

Map 1. A map of Egypt showing the location of al-Mahalla al-Kubra in the Delta. From WPCLipart.

Introduction: Townspeople, Company People, and Textiles: A Woven History

Egypt experienced its industrial revolution during the interwar period (roughly 1920–1940), when establishing an independent economy and building factories and financial institutions became celebrated tropes for nationalism and modernity. After the 1919 National Revolution, the Egyptian bourgeoisie launched the industrialization drive, and the Bank Misr Group and the Egyptian Industrial Federation spearheaded a theoretically independent nation-state under British occupation.¹ In the two decades after establishment in 1920, Bank Misr founded branches in most Egyptian towns, and its Misr Group founded twenty enterprises, mostly industrial compounds.² The group had a nominal share in capital of almost EGP 5 million on the eve of World War II.³ Between 1922 and 1939, membership in the Egyptian Industrial Federation grew from 40 to 460 members, many of them influential politicians.⁴ These figures speak to the expansion of industrialization and a growing industrialist class. Supported by slogans such as “an Egyptian bank for Egyptians,” “buy Egyptian products,” and “boycott foreign (British) goods,” mechanization rapidly overshadowed traditional handicrafts. The mechanization ethos moved stealthily into small and midsize industrial workshops, and new work relationships and a new culture influenced the traditional handicrafts workplaces.

The establishment of large factories turned old and new provincial towns, such as al-Mahalla al-Kubra, Shubra al-Khayma, Naj⁵ Hammadi, and Kafr al-Dawwar, into factory towns that attracted many peasants into industrial-urban orbits. The urban population grew rapidly across Egypt owing to rural immigration, with profound social and cultural effects. Immigrants who had been fairly homogeneous within their home villages became part of a human mosaic of rural immigrants in the cities.⁵ Millions of men, women, and children experienced industrial work, urban life, and the transformation from

peasant-based and handcraft cultures to factory organization and hierarchy for the first time during the interwar period. Now dwelling in a different place and a different time, they had to adopt new customs, establish and abide by new urban norms, and adapt to and form new moral and gender orders. The story of these nameless men and women who struggled through ordinary daily life and reshaped moral orders, gender regimes, and class and communal identities is the story of the making of modern urban life—and the story this study strives to reconstruct.

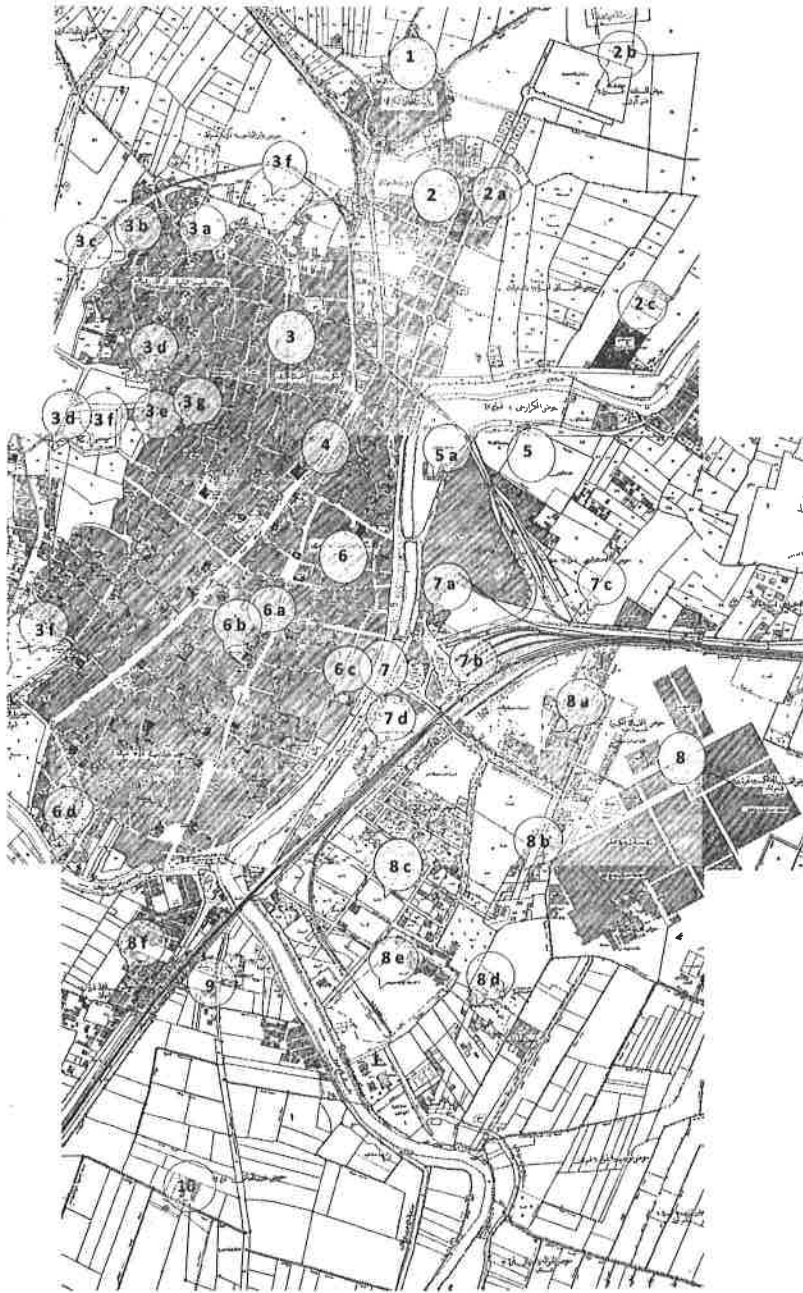
This is a study in the making of the modern urban norm and the normalization of urban life through the interconnected and simultaneous processes of the creation of industrial workers, propertied working-class women, the urban masculine, and modern Egyptian subjects. The core issues relate to how industrial urbanization altered social notions of proper sex, communal and gender relations, women's economic contributions, and women's presence in public spaces. Sewing together the details of the daily practices and discourses related to sex and gender among ordinary people in and out of factories, workers' lodges, urban slums, lavish neighborhoods, and prostitution quarters can illuminate the broad socioeconomic transformations wrought by Middle Eastern industrialization and urbanization since the 1920s. This is not a study on technical development, technological determinism, labor movements, or workers' political activism, although it takes the establishment of large factories during the interwar period as its starting point. It is a study of the sociocultural history of times and places undergoing rapid industrial urbanization, as well as an analysis of sexualities and feminine and masculine gender norms during the formation of industrial urban manners.

Through the reconstruction of the ordinary urban experiences in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, this book analyzes working-class life in Egypt as well as workers' masculine and feminine identities, sexualities, and public morality against the backdrop of the transition from handcraft-based to modern industry. The study focuses on the period between the establishment in 1920 of Bank Misr, which was a driving force in the rise of large industry, and the eve of the 1952 revolution, when the regime introduced drastic changes to policies pertaining to gender, labor, and urban planning. Like many towns with large factories throughout the study period, al-Mahalla al-Kubra changed dramatically with the establishment of the largest and most successful Egyptian textile factory, the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company (MSWC), in 1927.⁶ The rapid growth of the MSWC's workforce and the simultaneous shift of al-Mahalla's workshops from handlooms to mechanical looms accelerated the proletarianization of the town's population. The period concludes with the largest labor strike in the history of al-Mahalla al-Kubra, and Egypt, when 27,000 workers

at the MSWC—the largest number of industrial workers under one roof in Egypt—caused its closure for two months in 1947. Focusing on the social dynamics throughout the period allows us to examine the transformation of urban life, gender relations, and social notions of sexuality against the backdrop of population increases and industrialization.

The experience of al-Mahalla al-Kubra—located in the middle of the Nile Delta in Lower Egypt—is a microcosm of the proletarianization of Egypt's peasant population and the making of an industrial-urban community. The experience of people in al-Mahalla was similar to that of millions of other Egyptians who lived in towns hosting factories and witnessing rural immigration, urban population growth, and rapid sociocultural reconfigurations during this time. After centuries of exporting textile products to destinations all across the Ottoman Empire, al-Mahalla's handloom industry had faced competition from European textile makers within the Egyptian market in the nineteenth century. Scholars have made strong arguments about how Middle Eastern producers coped with the challenges of coercive integration into the global economy.⁷ Building on the work of revisionist historians of the modern Middle East, John Chalcraft studied the resilience of Egyptian craftsmen and service workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸ Al-Mahalla's handloom weavers responded to the competition with technical innovations to cut costs, improve quality, and diversify production. They developed half-mechanical looms, known as *amsba*, or flying shuttle handlooms, in the late nineteenth century.⁹ With 3,183 weavers operating 3,455 handlooms, al-Mahalla entered the twentieth century possessing the largest number of people working in the industry and operating the most handlooms.¹⁰

Europeans accelerated the integration of the town—and the rest of the country—into the global economy beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century when they established cotton-ginning industries and financial institutions geared toward cotton exports.¹¹ Established in 1912, the al-Mahalla cotton market, Halaqat al-Qutn, became the most active cotton market in the country after the Mina al-Basal cotton market in Alexandria.¹² Halaqat al-Qutn and ginning factories attracted a wave of immigrants, mostly villagers from Upper Egypt who were concentrated in a slum known as 'Izbat al-Sa'ayda. Escaping poverty, floods, and disease in their villages at the turn of the century, Upper Egyptians moved northward to work in the seasonal ginning industry and in domestic services; a few traded in products such as beans, lentils, and molasses.¹³ Cairo, Alexandria, Kafr al-Zayyat, Tanta, and al-Mahalla hosted immigrants who lived in precarious dwellings: makeshift shacks built from nondurable materials.¹⁴ Poor and landless peasants emigrated to large towns to work in newly established industries, such as sugar,



Map 2. Al-Mahalla al-Kubra in the 1930s and 1940s. Copyright © 2016 Hanan Hammad.

[Key]

1. Mahallat al-Burg
2. Muhib neighborhood
 - 2a. Madrasat al-Nasij (Weaving High School)
 - 2b. Amir Faruq Club
 - 2c. Faruq Public Hospital
3. Suq al-Laban
 - 3a. Abu al-Qasim quarter
 - 3b. Shawafi'iyya quarter
 - 3c. Delta Railway
 - 3d. Jewish temple and cemetery
 - 3e. Prostitution Quarter
 - 3f. Muslim cemetery
 - 3g. Al-'Umariyya Mosque
4. Sa'd Zaghul Street (formerly Khalij Canal)
5. Halaqat al-Qutn (Cotton Market), surrounded by cotton storage facilities and ginning factories
 - 5a. Municipality of al-Mahalla al-Kubra (Municipality Building)
6. Sandifa
 - 6a. Abu al-Fadl Mosque
 - 6b. Coptic church
 - 6c. Arwam (Greek) Church and Street
 - 6d. Fever Hospital
7. Bahr al-Mallah Canal (later Bahr Street)
 - 7a. Ahliyya court
 - 7b. Train station
 - 7c. Christian cemetery
 - 7d. Bill ginning factories
8. MSWC compound
 - 8a. Sa'yda Hamlet (incorporated in the MSWC compound)
 - 8b. Abu Gahsha Hamlet (partially incorporated in the MSWC compound)
 - 8c. Emerging Cleopatra neighborhood, where MSWC built housing for administrators
 - 8d. Emerging Sharika (Company) hamlet
 - 8e. Ginning factory
 - 8f. MSWC's Madinat al-'Ummal (workers' housing)
9. Christian cemetery and slaughterhouse
10. Tannery

paper, spinning, weaving, and cotton pressing. Egypt witnessed a 25 percent population growth between 1927 and 1937 (from 12.18 million people to 15.9 million), but the growth was even more rapid in cities, owing to rural immigration. Urban population soared by 56 percent during the same decade, from 1.88 million to 2.94 million.¹⁵

Urbanization became a manifestation of modernization as large investments were made in city-based industries and services and the state expanded its urban-based apparatus.¹⁶ The local landed elites of al-Mahalla invested in growing cotton and the cotton trade and attempted to modernize the city's famous silk- and cotton-weaving industries. A notable local family donated land where the city built a modern vocational high school focusing on the textile industry, Madrasat al-Nasij, in 1910. To link the railway station to the school, the local government built a new, wide boulevard named Muhib Street. These developments created a European-like neighborhood that attracted European residents and triggered an exodus of local elites from the traditional neighborhoods to live in the Muhib area. With the rise of an Egyptian bourgeoisie to lead nationalist industrialization, Bank Misr established the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in al-Mahalla three years after it established the Misr Company for Cotton Ginning in al-Mahalla, in 1924. Bank Misr had established many industrial and service enterprises in different localities, but the MSWC in al-Mahalla was the first large mechanized cotton factory in Egypt owned by Egyptians, and it became the most successful and fastest-growing enterprise in interwar Egypt. It remains the largest textile compound in the Middle East today. Egyptians refer to it as Sharikat al-Mahalla (the Company of al-Mahalla); the locals simply call it al-Sharika (the Company). The Company started on 32 *feddan* (one *feddan* is 1.038 acres) in 1927 and eventually became the largest industrial compound in Egypt, occupying a total of 550 *feddan* by 1950.¹⁷ The Company's success fueled enthusiasm among the bourgeoisie to invest in its expansion.

The public responded positively to the Company's calls to raise capital. In less than a decade, from 1927 to 1936, the Company's shares multiplied from 75,000 to 250,000, then swelled to 500,000 by 1951. Its capital increased from EGP 300,000 to EGP 1 million in 1936 and EGP 2 million in 1951. Buying stock in the Company proved to be a wise and lucrative investment. The distributed profit continually increased, from EGP 0.24 for each stock in 1938 to EGP 0.48 in 1940 and 1941, then to EGP 1.50 from 1946 to 1949. Government support played a major role in the Company's success.¹⁸ In addition, positive coverage in the nationalist press and King Faruq's frequent visits contributed to the Company's stature as a nationalist institution that enhanced Egyptian independence and modernization.¹⁹ The Company produced its first

piece of cloth in 1930 with 1,000 workers; its workforce increased to 10,000 in 1935, 20,000 in 1938, and 27,000 in 1945.²⁰ Many came from among the poor, mostly landless peasants across the country. In 1947 the Company had personnel files for about 100,000 workers.²¹

Handloom factories started mechanizing in earnest after World War II, when the Company sold its exhausted machines to handloom workshops. These workshops hired the Company's skilled mechanics to fix the mechanical looms and expanded their operations into small and medium-size factories with larger workforces. As thousands of people from all across Egypt were attracted to al-Mahalla, the population of the town increased from 45,642 in 1927 to 63,292 in 1937 and to 115,758 people in 1947—the highest growth rate in Egypt. With unprecedented 8 percent annual growth, al-Mahalla became the fastest-growing working-class population in Egypt. Al-Mahalla's experience was not unique. Many other towns that hosted large factories, such as Kafr al-Dawwar, al-Hawamidiyya, Hilwan, and Damietta, also experienced rapid population growth. During the first half of the twentieth century, the number of rural immigrants arriving in the towns increased simultaneously with the increase in industrial workers. The number of industrial workers witnessed 25.9 percent and 30.1 percent growth from 1927 to 1937 and from 1937 to 1947, respectively.²² Official censuses show that the number of industrial workers reached 438,000 workers in 1937—including 44,439 female workers—and 553,000 in 1947, in addition to 10,800 workers in public services.²³ An informal estimate suggests that the number of Egyptian laborers in 1941 reached 1 million, not including agricultural laborers.²⁴ In 1947, 6.3 million people, forming 33 percent of the total population, lived in urban areas.²⁵ The number of people working in industry and urban services continually grew. Urban professions attracted an increasing number of people: 560,600 people worked in industry, 203,300 people worked in transportation and communication, and 1,073,600 people worked in other services.²⁶ Industry not only grew but also tended to harness concentrated capital and laborers. The Industrial Federation estimated that 58 percent of industrial laborers worked in 580 industrial enterprises during World War II.²⁷

As a large, provincial town with a vibrant urban life and diverse economy, al-Mahalla represents the industrial transformation better than the two biggest cities, Cairo and Alexandria, which hosted the central government and had cosmopolitan milieus. Although it experienced urbanization and population growth similar to Cairo's and Alexandria's, overall al-Mahalla's experience was more similar to that of Egypt's provincial towns, such as Tanta, al-Mansura, Damanhur, Kafr al-Zayyat, Minya, and Naj' Hammadi, where the majority of the population lived. The social intercourse between the urbanites

(the people of al-Mahalla) and those who came to work in factories, as well as the newcomers' adjustment to industrial work and urban life, were complicated processes. They cannot be boiled down to mere episodes in the history of nationalist struggle versus colonialism, or labor struggle versus capitalism, in Egypt. This book attempts to illuminate the important and complex social transformations in daily life experiences that are missing from nationalist, labor, and gender histories.

Historians of labor movements and the political economy of modern Egypt have examined the concentration of national wealth in the hands of a few bourgeoisie and landlord families.²⁸ Scholars have debated whether there was a difference between foreign entrepreneurs and the rising nationalist bourgeoisie who were instrumental in building local modern industry.²⁹ The story of Bank Misr's drive to industrialize fits well in the nationalist narrative as a story of modernization and challenge to European domination. Social historians have most often treated workers in the first half of the twentieth century as configured and classed individuals. Structuralists have approached the working-class formation as an economically based formation—that is, the class-producing structures of the industrialized liberal economy created revolutionary conflict between capitalists and workers.³⁰ The culturist approach underscores the discursive process in making individuals conscious of class position; in this approach, workers are an imagined class that comes out of a discursive formation.³¹ The scholarship on the Egyptian working class provides us with a wealth of information about labor movements and the political activities of factory workers under the industrialized liberal economy.³² Yet this labor history reduces rich workers' experiences to unionism and political activism.

In his pioneering work on the Egyptian labor movement, Ra'uf Abbas argued that the development of modern transportation and establishment of transformative industries led to the rise of a modern working class among landless peasants who emigrated to urban towns, craftsmen who developed skills to match modern industry, and foreign skilled workers who came to Egypt to escape capitalist exploitation in their home countries.³³ Abbas highlighted the contribution of labor activists to the nationalist movement and the engagement of nationalist leaders with labor movements. In the same vein, the leftist Egyptian historian Amin 'Izz al-Din argues that the Egyptian working class has been a nationalist social force honing its anti-imperialist and anticapitalist consciousness ever since its birth in the late nineteenth century. In 'Izz al-Din's narrative, mechanical development, which from the mid-nineteenth century allowed Egypt to integrate into the European web of imperialism and economic domination, enabled European capitalists to

concentrate their presence in Egypt's large industrial enterprises and public services. Egypt's landless peasants and craftsmen became wage laborers in European enterprises; thus, they became a working class able to realize the deep contradiction between their own economic and political interests and the interests of foreign capitalists. The working class established organizations to achieve economic demands (higher wages and fewer work hours) and quickly incorporated the national political independence into its agenda.³⁴ 'Izz al-Din's impressive and detailed history of labor activism, particularly unionism and political struggles, offers insights into how political parties and organizations—including leftists—failed and even betrayed the working classes.³⁵ Despite this indifferent partisan leadership, he points out, Egyptian workers were able to continue their class struggle. Yet he restricts his account of their "daily resistance and struggles" to strikes, collective protests, and writing to the press.³⁶

Amid the available literature on the emerging Egyptian working class during the interwar period, Ellis Goldberg's work stands out in its straightforward analysis. Breaking away from the mechanical Marxist narrative that labor inevitably adopts socialism and opposes colonial capitalism, Goldberg argues that workers, like everybody else, take up ideas and available resources as they come, and that they search for allies and attempt to refine their understanding of their small world of work and the larger world that contains it.³⁷ If they achieve success, they hold to their initial analysis, but if they do not, they look for new ways to understand, organize, and attract new allies. Such fluidity between new and old ideas and the ways in which resources apply to workers' social strategies describe industrial urban life. Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman's *Workers on the Nile*—still the classic on Egyptian labor history—builds on Abbas's and 'Izz al-Din's works and follows their argument that Egypt's integration into the global capitalist system led to a limited but significant influx of investment in modern, larger-scale industrial and transport enterprises. In such sectors as the processing of agricultural raw materials, it was in the provision of goods and services for European and Europeanized segments of the urban population that a modern working class first emerged and soon began to engage in collective action.³⁸ Yet Beinin and Lockman, like Abbas and 'Izz al-Din before them, focus on organized workers, labor politics, and the institutional history of the Egyptian working class. Beinin and Lockman rightly point out that workers were in a dense web of social relations within and outside the workplace. They belonged to families, they had ties to villages, and working-class men, women, and children lived in complex communities where they all contributed to and re-formed the structures of neighborhoods and popular culture.³⁹ Relying heavily on published periodicals and memoirs,

Workers on the Nile provides another narrative that is narrowly focused on unions, strikes, and politics and pays scant attention to questions of identity, lived experience, and gender.⁴⁰ Surprisingly, the more recent contributions of Egyptian scholars have also been limited to similar issues and pay no attention to workers' daily lives beyond their activism and organization.⁴¹

In reconstructing the experiences of industrial workers in al-Mahalla, this study researches the unexplored aspects of workers' daily experiences as an important social agent in urban life and traces the social transformation of the working class and its integration into urban societies. Those who migrated to an urban industrial environment had to learn to coexist with members of other socioculturally heterogeneous groups, subjugate themselves to an industrial organizational hierarchy, and deal with the state's encroaching power as well as competing discourses. Tensions between the people of al-Mahalla, who called themselves *Mahallawiyya*, and the peasant-workers, whom *Mahallawiyya* called *Shirkawiyya*, or "people of the Company," influenced many aspects of daily urban life. As *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* made adjustments in order to live and work together, the tensions inherent in private practices and public discourses on gender and sex made sexual intimacy an especially powerful and ever-present battleground for sociocultural politics.

Nationalist struggles, the history of labor movements, the rise of class consciousness, and revolutionary conflicts are not at the center of my analysis of social transformation. This is not a study of Egyptian nationalism versus British colonialism. This is not to say that *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* did not engage in nationalist politics or labor activism.⁴² Although the government outlawed unions along with the first Egyptian Communist Party in 1924, handloom workers in al-Mahalla formed an active union in the early 1930s. The union led a successful strike in August 1930, in coordination with workers in Cairo and Samanud, to renegotiate wages.⁴³ Trade unions mushroomed in al-Mahalla, particularly once the Parliament legalized unionism in 1942.⁴⁴ Labor strikes were the strongest expression of class conflict in al-Mahalla before and after the establishment of the Company. A large strike in the spinning sections in mid-1938 forced the Company to abide by the new labor legislation and reduce working hours in all spinning factories from eleven and thirteen hours per shift to only eight. Asking for the same treatment and protesting the harsh working conditions and low wages, workers in weaving factories initiated a strike that July. An entire weaving section was destroyed during the strike, and management had to suspend work in the weaving factories for several weeks. The court convicted fifty-six workers of damaging Company property worth more than EGP 1,287 and causing injuries to administrators.⁴⁵

In 1947 Company workers launched the largest and most violent labor strike in modern Egyptian history. A series of limited strikes in 1946 and 1947 led to an explosion on September 2, 1947. This strike was spontaneous, coming in the wake of massive layoffs after the Company announced regulations that workers considered abusive and unjust. Workers' fury became so out of control that the combined police forces of all the Delta provinces failed to stop the destruction, and the government deployed the army with tanks to restore order. A number of workers and townspeople were killed, and the Company administration shut down the factory for more than six weeks. Despite an aggressive policy to purge activist workers, limited strikes arose in some sections in February 1948.⁴⁶ The series of strikes forced the Company to take workers' demands seriously. Although it continued reducing the workforce, it increased wages, accelerated the distribution of housing units, and established a hospital for respiratory diseases.

The exclusive focus in historical writings on revolutionary conflicts based in nationalist and class causes misses the rich drama of ordinary and everyday life.⁴⁷ Once an episode of labor activism cools off, these accounts leave us with little knowledge about the social lives of workers inside and outside their workplaces, their sense of belonging to social groups and communities, and the times and places they share with the rest of the urban population.⁴⁸ Ellis Goldberg has asked: "What do we know of the ways in which the social, emotional, and intellectual life of laboring men and women fit into larger patterns of social, emotional, and intellectual life in Egypt as a whole?"⁴⁹ Mechanized factories not only affected the concentration of labor but also were the force drawing workers from the country to urban life. Factory work was not synonymous with urban life: hundreds of thousands moved to the city and drove rapid expansion and population growth regardless of whether or not they landed a factory job. These new urbanites fostered new temporal-spatial relationships with everything from consumption patterns to social norms and identities. The coercive industrial organization and hierarchy put men, women, and children, both at work and at home, under the authority of unfamiliar men, thus intensifying sexual harassment, child molestation, prostitution, and public exposure of private heterosexual and homosexual relationships. The exposure of private intimacy to public scrutiny fed inconsistent public discourses through which the morality of the working classes, particularly women, was judged and regulated even while the socio-economic status of the upper class often exempted them from the same moral judgments and regulations.

I build my work on the idea that the working class and all urban subaltern groups created their own worldviews, morality, and notions of gender and

sexuality. Building on E. P. Thompson's argument that the world of the English working class was one that the workers made themselves, Goldberg has argued that the world of Egyptian politics may be one made in large part by the working class.⁵⁰ Here I argue that working-class men and women created the culture of Egyptian industrial urban society; crafted their own notions, ideals, discourses, and practices about gender and sexuality; and reappropriated the state's power and bourgeois employment regimes. Informed by the subaltern studies, this book analyzes the experiences of non-elite men and women and reconstructs their beliefs, practices, and struggles without suggesting that they were totally autonomous from the state or the elite. Liat Kozma shows, in her work on precolonial Egypt, that the discourses of the poor are neither autonomous, preexisting, nor confined to expressing resistance; our understanding of the modern state must incorporate the ways in which the disempowered learn to inhabit new norms, practices, and relationships.⁵¹

Recent scholarship that has underlined gender and sexuality as important categories in understanding the historical trajectory of the state and society of Egypt has overlooked the working classes. Regrettably, labor history has lost the momentum it enjoyed among Western and Egyptian scholars alike in the 1980s. Since the publication of Timothy Mitchell's seminal work *Colonising Egypt*, most scholarly attention has gone to the processes of state formation and the discourses and practices of the nationalist educated middle class, the *afandiyya* (singular: *afandi*).⁵² Despite the great contributions of scholars to women's history, masculinity, and sexuality, we do not have a sexual or gendered history of the Egyptian working class. Questions that examine identity, gender, consumerism, Westernization versus "indigenous authenticity," public morality, sexuality, and other aspects of social culture have so far focused mostly on the *afandiyya* and been studied through *afandiyya* discourses. Because a few of the Cairo-based *afandiyya* left a huge legacy in print culture, writing history based on their discourse is less of a challenge than writing the history of the illiterate and semiliterate lower classes. Scholars have either overlooked the communal, gender, sexual, class, and national identities of male and female factory workers, peddlers, prostitutes, and handloom weavers or constructed them through the point of view of the intellectual *afandiyya*. Abandoning social history and focusing on colonial and elite discourses, gender historians have documented and celebrated the Egyptian feminist movement.⁵³ While debating whether that movement was indigenous or a colonial product, scholars gave little attention to subaltern women who were carving out their spaces in masculine domains such as marketplaces, workers' lodges, and mechanized factories. The contributions of gender history fall under the

genre of intellectual history, which has been a vibrant field of scholarship, though limited in its scope and sources.⁵⁴ Hanan Kholoussy's important contribution in her study of gender through the lens of marriage and family was to show the gap between the middle-class discourses as expressed in the Cairene press and the real-life experiences of the urban lower, middle, and upper classes as documented in court records.⁵⁵

Gender is fundamentally important to shaping working-class history and culture, just as class is important to understanding histories of women and masculinities.⁵⁶ Examining everyday life in working-class urban neighborhoods reveals that the middle-class imagination had limited influence on a complicated and fluid reality. The social practices and discourses of lower-class women and men, as preserved in a variety of archives, complicate our understanding of gender in semicolonial interwar Egypt. Scholarship on nineteenth-century Egyptian women has offered not just an intellectual history but an examination of the socioeconomic conditions of women across classes. Some scholars provide compelling accounts of the decline in working-class women's status in the nineteenth century due to integration into the global economy and the centralization of state power.⁵⁷ In her pioneer work, Judith Tucker did not introduce women as subjugated and passive victims of state imperialism; she focused on the agency of women and their ability to resist and contribute to social realities. Liat Kozma reconstructs the everyday social interactions that legitimized the involvement of central authorities in policing the sexuality of working-class women. I hope to contribute to this scholarship on working-class women in the first half of the twentieth century by focusing on their rational choices to engage in industrial work, invest in real estate, and exercise agency in forming social morality. The urban experiences I have studied provide an account of the resilient attempts of Egyptian women to cope with rapid changes and to benefit from industrialization. Whether industrial workers, poor boardinghouse owners, or street vendors, working-class women utilized and manipulated the state's power and reshaped the urban social culture.

The gendered labor experience I strive to recover also illuminates the masculine identity of working-class men if we use gender as a primary tool and an object of analysis. Class and gender are a process protean enough to be shaped by historical circumstance and powerful enough to influence structures and institutions.⁵⁸ I examine masculinity among industrial workers and in interactions with *afandi* supervisors, female coworkers, and *Mahallawiyya* men. The gendering of Egyptian labor history, and of male and female workers, elucidates how gender operates with and within the social category of class.⁵⁹

By approaching gender as a primary way of signifying relationships of power and considering genders as temporal and spatial constructs rather than fixed categories, one realizes that ordinary life in the urban-industrial ethos could destabilize the female-male binary, to use Judith Butler's term.⁶⁰

Focusing on the town of al-Mahalla al-Kubra addresses the scarcity of scholarship on the urban history of the post-Ottoman Middle East outside of cosmopolitan cities and capitals.⁶¹ Against the backdrop of the establishment of large factories, intensive migration from rural to urban-industrial areas, and the increasing density of a socioculturally diverse population, boundaries between public and private spaces increasingly blurred, and the state and society expressed anxiety over rapid urbanization, social reconfiguration, and socioeconomic tensions in sexual terms.⁶² As rapid urbanization and social transformation altered the traditional structures of society and new norms were in the making, social groups selectively invited and resisted state intervention. The state and local communities seized the opportunity to publicly scrutinize sexuality and selectively criminalize certain heterosexual and homosexual practices. Individual selectivity and state inconsistency contributed to the fluid and intricate social constructs of normative masculinity and femininity as well as to both licit and illicit sexuality in the industrial urban milieu.

The "state" was not a coherent, preconceived entity that extended its gaze to new domains; instead, these new domains created an abstract, but very real, state power.⁶³ Individuals interacted with state agents and institutes, manipulated the state's power, selectively invited the state's intervention, and evaded the state's authority; they were not always the resisting agent or disciplined self.⁶⁴ State agents were also gendered and classed individuals who understood and applied regulations and laws in ways that were not necessarily uninformed but also were not always consistent. While exercising the state's power to regulate social morality against transgressions and enforce appropriate and permissible legal behaviors, male bureaucrats understood and applied laws differently.⁶⁵ Court cases (on which this study relies in part) show diverse ways of judging and evaluating public morality and sexual and gender orders—as opposed to making uniform interpretations of penal laws—since the late nineteenth century.⁶⁶ Gender, sexuality, and morality are spatially and temporally specific phenomena, not fixed categories. The daily gender and sexual practices and discourses of ordinary people in their interactions among themselves and with state institutes and functionaries illuminate the intimate aspects of the social transformation associated with the spread of modern industrialization and rapid urbanization in the first half of twentieth-century Egypt. Juxtaposing national modernist discourses with the social experiences

of daily life highlights the significant, but largely overlooked, role of ordinary people—from male and female industrial workers to handloom weavers, street vendors, lower-class landladies, and prostitutes—in shaping the Egyptian experience of modernity.

Notes on Sources

This work is based on the idea that local social groups play a key role in the struggle between change and continuity. Male and female peasants, artisans, and workers were not merely recipients of change imposed by outside forces. They made their own choices about where to work and live, what to wear and consume, and whom to marry. They negotiated the forces of change imposed upon them, whether these forces were European economic and political domination or rising native capitalism. They engaged with and challenged the state's power to achieve their economic goals and to form communal and gender identities, social norms, and moral orders. Because this study attempts to write history "from below" and focuses on local people, I had to rely especially on local sources produced by the locals themselves. I do not claim that I recovered the voices of *Shirkawiyya* and *Mahallawiyya*. Aside from workers' memoirs and petitions, this study draws heavily on state documents. I recognize that when state documents preserved the citizens' voices, the state must have done so to fulfill a state need, not necessarily because bureaucrats valued the people's voice.

As one might expect, I consulted the archives of the Company, the Department of Corporation in the Financial Ministry, and the Cabinet (Archif Majlis al-Wuzara'), as well as other central and official sources. I also utilized contemporary periodicals based in Cairo and al-Mahalla and drew intensively on court records, petition files of the 'Abdin Archive, memoirs, and oral history. The major challenge was finding any discourses of illiterate and semi-illiterate citizens in written sources scripted mostly by state functionaries and *afandiyya* employers and scribes. The petitions sent by inhabitants of al-Mahalla to the Royal Palace of 'Abdin are scattered in the 'Abdin Archive among dozens of boxes containing petitions from everywhere else. State officials selectively preserved petitions in the 'Abdin Archive, and we do not know how authorities responded to most of these petitions. Provisional scribes, or *kuttab 'ara'id*, composed most petitions on behalf of illiterate petitioners.⁶⁷ Hence, most petitions did not convey the concerns and complaints of people in their own words. Sometimes petitions were written in a formula developed

by scribes. Nevertheless, navigating thousands and thousands of these petitions is very rewarding. They not only capture local people's complaints and concerns but also reflect their moral values and worldviews.

In the quest to reconstruct the daily lives and voices of ordinary people, this book relies on thousands of records from the misdemeanor, criminal, civil, and Sharia courts. According to the judiciary's structure and hierarchy, established in 1883, the national (*Abliyya*) court system handled all criminal, trade and business, and civil disputes. Sharia courts would eventually be limited to personal status and family issues. *Abliyya* courts had to deal with all Egyptians and foreigners except when a foreigner's home state enjoyed extraterritorial legal rights known as "capitulations."⁶⁸ The *Abliyya* court system comprised three levels of jurisdiction. The highest level was the Court of Cassation, located in Cairo, the capital center; it had the power to review all appeals made after final verdicts to make sure that lower court levels had correctly applied the laws. The Court of Cassation could overrule verdicts and return cases to the lower courts. Every province had one appeals court located in the provincial capital.

The first-level court in each province had two houses: the criminal court, located in the provincial capital city, and the misdemeanor court (*Juz'iyya*), located in each major town inside the province.⁶⁹ I relied on records from al-Mahalla misdemeanor court (*Abliyya-Juz'iyya*) and the Tanta criminal court (*Abliyya-Kulliyya*), on al-Mahalla appeals handled by the Tanta appeals court, and on records from al-Mahalla al-Kubra civil court and the Sharia court of al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Those records dealt with cases from the town of al-Mahalla and the villages in its jurisdiction. The town and those villages formed one administrative unit called Markaz al-Mahalla al-Kubra.

The unprecedented population growth of al-Mahalla upon the establishment of the Company in 1927 led to a dramatic increase in misdemeanor cases. Starting in 1938, records of misdemeanor cases in the villages were kept in separate files from those that occurred inside town. Until 1930, misdemeanor cases from the entire Markaz al-Mahalla filled two files, with an average of two hundred cases a year. After 1938, misdemeanor cases inside town in any given year filled four volumes, with an average of five hundred cases annually. The appeals and criminal courts were more centralized. Only one criminal court and one appeals court dealt with all the cases in al-Gharbiyya Province (*Muduriyyat al-Gharbiyya*), in which al-Mahalla was a major town. Both were located in Tanta, the capital of the province.

Court records are never a completely accurate window on reality, and law is a process rather than a "normative prescription or administrative structure."⁷⁰ Interactions in courtrooms between judges, who represented the state, and

local inhabitants generated legal interpretations of the law. Court records do offer a great view of grassroots practices. Some judges at al-Mahalla were upper middle class, with the honorific title *bey*, but most were middle-class *afandiyya*. Their legal discourse and practices show us how some *afandiyya* applied their worldview to their work. Interestingly, the positions on gender and sexuality taken by *afandi* misdemeanor judges were varied rather than uniform. Some used very classist and sexist language against lower-class men and women, regardless of how they interpreted and applied laws; other judges were more lenient toward male workers (children and adults alike) accused of theft. Most were lenient toward female offenders and often suspended any jail sentences for them.

State agents wrote the court records and provided selective information about the individuals involved. Except when they handled criminal court records, court scribes usually followed a formula rather than providing details. Misdemeanor court records tend to narrate minor offenses common to urban spaces, such as casual violent confrontations, pickpocketing, petty theft, and trespassing. These narratives are brief, formulaic accounts that fulfilled the state's need for documentation but ignored the voices of lower-class defendants. Accounts given in local languages were reworded and translated into standard Arabic. Occasionally the coarse language that some people used during confrontations was recorded.⁷¹ Court records and citizens' petitions provide details on social life, especially the urban sphere. They are rich in information on communal networks, work systems, interactions in workplaces and marketplaces, domestic relations, and encounters between neighbors in public and private spaces. Yet they also document troubling situations. We have to read against the grain to extract stories of "normal" social interaction and recover people's voices. For example, we need to trace material culture, the adoption of new technical tools, and changes in consumption patterns through records that documented the loss of commodities rather than the acquisition of them.

Judges are not the only *afandiyya* group we meet in the courtrooms of al-Mahalla. Court records capture the worldview of an important sector of *afandiyya* functionaries. Although the state was centralized, it was also a complex network of different power centers and institutions. Not all functionaries interpreted regulations in the same way or were equally committed to adopting uniform interpretations, applications, and techniques supported by the central government. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, interpreting state regulations and determining how state agents would produce and apply regulations became an increasingly bureaucratic exercise.⁷² Changing social and economic realities led male administrators and bureaucratic intermediaries

to invoke their discretionary power to impose their bureaucratic interpretations. Public morality, gender, and sexuality were social practices and discursive fields in which the state, as well as social groups and classes, struggled to define the boundaries of the social norm. Social cultures, the urban norm, and sexual and gender regimes were the outcome of individual and communal interactions and state intervention. Gender and sexuality are always contested in areas of social mores, class hierarchies, kinship, family, and property relationships.⁷³ More than *afandiyya*'s publications, court records show how *afandi* judges, policemen, and market and health inspectors interpreted laws and state regulation. They also show how *afandiyya* put ideologies to work to restructure social relations and norms based on their own visions. Along with state agents, different types of *afandiyya* worked for the Company in supervisory and management positions and wrote most of the Company records that this study uses.

To discuss the *afandiyya* group, we must appreciate the social, economic, and cultural elasticity of the term "*afandiyya*." Recent historical analysis of interwar Egypt has shown the difficulties in conceptualizing *afandiyya* as a fixed socioeconomic group with clear social locations. The term *afandiyya* applies to large groups of men at various levels of education and positions within the socioeconomic structure, ranging from bureaucrats and professionals to students and unemployed graduates. Rather than define *afandiyya* as an economic-based class or conceptualize the term under the loose rubric of "educated middle class," a fast-growing body of literature identifies *afandiyya* as a sociocultural category encompassing those who approximated or aspired to become cultural bourgeoisie.⁷⁴ The most important aspect of *afandiyya* is the claim of modernity and nationalism.⁷⁵

Workers in al-Mahalla encountered different types of *afandiyya* inside the Company. Some top managers held higher educational degrees and had acquired more professional training locally or abroad; foremen and mechanics, by contrast, may have possessed little training and been barely literate. Yet all were *afandiyya*. Some upper bureaucrats and technocrats in the Company looked forward to joining the echelon of the upper classes by sharing elitist social spaces like fancy clubs or political power in parliamentary representation. Foremen and mechanics were closer to blue-collar workers in terms of income and professions. Yet they honed their supervisory power over workers and were frustrated by their lack of professional mobility. The experience of the *afandiyya* on the shop floor gives us an opportunity to examine everyday life, which was often different from *afandiyya* discourses in print culture and associations. The sources I use suggest that there were no sociocultural practices common to all *afandiyya* who were state agents or worked for the Company.

In contrast to the tradition of renowned intellectuals and politicians writing memoirs and documenting their life experiences, only a few ordinary people wrote about their lives. We do not have a memoir of a prostitute, a street vendor, a housewife, or a handloom weaver. Fortunately, three workers of al-Mahalla left valuable accounts. In the 1960s, Fikri al-Khuli wrote his memoir, *al-Rihla (The Journey)*, about his time in al-Mahalla from the late 1920s to the early 1940s.⁷⁶ Al-Khuli started working for the Company upon his arrival in al-Mahalla from his village near Tanta in the late 1920s, when he was only eleven years old. In 1942, the Company fired him and he was imprisoned because of his labor activism. The Nasserist regime imprisoned al-Khuli again in the 1950s for labor and leftist activism. About two decades after al-Khuli left al-Mahalla, during his years in the al-Wahat prison, he wrote of his experiences in al-Mahalla. Thus, he wrote about his past as a child laborer at a time when he was a middle-aged leftist labor activist.

'Abdu 'Abd al-Rahman came to al-Mahalla from al-Buhayra Province in 1932, when he was twenty-three years old. Thanks to a high school degree in textile industries, he joined the Company as a foreman. Twenty years later, he left al-Mahalla for Cairo after his health deteriorated and he became unfit for work on the shop floor. Unlike al-Khuli, who reported his experiences in terms of the evolution of his working-class consciousness, labor activism, and resistance, 'Abd al-Rahman gave his account as the antihero. His life experiences, as he reported them, were a series of surrenders and defeats, in the face of not only the Company but also his family and coworkers. Despite his education, he did not write his memoir by himself but instead dictated it; the leftist feminist author Asma Halim did the writing. Halim also edited the memoir, which a leftist publisher published in 1977. Hence, we do not know when, why, or how 'Abd al-Rahman decided to dictate his experiences or what Halim filtered or added. What we trust is that 'Abd al-Rahman and his memoirs are not fictional.

The veteran leftist and labor activist 'Attiya al-Sayrafi worked for the Company and lived in al-Mahalla for a brief but intense period of his life. He came to al-Mahalla after World War II, after he failed to support himself as a student at Azhar Institute in Zaqaq. He published his memoir about his days as a child laborer in 2007. I was fortunate to interview him in 2005, before his memoir was published. In that interview, he shared more memories about the town when he visited it frequently as a bus conductor. Tellingly, despite the differences in the attitudes of al-Khuli, al-Sayrafi, and 'Abd al-Rahman, their depictions of the working and living conditions in al-Mahalla during the interwar period are almost the same. More important, their accounts challenge the taboo on sexual experiences during childhood and coming of age.

I collected oral histories in al-Mahalla from as many men and women as possible from different walks of life. As with published memoirs, time and perspective collude in oral histories to shape the legacy and reality of past events.⁷⁷ These oral accounts add nuance and flavor to the story extracted from documents and helped me to understand many of the traditions I had never cared to understand before (even though I grew up in that town). Many people shared personal stories dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, and some readily shared family records and private collections and photos. All these stories were rich in information and helpful as I came to realize how people understand and construct their own histories. Although it is not within the scope of this study, oral histories showed how the interplay of the politics of memory erased the history of the Prostitution Quarter from the memory of many townspeople.

The Journey to Becoming a Class-Gendered Urbanite

The chapters follow men's and women's journeys as they were transformed into gender-classed industrial urbanites. These journeys started with individuals' recruitment into industrial work and culminated in strikes and struggles against tuberculosis, syphilis, and other industrial-urban diseases. In their quest to become factory laborers, newcomers to al-Mahalla were at the nexus of two forces: the hostile urbanites of al-Mahalla (*Mahallawiyya*) and the coercive industrial organization that placed rank-and-file workers at the bottom of the social hierarchy and subjugated them to various supervisory, managerial, and policing powers. Chapters 1 and 2 analyze the interconnected and spontaneous processes of becoming an industrial worker, an urban masculine, and a modern subject. Following workers inside factories while they maneuvered through the large factory culture and organization, chapter 1 shows how male workers and supervisors negotiated traditional and modern masculinity and how violence and aggression on the shop floor were expressions and performances of the contestation, ambivalence, and alteration of men's fluid masculine identities. Men negotiated the coercive industrial hierarchy by oscillating between docility and violence. In an attempt to strike a balance between taking personal pride in making a livelihood and protecting their own integrity, workers evaded authority, developed male associations, and bonded among themselves.

Outside the factories, newly arrived peasant-workers had to participate in urban traditions and manners, despite mutual hostility with townspeople. The division between the *Mahallawiyya* and the *Shirkawiyya* spawned vio-

lence, and the competition among *futuwwat*—the tough men who informally claimed the leadership of the community—only fed that violence and communal division. Chapter 2 uses urban violence as a lens through which to examine how men constructed, performed, and struggled for masculine identity. I contend that masculine gender identity, the performance of masculinity, and the construction of manhood were important elements in adapting to industrial urban life. In their competing and fluid loyalties, working-class *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* developed their notion of the ideal masculine *futuwwa* and created social locations for peer bonding and friendship.

Textile factories opened more opportunities for rural women to venture into urban life and assume an industrial working-class identity. Chapter 3 provides a gendered history of the textile industry in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in both handloom and mechanized factories. Female industrial workers went through a multifaceted process of proletarianization while being subjugated to the coercive industrial hierarchy and facing the capitalist structure and patriarchal culture inside and outside the factory. Thus, I focus on female industrial workers adapting to industrial and urban life, not exclusively on workplace-based collective action. Factory work also subjected women to sexual harassment and social stigma. They acquired the skills to operate modern machinery, rose in the social ranks of the salaried urban population, and gained experience in dealing with a factory system, yet they had the lowest status and payment among the workers in the male-dominated industrial hierarchy, and their morality became subject to communal suspicion and mistrust.

Taking advantage of unprecedented population growth and immigrants' demands for cheap accommodation, women of the working classes in al-Mahalla invested in workers' lodging and set up their own businesses to provide workers with foodstuffs, drinks, and other cheap commodities and services. Moving beyond assumptions about separate domestic and public spheres, chapter 4 examines the social history of these entrepreneurial women and their immense contribution to al-Mahalla's socioeconomic transformation and labor history. These new patterns of economic investment and work allowed lower-class women to assume powerful positions in their households and enabled them to challenge the patriarchal norm. These lower-class landladies, I argue, played an important role in shaping new workers' outlooks on and experiences with urban life, led the spatial growth of the town in unintended directions, undermined the agricultural economy in favor of real estate investment, and challenged the power of the state in the spheres of urbanization and urban control.

Chapter 5 treats sexuality as an intimate aspect of the social transformation associated with the spread of modern industry. By tracing practices and



Figure 1. Board members of the Amir Faruq Sport Club and notables of al-Mahalla at the inauguration of the club, 1936. *Source:* Courtesy of Baladiyyat al-Mahalla Sport Club.

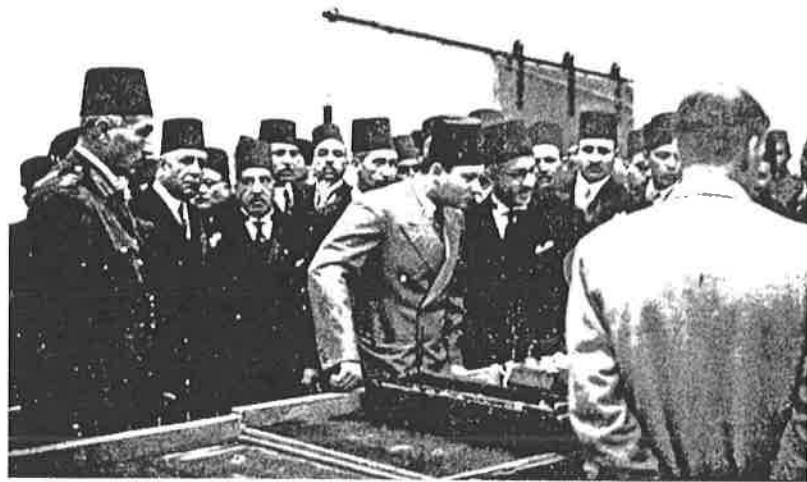


Figure 2. King Faruq listening to 'Abd al-Rahman Hamada bey, the chairman of MSWC, during the royal visit to al-Mahalla in 1937, with Ta'alat Harb Pasha, the founder of the Company and the Bank Misr, to their left. *Source:* Tal'at Harb, *Majmu'at Khutab Muhammad Tal'at Harb* (Cairo: Matba't Misr, 1934).



Figure 3. Afandiyya and workers with Ta'alat Harb Pasha on the shop floor during the Pasha's last visit to MSWC. *Source:* Courtesy of MSWC.



Figure 4. Ta'alat Harb Pasha surrounded by board members and administrators in his last visit to MSWC. *Source:* Courtesy of MSWC.



Figure 5. The MSWC in 1949 after the establishment of its clock tower. *Source:* Courtesy of MSWC.

discourses related to sexual intimacy, I reconstruct people's social experiences and their notions of sex and sexuality. Children and adults from different geographical origins were sharing living and sleeping spaces, and unmarried alien female and male *Shirkawiyya* were sharing houses with *Mahallawiyya* families and individuals. With these sociocultural differences increasing among individuals sharing limited spaces and the lack of privacy in these spaces, sexual life became vulnerable to public exposure. In living and work environments marked by anxiety, jealousy, mistrust, and suspicion, it was not unusual for ordinary disputes with neighbors, roommates, housemates, and co-workers to slip into judgment of one another's sexual behaviors. Moreover, in this environment, exposing sexuality was a way to negotiate disputes in one's own favor. By examining the social arguments and controversies over a variety of sexual practices—such as women's harassment, child molestation, sodomy, sex outside wedlock, and homosexuality—I argue that class, gender, and social cultures and subcultures, in addition to power discourses, interacted in a transformative, social-industrial urban milieu to make fluid rather than solidify the intricate social constructs of normative licit and illicit sexuality.

In 1947 *Shirkawiyya* launched the largest labor strike in the history of modern Egypt, shocking the country and capturing national attention. Striking workers exposed horrific work and living conditions and shattered the idealistic image that the MSWC had built under the banners of nationalism and economic independence. To redeem the situation, the Company launched a war of words against prostitution and claimed that uprooting brothels and encouraging sexual chastity among workers and in town were necessary steps to restore public order and improve workers' health and living conditions. Chapter 6 juxtaposes urban security and health conditions with the licit and illicit sex trades to illustrate the increasing vulnerability of the sexual lives of working-class men and women to public exposure and scrutiny. I argue that religio-nationalist discourses against sex work that had been a part of the urban landscape made the morality and sexuality of the working classes a target of bourgeois anxiety. Although invoking moral discourses against sex workers resonated with the nationalist discourse and the state's effort to medicalize, control, and stigmatize the lower class's sexuality, these discourses overlooked tuberculosis, malnutrition, and other diseases that preyed on the poor urban population and triggered strikes and urban unrest.

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*