that restricted female participation in public life generally. They could not have participated in discussions about work and resistance with male coworkers in any meetings held in private homes or at coffee shops. Also, the greater social and domestic expectations of women privileged their domestic responsibilities in the home, which left them with less energy and time to participate in collective causes. Many looked at factory work as temporary until they got married.

Gender differences divided al-Mahalla workers who were already divided by geographical origin. When the Company hired a large number of women to work in the new sock and underwear sections in the early 1930s, hostility arose between male and female workers. The male workers, worried that the Company was planning to replace them with women, attacked them viciously during their first days on the job.[100] Even when they realized that the Company had hired the females to work in the newly established sections, not to replace male workers in the old ones, males' hostility toward the newly hired women did not fully abate. With such suspicion toward their female coworkers, males may have found it hard to invite or accept women's participation in collective labor actions. Both employers and male activists deliberately excluded females from labor organizations. In al-Mahalla, no females were present among the dissenting labor activists or on the administration's handpicked trade union board. As far as records reveal, there were no cases of female workers being fired or prosecuted for activism in the labor movement or workers' rights. Lack of evidence of women's activism does not mean, however, that female workers had no grievances or never joined with their male coworkers to voice demands. We know that female workers carried a heavier burden, owing to their weaker position in the industrial hierarchy, and that they were paid less and subjected to sexual harassment. Thus, lack of documentation should not lead us to assume that women were better off than their male counterparts or that they never participated in labor protests.

The court may not have convicted women for leading strikes and sit-ins, but female workers did participate in collective protests alongside their male coworkers. Women sent petitions to the administration and to the king expressing their concerns over management inefficiency and decreases in wages. Owing to a decrease in the available raw wool and the demand for local wool cloth, an increase in production costs and prices for local wool, and competition from imported fabric, the wool cloth the Company had produced was accumulating in storage, and the amount of unsold production had become

alarmingly huge by the mid-1940s. Needing to reduce production, the Company canceled some work shifts in the wool factory, and the income of the workers at that factory, mostly women, consequently dropped. Both male and female laborers blamed the situation on the British manager of the factory, a Mr. Parkinson, whom they accused of deliberately harming them and their factory.[101] They wrote petitions to the Royal Palace in 1951 accusing the British manager of working to get the factory shut down. Using nationalist discourse, they argued that the Company had betrayed the nationalist cause by employing and empowering foreigners. This tactic allowed the workers to express their grievance over losing pay in nationalist language and appeal to nationalist sentiments by accusing the foreign administrator of trying to destroy Egyptian industry and promote foreign production. The Royal Court took these grievances seriously and made an inquiry. The Company replied that Parkinson had been a good technical manager of the wool factory since its establishment in 1938 and that he played no part in determining labor or production policies. The Company expressed its commitment to doing its best to reemploy the workers in other sections.[102]

Female laborers supported labor strikes and shared personal savings with striking male coworkers who had to support families and children. Al-Khuli points to his personal experience with a female coworker during the 1938 strike in the weaving department; his individual experience was consistent with the collective experience in Shubra al-Khayma in the 1940s.[103] In these moments of solidarity, female workers' actions were based on their consciousness of being part of a community of factory workers with a common interest. This identity was fluid and intersected with gender identities that privileged women's domestic roles over their factory work.

The fact that many female workers did not see much value in continuing work once they got a chance to be supported by a breadwinning husband shows the limitations of the feminist discourse created mostly by educated elite and middle-class women. Those women who came to al-Mahalla to work at the Company or in the small factories did so out of a desire for a source of income and an easier life, not because they were searching for an egalitarian society where men and women were equal. In their endeavor to secure a job and income, not in response to the calls of Egyptian feminists, they associated themselves with modernity. Whether they lived in al-Mahalla or commuted daily, they had a different experience than their counterparts who never worked or who worked in agriculture and never left their villages. The experience of female workers in al-Mahalla brought them closer to the experience of female workers in developed industrial cities, such as Chicago and Tokyo.[104] They commuted by train, the symbol of modern mobility, and

they operated modern machinery in a factory that symbolized the modern Egyptian nation. Many lived independently from their families, supported themselves, and pursued an urban life. More than the feminist discourse, their experience proved the relevance of Egyptian women to national productivity and modernism. Whether working in the Company or in small textile factories, they became the subjects of modern industrial organization and all it entailed: punctuality, discipline, industrial skills, and work divisions based on gender and age.[105] Apart from the elite feminists' discourse on women's emancipation and the idealized image of the "nationalist modern" company, female workers in al-Mahalla, at least until they got married and gave up factory work, configured their own way of life and paved the way to proving women's qualifications for equal opportunity.

Industrial Sexuality

Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt

BY HANAN HAMMAD

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To the memory of my beloved sister Amal—
The love you gave and taught is always with me