THE CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD IN SEMI-COLONIAL EGYPT

Marianne Dhenin*

ABSTRACT. This paper argues that a new institution of motherhood was constructed through modernising reforms in law and medicine in semi-colonial Egypt. It shows that Egyptian women were characterised as ignorant of basic principles of health and hygiene and blamed for the high infant mortality rate in turn-of-the-century Egypt, which coincided with an ongoing reorientation of the Egyptian family in popular and religious literature, wherein the woman was being recast as the central figure in shaping the child and tending the home. At the intersection of these phenomena, new discussions emerged about the significance of women as mothers and the proper way to perform motherhood as an Egyptian woman. A new institution of motherhood was then constructed, concretised, and enforced through medical and legal discourse and interventions that were opposable against women across Egypt. This article shows that British and Egyptian lawmakers privileged the role of women as mothers in debates surrounding the drafting of new labour legislation and that they sought to ensure the maturity of mothers and the mental and physical health of the Egyptian family in a series of controversial personal status law reforms throughout the semi-colonial period. Through a socio-legal history of the institution of motherhood, it examines how colonialism, nationalism, and claims to modernity affected Egyptians’ daily lives and accessed family homes and women’s bodies. Throughout the article, a conceptualisation of modernisation as a dialectical process is emphasised. Modernisation claims to liberate individuals, women, or a nation, but, at the same time, it creates elaborate structures for their discipline. This article treats the institution of motherhood as one such structure and explores the roles of hygiene and domestic cleanliness, coloniality, and law in its construction in semi-colonial Egypt.

*Marianne Dhenin is a researcher in the Leibniz Cooperation Project ‘The Historicity of Democracy in the Arab and Muslim Worlds’ and a member of the academic staff at the Leibniz Institute of European History, Mainz, Germany. Email: dhenin@ieg-mainz.de. She would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insights and the many friends and colleagues who provided helpful feedback and support. Special thanks to Manfred Sing, Pascale Ghazaleh, Jason Beckett, Mai Taha, and Noha Fikry. Omissions and errors are the author’s alone.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 1924, the recently established Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) opened a clinic and dispensary for poor mothers and children in the district of al-Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo. The clinic and dispensary were organised under the EFU’s Committee for Child Care and Committee for the Health Affairs of Women and Children. The stated duties of both committees were to care for the cleanliness, health, and hygiene of mothers, their children, and their homes. Beyond their work at the clinic and dispensary, committee representatives also visited homes in poor neighbourhoods to instruct mothers in basic hygiene, health practices, and ‘the proper care of their children’. The Committee for the Health Affairs of Women and Children even awarded cash prizes to mothers ‘who [took] good care of the cleanliness of their children.’ This level of attention to motherhood and the standards of hygiene and domestic cleanliness to which poor mothers were instructed to adhere and awarded for achieving were still being developed and codified contemporaneously, as part of a process of constructing a new institution of motherhood which had begun less than three decades earlier. This article explores this period with a focus on how the new institution of motherhood was constructed and enforced on the level of the population through legal interventions that were opposable against women across Egypt.

This article shows that Egyptian women were blamed for the poor state of public health and high infant mortality rate in early-twentieth-century Egypt. This coincided with an ongoing reorientation of the Egyptian family in popular and religious literature, wherein the woman was being recast as the central figure in shaping the child and tending the home. At the intersection of these phenomena, new discussions emerged surrounding the significance of the role of women as mothers and the proper way to perform motherhood as an Egyptian woman. This article argues that a new institution of motherhood was then constructed and concretised through medicolegal discourse and legal reforms in semi-colonial Egypt. Through the history of the institution of motherhood, this article explores relationships between colonialism, nationalism, gender, and modernity during the period. It follows the work of many others who have also explored the effects of these structures on women and the family in Egypt. It contributes to the existing literature with a narrow focus on

---

1 Margot Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt (Princeton University Press 1994) 111.
2 Bahiga Arafa, The Social Activities of the Egyptian Feminist Union (Cairo Elias Modern Press 1973) 25.
3 As above at 29.
4 On motherhood, childhood, and the family see Heidi Morrison, Childhood and Colonial Modernity in Egypt (Springer 2015); Kenneth M. Cuno, Modernizing Marriage: Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt (Syracuse University Press 2015); Hanan Kholoussy, For Better, For Worse: The Marriage Crisis that Made Modern Egypt (Stanford University Press 2010); Lisa Pollard, Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805–1923 (University of California Press 2005); Timothy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt: With a New Preface (University of California Press 1991) 105–107; Beth Baron, ‘Perilous Beginnings: Infant Mortality, Public Health, and the State in Egypt’ in Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann and Katharina Stornig, Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century: Practice, Politics, and the Power of Representation (Palgrave Macmillan 2020) 195; Renate Lunde, ‘Building Bonny Babies – Missionary Welfare Work in Cairo 1920–1950’ in Nefissa Naguib and Inger Marie
the prevalence of questions about motherhood in discussions surrounding legal reforms, revealing ‘the legal’ as one site among many productive of new gender and family norms.

This article argues for a conceptualisation of modernisation as a dialectical process through examples of modernising reforms in the realms of labour and personal status law. Modernisation claims to liberate individuals, women, or a nation, but, at the same time, it creates elaborate structures for their capture, classification, and discipline. The institution of motherhood is one such structure.

1.1 Re-Presenting Semi-Colonial Egypt

The persons, relationships, and social transformations analysed herein must be understood as enmeshed in larger geopolitical relationships; economic, social, political and legal processes; and capitalist and colonial systems at play in Egypt during the period explored here, which stretches from the turn of the twentieth century into the early 1930s. This period is characterised as semi-colonial to give credit to Egyptian reformers for their clear role in drafting the legislation detailed here without obscuring the extent to which their actions were constrained by British interference in Egyptian institutions and affairs. The following historical background is provided for the purpose of understanding this term and with the hope that what follows can be situated in historical context.

British troops landed in Egypt in 1882, marking the start of a decades-long occupation of the territory. Despite British presence, Egypt also remained nominally a province of the Ottoman Empire, as it had been since 1517. The early years of the occupation entrenched British influence in Egyptian institutions and affairs. Efforts

Okkenhaug, Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East (Brill, 2007) 83; Hanan Kholoussy, ‘The Nationalization of Marriage in Monarchical Egypt’ in Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson and Barak A. Salmoni, Re-Envisioning Egypt 1919–1952 (American University in Cairo Press 2005) 317; Omnia el Shakry, ‘Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt’ in Lila Abu-Lughod, Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East (Princeton University Press 1998) 126. On women and nationalism see Beth Baron, Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics (University of California Press 2005); Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation; Mervat F. Hatem, ‘The 1919 Revolution and Nationalist Constructions of the Lives and Works of Pioneering Women Writers’ in Re-Envisioning Egypt 398. On shifting gender roles during the period see Hanan Hammad, Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanisation, and Social Transformation in Egypt (University of Texas Press 2016); Lucie Ryzova, The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt (Oxford University Press 2014); Wilson Chacko Jacob, Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940 (Duke University Press 2011); Mona L. Russell, Creating the New Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863–1922 (Springer 2004); Beth Baron, The Women’s Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press (Yale University Press 1994).

5 The author heeds the arguments of Beth Baron and Hanan Kholoussy on the choice of the term semi-colonial. See Beth Baron, The Orphan Scandal: Christian Missionaries and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (Stanford University Press 2014) xi; Hanan Kholoussy, The Marriage Crisis above note 4 at 5-6; Hanan Kholoussy, ‘Monitoring and Medicalising Male Sexuality in Semi-Colonial Egypt’ (2010) 22(3) Gender & History 677 at 688.

6 See generally, William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, A History of the Modern Middle East (Westview Press 2012, 5th edn.) 86–92.
to quickly secure financial and political stability in the territory were led by Lord Earl of Cromer, who served as the British consul-general to Egypt from 1883 to 1907. Under his command, the British administration restructured the Egyptian army and penetrated government ministries, placing British officers in positions of power throughout. Alongside the new colonial regime, however, Egyptians continued to oversee many indigenous institutions, including the Islamic courts, whose jurisdiction had been whittled down to questions of religious endowments, succession, and personal status, encompassing family matters and domestic relations, over the preceding century.

Grievances against the British fuelled an Egyptian nationalist movement, which first organised under Mustafa Kamil and his National Party (Hizb al-Watani) in 1907. Kamil is credited with popularising kinship metaphors to deemphasise ethnic and religious differences among Egyptians, which proved fundamental to nationalist identity formation in turn-of-the-century Egypt. Beth Baron notes that while the language of kinship transcended class, it also reinforced class hierarchies through its paternalism. Elite women who saw themselves as mothers of the nation felt a sense of maternal authority, which empowered them to engage in reform programmes that targeted poorer classes of women.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Britain declared Egypt a protectorate, ending Ottoman suzerainty and expanding British powers. As the war drew to a close in 1918, the Egyptian nationalist movement was reinvigorated under a new leader, Saad Zaghloul, and the Wafd Party (Hizb al-Wafd). The British arrested and exiled Zaghloul in 1919 as a result of his efforts to foment nationalist sentiment, but the action failed to bring Egyptians in line and instead sparked a wave of support for the Wafd and a period of upheaval now known as the 1919 Revolution.

Following the revolution, which was put down by force, the British appointed a commission to make recommendations for the future of the Anglo-Egyptian relationship. The commission concluded that Britain could not hope to maintain direct control over Egypt and that its interests in the region would be best protected if Britain granted Egypt conditional independence. Thus, in deference, the British abolished the protectorate and declared Egypt independent in 1922. However, this declaration of independence reserved several points, which, as historian Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot puts it, ‘rendered it well nigh void.’

For Wafdist politicians, many of whom trained as lawyers either at the Khedival Law School or the French Law School in Cairo, the idea of independence was

---

7 M.W. Daly, ‘The British Occupation, 1882–1922’ in M.W. Daly, The Cambridge History of Egypt (Cambridge University Press 1998) 239 at 241.
8 Khalid Fahmy and Rudolph Peters, ‘The Legal History of Ottoman Egypt: Introduction’ (1999) 6 (2) Islamic Law and Society 129 at 131.
9 Cleveland and Bunton above note 6 at 99.
10 See Baron, Egypt as a Woman above note 4.
11 As above at 36–37.
12 Cleveland and Bunton above note 6 at 180.
13 As above.
14 Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, A Short History of Modern Egypt (Cambridge University Press 1985) 81.
closely linked to concepts of constitutional liberalism. Once the Egyptian declaration of independence was issued, politicians hastened to promulgate a constitution and establish a parliament. Egypt nonetheless struggled to attain political stability during this period thanks to tensions between early governments, the Egyptian monarchy, and a British administration that remained entrenched in Egyptian affairs.

2.0 CONSTRUCTING THE MOTHERS OF THE FUTURE

2.1 A Politics of Health and Hygiene

A new politics of health emerged in semi-colonial Egypt, couched in the policies of both the British colonial administration and the mostly European-educated Egyptian nationalist elites. While British leadership sought to capture and make Egyptians useful for continued colonial exploitation, the nationalists were determined to show that Egyptians were a civilised and productive people and thereby prove their capacity for independent governance. The groups disagreed on which administration should lead Egypt into the modern era, but the colonialists and nationalists shared a common set of assumptions about the path that should be followed. Lord Cromer wrote that ‘The new generation of Egyptians has to be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of Western civilisation’. Mustafa Kamil, leader of the National Party, echoed Cromer in his writing, claiming that ‘We have known for over a century, that nations can live honourably only if they follow the path of Western civilisation.’ The colonial and nationalist projects thus converged in their desire to reform Egyptians into civilised and productive, i.e. mentally and physically sound citizens for a modern nation.

The teachings of foreign missionaries, work of voluntary social welfare organisations, agendas of professional associations, and writings of the press were also constitutive of the new politics of health in semi-colonial Egypt. These groups linked public health to the various issues that concerned their members, from the status of Egyptian women to the population problem. Missionary sources, for example, reveal a belief that healthy family life was impeded by the structure of the Islamic family, where missionaries claimed the husband ruled despotically over his wife. Linking uncleanliness and poor family health to the oppression and disrespect of women, missionaries thought they could empower women and earn them the respect of their husbands by teaching them

15 Amr Shalakany has traced the rise of an Egyptian legal elite trained at successive iterations of what was known during this period as the Khedival Law School. He writes that graduates of the institution came to monopolise the leadership of the early-twentieth-century Egyptian nationalist movement and succeeded in hitching the nationalist project to a “liberal legality” project of political and economic governance. Amr Shalakany, “I Heard It All Before”: Egyptian Tales of Law and Development (2006) 27(5) Third World Quarterly 833.

16 See Zachary Lockman, ‘Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899–1914’ (1994) 15(2) Poetics Today 157.

17 The Earl of Cromer, 2 Modern Egypt (Macmillan 1916) 538.

18 Abd al-Rahman al-Raf’i, Mustafa Kamil Ba’ith al-Haraka al-Wataniyya: Tarikh Misr al-Qawmi min Sanat 1892 ila Sanat 1908, (Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyya 1962) 215.
principles of personal hygiene and domestic cleanliness. Missionaries also linked conceptions of personal hygiene and domestic cleanliness to moral and religious purity.\textsuperscript{19}

The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, a prominent British women’s organisation whose objective was to promote a high standard of morality and sexual responsibility in public opinion, legislation, and social practice and which operated in Egypt during the period, tied their mission to public health as well.\textsuperscript{20} One of the association’s members commented on the ‘disastrous lack of decent sanitation and hygiene’ in Egypt in a private letter written in 1930. She claimed that ‘what is obviously needed is a general levelling up of sanitary conditions for everyone,’ and concluded, ‘It is obviously a hopeless task to hope to improve Egyptian moral conditions if its present social conditions are not drastically changed.’\textsuperscript{21} Here, uncleanliness is again linked to moral impurity.

A concern that reoccurs significantly throughout the literature of the period is the tremendously high rate of infant mortality in Egypt. British colonial public health officials, who measured and reported the infant mortality rate in annual reports from the Department of Public Health, defined infant mortality as the death of infants and children from birth to 10 years of age.\textsuperscript{22} American traveller Elizabeth Cooper was told before the war that 65% of children born in Egypt died before their third birthday.\textsuperscript{23} A report published in 1921 by the Public Health Department on the state of public health in Egypt from 1914 to 1918 does not substantiate this but does, nonetheless, reflect a high infant mortality rate. According to the report, ‘over one quarter of the children born in the 20 principal towns never reach the first anniversary of their birth.’\textsuperscript{24} After the war, the infant mortality rate was reportedly 37% throughout Egypt, causing one doctor to remark that ‘women give birth uselessly one time in every three’.\textsuperscript{25} Nearly two decades later, in 1937, infant mortality was estimated to account for 65% of all deaths in Egypt.\textsuperscript{26} The rate of infant mortality during this period surpassed those of infectious diseases, accidents, and other causes of mortality combined.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{19} Samir Boulos, “‘A Clean Heart Likes Clean Clothes’: Cleanliness Customs and Conversion in Egypt (1900–1956)’ (2010) 21(4) Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 315 at 321.
\textsuperscript{20} Francesca Biancani, Sex Work in Colonial Egypt: Women, Modernity and the Global Economy (Bloomsbury Publishing 2018) 142.
\textsuperscript{21} Letter to Miss Higson (23 January 1930) 3AMS/D/13/01 Egypt 1921–1950 on file with the London School of Economics Women’s Library).
\textsuperscript{22} Baron, ‘Perilous Beginnings’ above note 4 at 196.
\textsuperscript{23} Elizabeth Cooper, The Women of Egypt (Frederick A. Stokes Company 1914) 294. Cooper was a professional writer who travelled to research and write a series of books on women. For more on Cooper and her time in Egypt see Reina Lewis and Nancy Micklewright, Gender, Modernity, and Liberty: Middle Eastern and Western Women’s Writing: A Critical Sourcebook (I.B. Tauris 2006) 156–163.
\textsuperscript{24} Ministry of Interior Annual Report (23 February 1921) FO 141/586/4 (on file with the British National Archives) 21.
\textsuperscript{25} Quoted in Baron, The Women’s Awakening above note 4 at 160.
\textsuperscript{26} Omnia el Shakry, ‘Barren Land and Fecund Bodies: The Emergence of Population Discourse in Interwar Egypt’ (2005) 37(3) International Journal of Middle East Studies 351 at 359.
\textsuperscript{27} Baron, ‘Perilous Beginnings’ above note 4 at 196.
Most medical specialists in Egypt at the time attributed the high rate of infant mortality to gastroenteritis, which was commonly known as ‘summer diarrhoea.’ The Department of Public Health Report for 1909 found that ‘summer diarrhoea’ was likely caused by ‘a variety of bacillary growths, stimulated to unwonted activity by the circumstances of temperature and the reduced power of resistance on the part of the victim.’ Victims of summer diarrhoea were, of course, infants, but also adult agricultural workers and others among the fellahin (peasantry), whose work brought them in intimate and repeated contact with microorganisms that thrived in irrigation canals and drains and caused intestinal disease.

A spike in the incidence of intestinal diseases caused by parasites and bacteria in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries corresponded to a doubling in Egypt’s cotton production. The increase in production was thanks to British colonial interference, which sought to reorient the Egyptian economy to serve the interests of Britain and other core economies. The provision of water necessary for increasing cotton production was not accompanied by commensurate improvements in drainage, which led to the widespread incidence of ailments like gastroenteritis, bilharzia, hookworm, and malaria.

While Egyptians grew sicker as a result of British meddling, the British administration insisted on maintaining a balanced budget and prioritising the repayment of Egyptian debts to Europe. Only minimal expenditures were spared for Egyptian health and welfare. What little money the British colonial administration did spend on health and welfare in Egypt, it spent in the interest of preventing the spread of diseases that could affect the British occupation forces or colonial families. Non-infectious ailments like gastroenteritis were not prioritised.

The colonial regime was also ambivalent about addressing the high infant mortality rate because it was an issue that mainly concerned Egyptians. W.P.G. Graham, the Director-General of the Egyptian Department of Public Health, wrote in the Department of Public Health Annual Report for 1910 that the issue of infant mortality was ‘excessively complex,’ and that the government’s actions ‘should be directed to avoiding any serious disturbance of the balance between the birth-rate and the death-rate.’ Concerned at the prospect of population growth should the infant mortality rate be reduced, Graham argued that it was better to encourage Egyptians to develop ‘such qualities as shall better fit them to face the more strenuous conditions of life which would inevitably ensue as the population grew more crowded in the land and competition for existence more keen.’

---

28 As above at 197, 204.
29 As above at 197.
30 See Jennifer L. Derr, The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt (Stanford University Press 2019) 99–126; Mohamed Gamal-Eldin, ‘Cesspools, Mosquitos and Fever: An Environmental History of Malaria Prevention in Ismailia and Port Said, 1869–1910’ in Onur Inal and Yavuz Kose, Seeds of Power: Explorations in Ottoman Environmental History (White Horse Press 2019) 184.
31 Roger Owen and Sevket Pamuk, A History of Middle East Economies in the Twentieth Century (IB Tauris 1998) 30–33.
32 Baron, ‘Perilous Beginnings’ above note 4 at 200.
33 Quoted in above at 200.
34 As above.
A decade later, in 1921, the Department of Public Health reported that a meagre number of children’s dispensaries and maternity schools had been opened by locals in Egypt but noted ‘an urgent necessity of encouraging and increasing children [sic] dispensaries and maternity homes’ to further address the infant mortality rate.\(^{35}\) Despite recognising the need for services, the British high commissioner maintained that ‘A general provision of [services] by the State … would impose too great a financial burden upon the Government, and this local need must fall to be met by local effort.’\(^{36}\)

While the colonial health regime spared no expense and expressed little care to address the infant mortality rate in early-twentieth-century Egypt, colonial officials and other foreigners often speculated about its causes. Graham posited that Egyptian infants often fell ill because their mothers left them on the floor of houses or on the ground outside, where they were exposed to ‘organic soiling and which may very readily be specifically contaminated with intestinal germ life, in consequence of the lack of sanitary provisions, the absence of effective conservancy, and the long-acustomed habits of the people.’\(^{37}\) Infant mortality was thus linked to uncleanliness.

Like Graham, Cooper also wrote that ignorant mothers did not bathe their infants for eight to forty days after birth and dressed their children in rags. She lamented that such conditions rendered childhood in Egypt ‘absolutely a survival of the fittest.’ ‘One often marvels,’ Cooper wrote, ‘that any children live at all.’\(^{38}\) Graham and Cooper, in both cases, placed the blame for sick infants with their mothers, who had purportedly failed to care for their children by either placing them on the ground or bathing and dressing them improperly.

2.2 Constructing Mothers

The supposed shortcomings of Egyptian women had long been a popular talking point among British colonial administrators. Writing in 1908, Lord Cromer expressed his belief that ‘The position of women in Egypt’ was ‘a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of European civilisation’.\(^{39}\) When Harry Boyle, Lord Cromer’s Oriental Secretary, penned a memorandum on the background of the Khedival family, he variously described the women of the family as lesbians, alcoholics, and keepers of chaotic and disorderly homes.\(^{40}\) According to the colonialists, the backwardness of Egyptian women evidenced the innate inferiority of the Egyptian people, the inability of Egyptian men to govern Egyptian women justly, and the need for the British civilising project to interfere. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, ‘Imperialism’s image

\(^{35}\) Ministry of Interior above note 24 at 21.

\(^{36}\) Quoted in Beth Baron, ‘Women’s Voluntary Social Welfare Organizations in Egypt’ in Inger Marie Okkenhaug & Ingvild Flakerud, Gender, Religion, and Change in the Middle East: Two Hundred Years of History (Berg 2005) 85 at 90.

\(^{37}\) Quoted in Baron, ‘Perilous Beginnings’ above note 4 at 198.

\(^{38}\) Cooper above note 23 at 272.

\(^{39}\) The Earl of Cromer above note 17 at 539.

\(^{40}\) Clara Asch Boyle, Boyle of Cairo: A Diplomatist’s Adventures in the Middle East (T. Wilson 1965) 41–42.
as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind. 41

The colonised intelligentsia did not seem to disagree with the reputed backwardness of Egyptian women, but they pointed to the concept of the potential educability of backward peoples, rather than innate inferiority, to support their modernising project. The many faults of Egyptian women were a significant theme in the writing of Qasim Amin, an Egyptian jurist and writer who published several works on women in Egypt at the turn of the century. 42 In his book The New Woman (al-Mar’a al-Jadida), published in 1900, Qasim Amin described the general opinion of women in Egypt as ‘inferior due to their mental deficiencies, their low status in religion, and their primary role as temptresses and agents for the Devil’. 43 He wrote that Egyptian women must cultivate their minds, refine their manners, and gradually gain their rights, thereby following in the footsteps of Western women. 44

Qasim Amin principally criticised veiling, seclusion, and early marriage and advocated for the education of women, their incorporation into public life, and reform of personal status law. His ideas were widely discussed among the Egyptian intelligentsia in the early-twentieth century. Salama Musa, a prominent Egyptian intellectual and journalist, later reflected in his autobiography that there were two subjects that he and his colleagues had discussed more than anything else during his time at the Khedival College from 1903 to 1908. These topics were ‘the English occupation and Qasim Amin’s movement for the liberation of women’. The students discussed these topics, he wrote, because ‘they concerned the whole of Egyptian society’. 45 Women journalists commonly engaged with the works of Qasim Amin in the press as well, which Juan Ricardo Cole notes is evidence of solidarity among intellectuals of the upper class across gender lines. 46

Discussions of women’s backwardness tangled with anxieties over public health and hygiene in Egypt during the period, such that discussions of their backwardness became discussions of their uncleanness, disorderliness, and poor hygiene. Labiba Hashim, the editor of a popular women’s journal published in Egypt, argued in 1911 that ‘the ignorance of mothers of the principles of hygiene’ was one of

41 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg, Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (University of Illinois Press 1988) 271 at 299.
42 Many have offered criticisms of Qasim Amin and questioned the characterisation of his works as feminist, showing, instead, their links to a colonial modernising project. See Mitchell above note 4 at 111–113; Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate (Yale University Press 1993). 144–163. For an exploration of the predicament Qasim Amin found himself in at the time of his writing, see Murad Idris, ‘Colonial Hesitation, Appropriation, and Citation: Qasim Amin, Empire, and Saying “No”’ in Burke A. Hendrix and Deborah Baumgold, Colonial Exchanges: Political Theory and the Agency of the Colonised (Manchester University Press 2017) 180.
43 Qasim Amin, The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism (trans Samiha Sidhom Peterson) (American University in Cairo Press 1995) 115.
44 As above at 116.
45 Salama Musa & L.O. Schuman, The Education of Salama Musa (trans L.O. Schuman) (Brill 1961) 29.
46 Juan Ricardo Cole, ‘Feminism, Class, and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt’ (1981) 13(4) International Journal of Middle East Studies 387 at 402.
Egypt’s central problems. Qasim Amin wrote on this, too, claiming that ‘the number of children killed by ignorant women every year exceeds the number of people who die in the most brutal wars’. ‘Through their ignorance about health or hygiene issues’, he reasoned, women ‘bring sickness and chronic diseases upon their children, which place a heavy burden on them for the rest of their lives’.

The portrayal of poor women as ignorant and the resulting focus on reforming mothers and families worked to obscure the pernicious health effects of poverty and environmental hazards, which were aggravated by an uneven distribution of landed property, worsened under British administration. Omnia el Shakry notes this, writing that prominent establishment figures kept with their landowning-class interests by shifting blame to tangential issues. Parliamentarians, large landowners, and other elites engaged in clichéd discussions linking poverty to disease and disease to ignorance and established charitable organisations to address these issues while protecting their interests.

While Egyptian reformists like Qasim Amin advocated for the education of all women as a cure for their ignorance, Western observers were sceptical of the educability of poorer classes of Egyptians. Cooper wrote, for example, that Lord Herbert Kitchener, the British consul-general in Egypt from 1911 to 1914, sent thousands of pamphlets to villages instructing mothers in the proper treatment of children before the war, but the fellahin could not read them. When Cooper explained the pamphlets’ purpose to a woman in one of the villages, the woman reportedly laughed and suggested that Lord Kitchener send a town crier with each bundle of leaflets. If anyone in the village could read the pamphlets, they were reluctant to do so because, Cooper explains, the villagers shared a general ‘dislike of anything the British government might do.’ Cooper portrays those in the village as unable or, at least, reluctant to learn and concludes that ignorance is an Egyptian ‘handicap.’

Women were simultaneously being recast as the central figure in shaping the child and tending the home. Within the Islamic religious establishment, there was a recognisable shift in the focus and audience of literature dealing with child rearing issues beginning in the late-nineteenth century. Most of the earlier literature on the topic had been addressed to the father as the foremost parental authority. This focus reflected a legal reality, which held that fathers were responsible for supporting their children and children belonged to their father. In divorce cases, mothers were vested with caretaking responsibilities until children reached a certain age, but then custody was transferred to the father. If the father died, his family took guardianship of the children. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century, however, women were addressed more directly. Mothers began to become the central parental authority in religious texts. Scores of other books and articles were also published on the

---

47 Quoted in el Shakry above note 4 at 158.
48 Qasim Amin above note 43 at 162.
49 El Shakry above note 26 at 353.
50 Cooper above note 23 at 294-297.
51 See Avner Giladi, Children of Islam: Concepts of Childhood in Medieval Muslim Society (Springer 1992) 42–68.
52 Ahmed Fekry Ibrahim, Child Custody in Islamic Law: Theory and Practice in Egypt since the Sixteenth Century (Cambridge University Press 2018) 165–191.
central role of women within the family during the period. These included translations of earlier works, including *Healthcare of the Pregnant, the Postpartum, and the Infant* (Tadbir Sihhat al-Hamil wa-l-Nafsa’ wa-l-Tifl) and *Advice for Mothers* (Nasihat li-l-Ummahat), which schools purchased for inclusion in their curricula, plus a flood of original works.53

The cornerstone of a new institution of motherhood was laid here, at the intersection of popular representations of women as ignorant, anxieties over public health, and a reorientation of the Egyptian family. The new institution transcended class, but its components had different class origins and were disseminated to different classes of women via different means. Wealthier Egyptian women read about motherhood in a thriving women’s press comprised of a series of mostly monthly Arabic periodicals. Baron writes that journals published by, for, and about women grew in popularity and number, beginning with Hind Nawfal’s *The Young Woman* (al-Fata), which appeared in Alexandria in 1892. Women’s journals were issued in Egypt at an average rate of one per year from that point through World War I. These journals were aimed at a wealthy audience, at least partly because wealthy women were more likely to be able to read them, as literacy rates among women in Egypt at the time were very low.54

The women’s press helped create a new body of literature on motherhood, which argued that raising children was a job that should not be neglected nor delegated to servants or relatives. This literature condemned the widespread practice of giving infants to a wet nurse. Writers cautioned that wet nursing might be dangerous. Printed reports of the accidental death of infants suffocated by their wet nurses while both slept strengthened the effect of the writers’ warnings.55 Rosa Antun, the editor of the popular women’s journal *The Women and the Girls* (al-Sayyidat w-l-Banat), wrote in 1903 that although some women ‘brag about not nursing their children themselves, there is nothing in this custom to boast about.’56

Women in the middle classes may have been discouraged from giving their infants to wet nurses as an economising measure as well, as wet nurses may have been difficult to find and expensive at the time.57 Writers suggested various personal remedies for women who were unable to nurse. Female intellectuals also condemned the practice of wet nursing because they claimed it weakened the bond between mother and child when those bonds ought to be fortified.58 This emerging body of literature sought to celebrate motherhood and imbue it with a new dignity. Motherhood was to be understood by Egyptian women as their duty but also as a great reward.

While women of the upper classes were instructed not to neglect the duties associated with motherhood, poorer women were characterised as ignorant of them. As new responsibilities came to be accepted as common knowledge among the wealthier

53 Baron, *The Women’s Awakening* above note 4 at 158–159.
54 Beth Baron, ‘Readers and the Women’s Press in Egypt’ (1994) 15(2) Poetics Today 217 at 218–220.
55 Baron, *The Women’s Awakening* above note 4 at 163.
56 Quoted in above at 161.
57 Huda Sha’rawi, *The Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, 1879–1924* (trans Margot Badran) (Feminist Press at the City University of New York 1987) 86.
58 Baron, *The Women’s Awakening* above note 4 at 161.
classes, it was reasoned that those who did not perform them must be ignorant of them or at least irresponsible. The journals that wealthier women subscribed to propagated the idea that maternal ignorance was rampant among the poorer classes. For example, Malak Hifni Nasif, a prominent contributor to the women’s press during the period, often under her pseudonym, Searcher in the Desert (Bahithat al-Badiya), expressed concern in her writing that only educated women could imbue children with appropriate values. She cautioned her readers against allowing peasant servant women to tend to their children because she claimed they were not sophisticated enough to do so.\(^{59}\) This conditioning led to the foundation of several elite women’s voluntary social welfare organisations, which played a significant role in enforcing the new expectations of motherhood on poorer classes of women.\(^{60}\)

### 3.0 Legal Constructions of Motherhood

#### 3.1 In Labour Law

Anna Davin, writing on motherhood in turn-of-the-century Britain, argues that emphasis on the importance of women not neglecting the duties associated with motherhood was related to a belief that middle- and upper-class women were prioritising the pursuit of new opportunities in education and employment or otherwise restricting their number of children.\(^{61}\) While it is difficult to identify trends in earlier census data, Egyptian women indeed began entering the waged workforce in large numbers during the interwar period as Egypt underwent rapid industrialisation.\(^{62}\) Women’s labour became an essential feature of a burgeoning spinning and weaving industry in Egypt after the war, and women were employed in large numbers at several textile mills at Shubra al-Khayma and the spinning and weaving complex at al-Mahalla al-Kubra, which was opened in 1927.\(^{63}\) Even as women entered the workforce during this period, there remained an expectation that motherhood and the performance of wage labour were mutually exclusive. This can be gleaned from contemporary discussions surrounding the drafting of new labour law.

The expansion of factory labour in Egypt was met with calls from workers for new labour legislation. The Egyptian Parliament responded in 1931 by forming a committee — the Committee of the Interior and Health Affairs (Taqrir Lajnat al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-Shu’un al-Sihhiyya) — to make recommendations for a draft labour law.\(^{64}\) This committee worked alongside a representative from the International Labour

---

\(^{59}\) Quoted in Thomas Phillip, ‘Feminism and Nationalist Politics in Egypt’ in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Muslim World* (Harvard University Press 1978) 277 at 283.

\(^{60}\) See Baron above note 36.

\(^{61}\) Anna Davin, ‘Imperialism and Motherhood’ (1978) 5 *History Workshop* 9 at 14.

\(^{62}\) See Hammad above note 4.

\(^{63}\) As above at 6. See also Judith Tucker, ‘Egyptian Women in the Workforce: An Historical Survey’ (1976) 50 *MERIP Reports* 3.

\(^{64}\) Taqrir Lajnat al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-Shu’un al-Sihhiyya, ‘‘An Mashru’ al-Qanun al-Khash bi-Wad’ Nizam li-Tashghil al-Ahdath min al-Dhukur wa-l-Inath’ in 1 *Mahar al-Jalsa al-Khamsa wa-l-Ishrin li-Majlis al-Nuwaab* (1933) 340 (cites the expansion of factory labour as a reason for the formation of the committee).
Organization (ILO), a man named Harold Butler, who was dispatched to Egypt to report on labour conditions and make recommendations for new legislation on behalf of the organisation. Butler arrived in Cairo in 1932.65

Both the Egyptian government and the ILO were concerned with ensuring the health and longevity of the Egyptian workforce, which, in turn, relied on ensuring the reproduction of labour(ers) occurring within the family. Paradoxically, however, neither group initially prioritised maternity provisions in their recommendations for the new labour law. Butler explained in a report in 1932 that adopting maternity provisions in the new labour code struck him as superfluous because so few married women were employed in Egypt at the time. He wrote that it remained customary for women to cease employment when they married.66 The groups instead prioritised the reduction and regulation of working hours for both women and children. Women and children were grouped in discussions, with the implication that the groups were similarly capable and required a similar level of protection and supervision.

The Egyptian Committee of the Interior and Health Affairs’ rapporteur, a trained medical doctor, named Abd al-Aziz Nazmi, often framed child welfare as a matter of national importance.67 In 1910, for example, at a Conference on the Protection of Children hosted by the Khedival Society for Political Economy, Statistics, and Legislation in Cairo, Dr Nazmi told his audience that ‘It is in the interest of everyone, as well as their obligation to participate in actions to save children … [and] to fight infant mortality which annihilates the nation.’68 He made a similar argument on the Committee of the Interior and Health Affairs more than 20 years later, insisting that women in the labour force needed to be protected because they were responsible for raising ‘the men of the future,’ who were ‘the pillar of the nation’s fortune.’69 Butler also privileged the role of Egyptian women as mothers by referring to them as ‘young wives to be’ in his reports.70

When the Egyptian Parliament passed Law No. 80 on the Regulation of Women in Industry and Commercial Establishments in 1933 following the work of the ILO and parliamentary committee, it included some protections for pregnant women and nursing mothers. It required women to take one month off before childbirth and another 15 days after childbirth. It also forbade employers from dismissing women during their maternity leave.71 Employers that did not want to accommodate

---

65 Mai Taha, ‘Reading “Class” in International Law: The Labor Question in Interwar Egypt’ (2016) 25(5) Social & Legal Studies 567 at 578.
66 As above at 580.
67 Dr Nazmi trained in France at the turn of the century as part of an Egyptian mission, and upon his return to Egypt in 1903, began to research the high rate of infant mortality in the country. He published numerous articles and gave talks on the significance of the cleanliness of infants’ clothing and surroundings and proper hygiene for mothers and infants throughout his career. See Baron, ‘Perilous Beginnings’ above note 4 at 202; Mine Ener, Managing Egypt’s Poor and the Politics of Benevolence, 1800–1952 (Princeton University Press 2003) 109–110.
68 Quoted in Ener above at 109.
69 Taqrir Lajnat al-Dakhiliyya wa-l-Shu’un al-Sihhiyya above note 64 at 386.
70 Quoted in Taha above note 65 at 580.
71 Badran above note 4 at 174; See also Joel Beinin & Zachary Lockman, Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954 (American University in Cairo Press 1998) 205.
pregnant or nursing mothers, however, simply refused to hire married women and
took to dismissing women who did not leave their positions voluntarily after mar-
riage.\textsuperscript{72} While the law prohibited employers from firing women during maternity
leave, there were no other limitations on their ability to dismiss an employee.\textsuperscript{73}
This environment made plain that while young unmarried women could join the
workforce, they were welcome there only as long as they remained ‘young wives to
be.’ They were expected to mature, marry, and leave the workforce to become
mothers, at which point they would work instead in their homes to ensure the
health of their children and the nation’s future. Rather than ensuring the rights of
women entering the Egyptian labour force, Law No. 80 of 1933 thus circumscribed
their opportunities and offered no real protection from termination for those who
wished to continue working after marriage.

\subsection*{3.2 In Personal Status Law}

In March 1914, assembly member Zakariya Bey Namiq proposed a bill on marital
issues to the Legislative Assembly. Changes to personal status law were, at the
time, a source of great public controversy as matters of personal status — family
matters and domestic relations — remained within the jurisdiction of the \textit{shari’a} in
Egypt and many Muslim jurists and laypeople alike were opposed to reinterpreting
the law.\textsuperscript{74} The bill that Zakariya Bey proposed comprised several recommendations,
but a proposal to make 16 the minimum age at which girls could legally marry gar-
nered particular attention. The existing law contained no provision regarding the
age at which a girl could marry, and it was the norm at the time for women of all
classes in Egypt to marry around the age of puberty.\textsuperscript{75} Zakariya Bey’s proposal
came after some women had called for a minimum marriageable age to be established
in the press.\textsuperscript{76}

Following Zakariya Bey’s proposal, reporters and readers alike offered their
opinions on the appropriate age of marriage in the press. Some offered their own
legal proposals. A significant portion of the arguments in support of the proposal
relied on medical rationale. Many argued that girls who married too young were
prone to dangerous or even fatal pregnancies and diseases. Malak Hifni Nasif
made this argument, writing that many girls who married at a young age developed
‘diseases of the nerves’ or hysteria.\textsuperscript{77} Zakariya Bey also believed that women who
married too soon risked their health, and he consulted several doctors before deter-
mining that 16 was a suitable age and specifying it in his proposal.\textsuperscript{78}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{72} Hammad above note 4 at 92.
\item\textsuperscript{73} Badran above note 1 at 174.
\item\textsuperscript{74} Farhat Ziadeh, \textit{Lawyers, the Rule of Law and Liberalism in Modern Egypt} (Hoover Institution
Press 1968) 116.
\item\textsuperscript{75} Badran above note 1 at 127; Cuno above note 4 at 130–131.
\item\textsuperscript{76} Baron, \textit{The Women’s Awakening} above note 4 at 33.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Quoted in Beth Baron, \textit{The Making and Breaking of Marital Bonds in Egypt} in Beth Baron & Nikki
R. Keddie, \textit{Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender} (1991) 275
at 281.
\item\textsuperscript{78} Kholoussy, ‘The Nationalization of Marriage’ above note 4 at 320–321.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Another significant portion of the arguments in support of the proposal took a more nationalist approach and argued that women should not marry too young because mature women were better suited to producing and rearing the future citizens of the Egyptian nation. In their response to the proposal, the editors of *al-Ahram* wrote, ‘a strong nation can only be built from a large, well-raised, educated offspring and such offspring can only be formed by mature mothers. The nation needs mature women, not girls.’ A similar rationale regarding the need for mature mothers was employed by contemporary reformists like Qasim Amin, as they advocated for women’s education.

The bill proposed by Zakariya Bey in 1914 was met with such significant criticism from the Islamic religious establishment that he was forced to retract it. Muslim authorities found no basis in Islamic law for establishing a minimum marriageable age because the Prophet Muhammad had married his third wife, ‘A’isha, before she reached puberty. Many Muslim medical doctors even refused medical findings that concluded that early marriage was dangerous.

While Zakariya Bey’s 1914 proposal failed, the general public remained invested in the matter. Less than a decade later, in 1923, the newly established EFU petitioned the government for a legal provision establishing 16 as the minimum legal marriageable age for women. Law No. 56 of that year fixed the minimum marriageable age at 16 for women and 18 for men. The EFU celebrated this as a great success, but the law proved difficult to enforce. The courts responsible for issuing marriage licenses were initially happy to accept verbal testimony in place of a birth certificate to verify a woman’s age. The EFU and its allies insisted that birth certificates be produced, and if that were impossible, they proposed that a woman’s age should be verified through a series of two medical examinations performed by government doctors. Thus, a law whose stated purpose was the protection of young women led to their being forcibly subjected to the state medical apparatus in new ways.

When medical examinations became a requirement, doctors were accused of knowingly falsifying women’s ages in their reports. Many marriages also went unregistered for years or altogether to evade the minimum marriageable age outlined in the decree. The Egyptian government attempted to address shortcomings in earlier legislation with the passage of Law No. 78 of 1931, which consolidated the provisions issued in 1923 and further stipulated that courts could not entertain claims of disputed marriages unless those marriages were registered. Two years later, Law No. 44 of 1933 made it possible to prosecute doctors or witnesses who falsely verified a woman’s age to obtain a marriage license.

Opinions that a minimum marriageable age should be codified reflected a desire to ensure the maturity of mothers. Those who supported the legislation expressed two

---

79 Quoted in above at 321.
80 See, generally, Amin above note 43.
81 Kholoussy, ‘The Nationalization of Marriage’ above note 4 at 321.
82 Badran, above note 1 at 127–128.
83 As above at 128.
84 Cuno, above note 4 at 140.
85 Kholoussy, ‘The Nationalization of Marriage’ above note 4 at 323.
motivations for ensuring the maturity of mothers based on medical and pseudo-medical nationalist rationale. Those who made the former argument claimed that women who married and became pregnant at too young an age risked their physical or mental health or that of their children. Others argued that mothers must be sufficiently mature not only to ensure the health and welfare of their children but to raise them to be educable and successful. Both arguments prioritised the role of women as mothers and emphasised their central role in the rearing of children.

While the debate over the appropriate minimum age of marriage raged in the press, less controversial reforms were codified in Personal Status Law No. 25 of 1920. While these reforms did not elicit the same level of public discussion, they were no less significant in shaping the new institution of motherhood and reshaping the Egyptian family. In particular, Article 9 of Law No. 25 sought to ensure the health of the family unit. This article granted a wife the legal right to divorce her husband if he contracted a serious and incurable ailment. Unlike later provisions that gave women greater access to divorce, this provision did not emerge from a women’s rights discourse nor as a result of organised women’s lobbying. It came instead from a growing Egyptian interest in the contemporary eugenics movement.

El Shakry explains that, in the Egyptian context, eugenics was not discussed as a racial issue but as an issue of removing what were understood as physical and mental defects from the population. It emphasised positive eugenics — encouraging the reproduction of the fit rather than the extermination of the unfit. This approach is evident in Article 9 of Law No. 25, which names leprosy, insanity, and skin diseases as ailments that merit a woman’s right to divorce her husband. With Article 9 of Law No. 25, legislators sought to ensure the production of physically and mentally fit children and the development of sound families to serve as the foundation for the modern Egyptian nation.

The growing Egyptian interest in eugenics also inspired widespread calls to require men and women to undergo medical examinations before marriage. In a letter to the editor published in *al-Ahram* in 1914, a man condemned families that allowed their ailing and incurable children to marry and called on the government to adopt a law requiring couples to attest that they were not afflicted with any disease before marriage for the sake of their children. He referenced similar policies that were in place in the United States to support his argument.

Dr Abd al-Wahid al-Wakil similarly wrote in 1931 that medical examinations should be required for couples before marriage to ensure their health and the absence of diseases, especially venereal diseases. He noted that it was too soon to consider contraceptives in Egypt, despite that being a popular topic of discussion.

---

86 The EFU, which would later lobby for this cause, was not yet founded and would not launch its campaign to reform personal status law until the end of the decade. See Kholoussy ‘Monitoring and Medicalising Male Sexuality’ above note 5 at 682. On the EFU’s later efforts to ‘[demand] women’s rights’ see Arafa above note 2 at 29–32.
87 See Kholoussy as above.
88 Omnia el Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford University Press 2007) 170.
89 Ilyas al-Ghadban, ‘Zawaj al-mu’ tallin wa-hal min al-imkan man’uhu?’ *al-Ahram* 21 March 1914.
90 Abd al-Wahid al-Wakil, ‘Hal na’mad ila tahdid al-nasl?’ *al-Hilal* December, 1931.
in Europe at the time. He argued that medical examinations before marriage were a better alternative. Dr Wakil became the Egyptian Minister of Health in 1942. While he died suddenly of typhoid in 1944 after serving only a short term, his ideas strongly influenced the ministry’s future.  

Dr Abd al-Rahman Awad also drew up a proposal to require medical examinations for couples before marriage, and it was sent to the senate in 1928. The proposal was initially tabled but then seriously considered in 1941 when it was resubmitted with revisions from the Ministry of Health under Minister of Health Dr Ali Ibrahim Pasha.  

An article published in the *Journal of the Ministry of Social Affairs* in April of that year argued that the new law would protect future generations of the nation. The bill was not passed. If it had been, however, it would have again represented a supposed modernising reform whose result was the forced subjection of Egyptians to a growing state medical apparatus and their classification therein.

Those who called for couples to undergo medical examinations before marriage sought to ensure the mental and physical health of Egyptian families. This same desire led to the drafting and promulgation of Article 9 of Law No. 25, which granted a wife the right to seek a divorce if her husband had an intellectual disability or contracted a skin disease or other serious and incurable ailment at a time when women in Egypt had limited other access to divorce. That they were granted the right to seek a divorce to protect the health of their children reflects the idea that motherhood was their duty and that mothers were expected to take a central role in ensuring the mental and physical health of their children, the family unit, and the Egyptian nation.

### 4.0 Conclusion

This article has shown that a new institution of motherhood was constructed and concretised through medicolegal discourse and legal reforms in semi-colonial Egypt, using examples of reforms in labour and personal status law.

Discussions surrounding the drafting of new labour legislation during the interwar period show that the role of women as mothers was privileged. Even as Egypt underwent rapid industrialisation in the interwar period, there remained a widespread opinion that motherhood and the performance of wage labour should remain mutually exclusive to ensure the health of Egyptian children. New labour law promulgated in 1933 to ostensibly ensure the rights of women entering the workforce instead circumscribed their opportunities and offered no real protection from termination for those who wished to continue working after marriage.

A series of controversial personal status law reforms show that lawmakers sought to ensure the maturity of mothers and the mental and physical health of the Egyptian family above all else. With the establishment of a minimum legal marriageable age for

---

91 Nancy Elizabeth Gallagher, *Egypt’s Other Wars: Epidemics and the Politics of Public Health* (Syracuse University Press 1990) 89.

92 El Shakry above note 88 at 173.

93 El Shakry notes that while this article was attributed only to ‘S.Q.,’ it’s likely that Sayyid Qutb penned it. He was a regular contributor to the journal, as above at 276.
girls in 1923, proponents argued that they were protecting women and increasing the likelihood that they would raise successful and productive children. Efforts to enforce the law, however, led to young Egyptian women being forcibly subjected to a growing state medical apparatus in new ways.

This article has also shown how discussions among colonial administrators, early Egyptian parliamentarians and other lawmakers, and elite Egyptian and foreign women, many of whom understood their work as a feminist undertaking, were echoed in the press, education, and medical and social welfare institutions during the period. The new level of attention to motherhood among these and other groups in the name of reducing the infant mortality rate and rearing a modern nation coalesced to construct, concretise, and enforce new standards of maternal and infant hygiene, domestic cleanliness, and childrearing. These new standards and their enforcement led to the capture, classification, and disciplining of Egyptian women in more ways than ever before.

This work has endeavoured to reveal modernisation as a dialectical process through its exploration of the new institution of motherhood constructed in semi-colonial Egypt. It has shown how women, as those who are expected to (re)produce future generations and, therefore, the nation-state itself, are central to this process. The reading of women as vectors of a pernicious process of modernisation should not be interpreted as a dismissal of their agency but rather as an acknowledgement of their remarkable power.