

A Decade before Bandung

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Inji Efflatoun in Cairo, c. 1940s
(Image courtesy of Safarkhan Art Gallery, Cairo)

1 Patrick Kane and Salwa Mikdadi, “Inji Efflatoun”, in *Oxford Bibliographies in Islamic Studies*, accessed 4 April 2024, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0290.xml>.
2 Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995), 238–245. As cited in Elisabeth Armstrong, “Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women’s Movement in Asia and the Women’s International Democratic Federation”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 2 (2016): 305–331 (319).
3 Inji Efflatoun, *80 Million Women Stand with Us* (Cairo: Dar al-Fajr, 1948), 13. Author’s own translation from Arabic.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 12.
6 Armstrong, “Before Bandung”, 313.
7 Efflatoun, *80 Million Women Stand with Us*, 15.

In November 1945, at the age of 21, Inji Efflatoun boarded a flight with activist Safiyya Fadel and writer Souad Zuhair al-Ramly as the Kingdom of Egypt’s official delegates to the International Congress of Women that took place in Paris in November and December of 1945. The French capital had been liberated from the Nazi occupation only fifteen months prior to the Congress, and World War II had just ended in the Pacific the previous summer. Efflatoun, who was a fluent French speaker,¹ led the Egyptian delegation and delivered the official remarks on their behalf. During the conference, Efflatoun would give a momentous speech staking out an anti-imperialist position coupled with deep-rooted feminism that not only resonated with women in her own country but throughout the colonised world, namely in Africa and Asia. That speech would later be expanded into a book, and Efflatoun would continue to articulate its ideals in later speeches, as well as in her artworks. This coupling of feminism and anti-imperialism was a timely combination in the mid-1940s as scholars have noted. For instance, gender studies scholar Margot Badran describes “the emergence of a pan-Arab feminism in 1944 in the International Alliance of Women’s refusal to confront imperialism as a women’s issue”.² Efflatoun’s insistence on intertwining feminist and anti-imperialist thought in her speech could be seen as part of the “emergence” of this trend.
In *80 Million Women Stand with Us*, originally written in 1948 and issued by Dar al-Fajr Publishing, Efflatoun opens by clarifying the rationale behind holding the International Congress of Women in Paris (**see p. 138**). She writes,

After the end of World War II, with the efforts made by women and the sorrows and pain we witnessed, the women of the world felt their urgent need to make an organised effort and to meet in a conference in which we would discuss their problems and consult on the means of struggle necessary to maintain peace and democracy.³

Efflatoun praises the “great role”⁴ that women played in the advancement of socialism and angrily criticises capitalism, fascism, colonialism, and imperialism. Notably, her explicit support for democracy on behalf of subjugated “Eastern”⁵ men and women anticipates—by a decade—similar notions that infused the discourse of the Bandung Conference (Asian-African Conference) in 1955. “East” was not only a cardinal-geographical term but also one used to denote colonised areas of the world, including in Asia and Africa. For example, in a letter addressed to an Egyptian Feminist Union-organised conference in Cairo in 1944, Indian activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay implored conference participants to “remember during your deliberations the struggle of India and her participation for the sake of the entire East”.⁶ Other leading feminists, therefore, shared this concept of the “East” as more than a spatial category.

In Efflatoun’s participation, speech, and (later on) in her book, she used the opportunity to underline the particularity of the female experience of colonialism, describing its impact on that vulnerable and often overlooked half of the Egyptian population. Women in Egypt, she writes, “fully understand what colonialism means. Weren’t we too its victims for sixty-five years? Don’t we all despise and resent it?”⁷ She proceeds to highlight the evils of fascism and colonialism, from the murder of Jewish babies in Poland to the Bengal famine of 1943 that plagued India under British rule. In contrast, she underlines the role that women played during the war effort that resulted in the Allied countries’



International Congress of Women, Paris, Maison de la Mutualité, November 1945 (Image courtesy of Galerie Roger-Viollet)

victory, noting that 18 million women took part in the war effort in the US, a further nine million in Britain, eight million in France, and 20 million women in the USSR. Her book’s very title, *80 Million Women Stand with Us*, refers to another number: the more than 80 million women who were represented by the 181 international feminist associations present at the Paris Congress.

At the time of the conference, Egypt’s population was 19 million, split evenly between men and women.⁸ Efflatoun, along with Fadel and al-Ramly, sought emancipation and liberation for not only women but the wider Egyptian community. Efflatoun stressed that women’s issues did not pertain solely to women but stood to benefit everyone; further proof of her broad stance on the issue came via the book’s introduction, contributed by the Egyptian writer Taha Hussein.⁹ Efflatoun’s decision to feature a text by Hussein was predicated on his stature as one of the leading public intellectuals of his time. The goal of “Egyptian and Eastern women’s” empowerment, political participation, and emancipation dismantled what Efflatoun referred to as “the humiliation of colonialism and exploitation that men suffer, along with the humiliation of domestic slavery and inequality in society”.¹⁰ It was for her a society-wide goal that necessitated full collaboration with male allies.

After detailing the outcome of the Paris Congress, including the struggle against fascism and colonialism, welcoming the formation of the United Nations, and condemning the “abhorrent global capitalism” that “has pushed the world into war”,¹¹ Efflatoun dedicates a section of her text to the reason behind her attendance at the Congress as an Egyptian citizen. She states that “peace will continue to be a word without any meaning until the curse of colonialism has ended completely” and that there will be “no peace in this country until Egypt enjoys full independence and freedom to do as it wishes”.¹² Similarly, when Efflatoun took up the microphone to address the crowd at the International Congress of Women, she used her speech to rail against the British

8 Alan Mountjoy, “A Note on the 1947 Population of Egypt”, *Geography* 34, no. 1 (1949): 30–37.

9 Hussein argued for male support of women’s emancipation and political participation. Drawing from Islamic history, Hussein wrote that ‘Abd al-Rahman Ibn ‘Awf, one of the Prophet’s most prominent companions, consulted both men and women when it came to choosing a Caliph. In addition ‘Uthman Ibn ‘Affan, who was the third Caliph, consulted women on issues relating to *fitna* (rebellion). Hussein claimed that had “Muslims of today experienced parliamentary systems in those bygone days they would not have denied women their political rights”. Hussein underlined that men and women should both recognise that political participation is not an end in itself but a means by which to achieve the higher human goals of “developing civilisation and liberating people from fear, injustice and slavery”.

10 Efflatoun, 12.

11 Ibid., 30.

12 Ibid., 32.

13 Author’s own translation from Arabic. Full text below.

”لقد سنحت لنا الفرصة أخيرا للتحدث أمام نساء العالم قاطبة عن الاستبداد الذي تعانيه مصر منذ خمس وستين عاما ، فنحن نستطيع الآن أن نتحدث بصراحة عن السياسة الاستعمارية الخبيثة التي كانت تعوق دائما وباستمرار كل تقدم أو ارتقاء في بلادنا.

ان الرأي العام العالمي ليست لديه غير معلومات ضئيلة مشوهة عما يجرى في ديارنا والدعاية البريطانية المسمومة تعمل باستمرار على نشر الأكاذيب والأباطيل عنا. فعندما هب الشعب المصري مطالبا بالاستقلال ، وخرجت المظاهرات معبرة عن غضبه مصر ، أسرعرت انجلترا باذاعة دعائيتها فاتهمت بلادنا بالتعصب والرجعية ، وادعت أن الشعب المصري يقاوم جهودها للتقدم به ونشر التمدن بين صفوفه . بل ان كفاحنا الوطني الخالد في سنوات ١٨٨٢ ، ١٩١٩ ، ١٩٣٥ ، ١٩٤٦ ، هذا الكفاح العنيد المستمر ، هذا الكفاح الوطني التقدمي ، قد شوهته انجلترا ووصفته للعالم بأنه «مقاومة رخيصة يقودها عدد من المغامرين والارهابيين»، ولكن انتن المجتمعات في هذا المؤتمر، واللاتي ناضلن ضد الاستعمار ، وعرفتن ما هو الكفاح الوطني ، لن تخدعنك الأباطيل والاكاذيب.

ان الشعوب المحبة للحرية ، والتي تناضل من أجل المحافظة على استقلالها ، تدرك يوما بعد يوم أن قضية الشعوب المستعمرة انما هي في الواقع قضيتها. وأن الحرية لن تسود العالم ، ولن تتمتع تلك الشعوب بالنظم التي ضحت من أجلها، الا اذا تحررت الشعوب المستعبدة من قبضة مغتصبها.

ولهذا فإن الاشتراك في هذا المؤتمر كان أمراً حيويّاً بالنسبة الينا ، كان لا يد لنا أن نأتي إلى هنا لنسرد على مسامعكن قصة الاستعباد والاستغلال التي تتمثل في حياتنا. وكان علينا كذلك أن نخبركن أنه بالرغم من تلك القصة الدامية ، فإن نضالنا الوطني مستمر على أشده، وأن الحركة القومية أبقيت في نفوس جمهرة النساء ذكري أعوام بؤس وشقاء ، أعوام طويلة احتملتها في صمت وامتنال.”

14 Heba Sharobeem, “When the Personal Becomes Collective: A Study of an Activist’s Memoir”, accessed 4 April 2024, https://www.academia.edu/66003609/When_the_personal_becomes_collective_A_study_of_an_activist_s_memoir.

occupation, which she regarded as the first barrier to emancipation, and did not limit her interventions to women-specific struggles and goals.

Below is a translation of her Paris speech in its entirety (originally delivered in French):

We have finally had the opportunity to speak in front of the women of the entire world about the tyranny that Egypt has been suffering from for sixty-five years. We can now speak frankly about the malicious colonial policy that has always and constantly hindered all progress or advancement in our country.

World public opinion has only scant, distorted information about what is happening in our homes, and toxic British propaganda is constantly working to spread lies and falsehoods about us. When the Egyptian people rose up demanding independence and demonstrations took place expressing Egypt’s anger, England was quick to spread its propaganda, accusing our country of fanaticism and reactionism and claiming that the Egyptian people were resisting its efforts to advance it and to spread civilisation among its ranks. Rather, our immortal national struggle in the years 1882, 1919, 1935, and 1946, this stubborn and continuous struggle, this progressive national struggle, was distorted by England and described to the world as “cheap resistance led by a number of adventurers and terrorists”, but you are the societies in this conference, who struggled against colonialism, and you know what the national struggle is, you will not be deceived by falsehoods and lies.

Freedom-loving peoples, who struggle to preserve their independence, realise day after day that the issue of the colonised peoples is in fact their issue. Freedom will not prevail in the world, and those peoples will not enjoy the systems for which they sacrificed, unless these rising peoples are liberated from the grip of their usurpers.

That is why participating in this conference was vital for us. We had no choice but to come here to tell you the story of enslavement and exploitation that is represented in our lives. We also had to tell you that, despite this bloody story, our national struggle continues at its intensity and that the national movement has awakened in the souls of the masses of women the memory of years of misery and misery, long years that they endured in silence and compliance.¹³

The episode is instructive about Efflatoun’s political activities, which are often left out of the scholarship that has developed around the work of the painter. Today, she is mostly remembered as an activist for women’s rights and for labourers, but her understanding of how these subjects are part of a wider anti-imperialist struggle—to be enacted on an international, collaborative stage—has not been as widely acknowledged. A look at the speech she delivered at the International Congress of Women, her book *80 Million Women Stand with Us*, and her subsequent participation at international solidarity conferences makes the full scope of her politics clear, even from a very young age. That said, Inji’s participation was not without its detractors. In fact, leading feminist Munira Thabit (1906–1967) criticised Efflatoun’s *80 Million Women Stand with Us*, claiming that Efflatoun under “the innocent claim of liberating women was encouraging them to rebel against the principles of Islam and propagating her destructive communist beliefs”.¹⁴

The topics that Efflatoun touches upon in her text are reminiscent of another prominent Egyptian leader who came to power several years later—that is, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser, who was a member of the Free Officers Movement that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in 1952, became president of Egypt in 1954. Nasser would come to be known as an anti-colonial leader and co-founder of the Non-Aligned Movement established in 1956. While he was an avowed socialist, he was also vehemently anti-communist. His regime was so vexed with the activism of Marxist groups—including Iskra, to which Efflatoun belonged—that laws were changed in Egypt to permit the jailing of female political activists. And in June 1959, Efflatoun was arrested and spent the next four years in prison. Despite this, Efflatoun looked back at the Nasser era with forgiveness and maybe even understanding, telling the artist and writer Betty LaDuke in an interview in the 1980s, long after Nasser had passed, that “Nasser, although he put me in prison, was a great patriot”.¹⁵

Perhaps Efflatoun’s perspective was shaped by her strong alignment with Nasser’s ultimate goals of the emancipation of Egypt and the peoples of the world from the evils of colonialism and imperialism. Following the Paris Congress of 1945, Efflatoun attended the founding conference of the International Union of Students in Prague in August 1946, and in 1947, the World Youth Festival in the same city. Again, she underlined the importance of women’s political agency, but her contributions were not limited to a gender-focused agenda as she again twinned the need for female emancipation to the wider good of anti-colonialism.

Nasser’s speeches, as captivating and historic as they were, almost never referenced women. Nasser would start sentences with male pronouns and use terms such as “O Brothers”¹⁶ throughout. This does not mean that Nasser neglected the role and rights of women. The 1962 National Charter of Egypt adopted during the Nasser era stated, “Women should have equal rights with men, and whatever shackles impeding her freedom must be broken off so that she can deeply and positively engage in social life”.¹⁷ In the same vein, Efflatoun’s activism for rights in Egypt extended beyond demanding emancipation for women alone but for the entire society. Decades after her passing, perhaps Efflatoun could be regarded as a pioneer and flag-bearer for non-Western emancipation in the same light as Fatima Jinnah of Pakistan and Mabel Dove Danquah of Ghana and also perhaps as Gamal Abdel Nasser himself. Inji Efflatoun, who wrote and spoke about emancipation of women and men, should be regarded not only as a leading feminist and labour activist but equally as an Egyptian anti-imperialist leader.

15 Betty LaDuke, “Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun: The Merging of Art, Feminism, and Politics”, *NWSA Journal* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 474–485 (483).

16 “The Speech of President Gamal Abdel Nasser to the Afro-Asian Youth Conference”, 2 February [Fibrair Shbat], 1958 / 24 Rajab 1378. Source: Sabri Abu al-Majd, *al-Tadamun al-Afriqi al-Asiawi* [Afro-Asian Solidarity] (Cairo: Lajnat Kutub Siasiyya, n.d. [1959?]), 3–8. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh. Accessed 4 April 2024, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/speech-president-gamal-abdel-nasser-afro-asian-youth-conference-monday-2-february-fibrair>.

17 “Women on Nasser’s Agenda... Justice in Economic and Social Rights”, Nasser Youth Movement, last modified 5 March 2023, <https://nasseryouthmovement.net/WomenonNasser>.