

TIMELINE OF WOMEN AND GENDER RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Note to Teacher: Divide the class in pairs. Cut up and shuffle the historical events listed. Ask each pair to discuss their event. Have the class line up in chronological order and once in order, share the events. The teacher/facilitator can create a visual timeline in the classroom with dates (from 500 A.D. to the present) for students to line up along.

555-619 A.D. Khadija was the first wife of the Prophet Mohammed (last messenger and prophet sent by God, according to Islam). She was a working business-woman. Initially, she hired the prophet to lead caravans for her trading business and later she proposed marriage to him (even though she was older than him and she had been married before). Khadija was the first person to convert to Islam.



[Roullié, Guillaume (1510-1589). Image. *Kadija al-Kubra*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Khadija_al-Kubra.jpg. Public domain.]

609-632 A.D. According to Islam, the Qur'an, the central religious text of the Muslim faith, was revealed by God to the Prophet Mohammed through the Angel Gabriel over a 23-year period. It is considered by Muslims to be the word of God. The Qur'an notes several things related to gender relations and the treatment of women, including:

- Instructing Muslims to educate daughters and sons (this was not a common practice at the time).
- Giving women the right to own and inherit property (which was not a right in Europe at the time).
- Granting women rights in divorce and the ability to divorce their husbands. Women can also refuse to marry prospective husbands.

859 A.D.



With money inherited from their father, Fatima and Mariam al-Fihri established the University of al-Karaouine in Fez, Morocco in 859 A.D. The complex also contains the largest mosque in North Africa and a religious school. The University of al-Karaouine has been declared by UNESCO as the oldest university in the world. In later centuries, many Muslim, Jewish, and Christian thinkers spent time at the University and many historical

documents/manuscripts were kept there.

[Khonsali. Photograph. 2008. *Var 132*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Var_132.jpg. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported]

1048-1138 A.D. Arwa al-Sulayhi, also known as the “Noble Lady” or “Noble Queen,” was an orphan born in Yemen. Her husband became the ruler of Yemen after his father’s death, but because he was paralyzed and bedridden, he handed all his powers over to his wife, Arwa. She ruled through her husband at first, then on her own; altogether, she was in power from 1067-1138 A.D. Founded in 1996, the Queen Arwa University in Sana’a (Yemen’s capital) is named for this historical figure.

1200s A.D. Former slave Sultana Shagrat al-Durr became the first leader (Queen) of the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt in the 1200s after successfully defeating a French invasion sent by King Louis IX of France as part of the Crusades, which were religious wars led by Christians against Muslims and other non-Christians between the 11th and 16th centuries.

1500s-1600s A.D. The “Sultanate of Women” refers to a 130-period in the 16th and 17th centuries when women effectively ruled the Ottoman Empire, carrying out most political tasks except leading armies into battle. Women in the Ottoman Empire (which lasted from 1299-1923 and covered the present-day regions of Turkey, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and North Africa) had the right to own land and to have their own business. By providing political guidance to husbands and sons, many women also exercised political power over the vast empire.

1840-1902 A.D. Aisha Taymur was a noted poet, writer, and activist for women’s rights in Egypt. She married at the age of 14, and wrote poetry in three languages: Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.

1920s Women in Iraq organized for greater education and employment opportunities and rights for women. Aswa Zahawi founded the Women’s Rising Group, which published the journal *Leila* to advance women’s rights. By the 1970s, Iraqi women were working in large numbers, could run for political office, and had the highest literacy rates in the Middle East. As of 2012, women in Iraq make up 25% of the elected national government, a higher percentage of women political leaders than in the United States or the United Kingdom.

1923 Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) from Egypt founded charitable organizations and schools to educate young girls. In 1919, she organized (with others such as Safia Zaghlul, pictured on the left) the largest demonstration of women protesting British colonial rule of Egypt, which lasted from 1882-1922, though British troops stayed on in Egypt until it became a republic in 1952. In 1923, Huda established the Egyptian Feminist Union, which still operates today. She also publicly removed her veil in 1923, leading to many women’s abandoning the use of the veil afterwards in Egypt. In 1945, Huda became the founding president of the Arab Feminist Union.



[Photograph. 1947. *Huda Shaarawi & Safia Zaghlul*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:HudaShaarawi%26SafiaZaghlul.jpg>. Public domain.]

1934 Ataturk was the founder of modern Turkey and ruled from 1923-1938. He advocated strongly for women's education and women's rights. In 1934, women were granted full suffrage (voting rights), and in 1935, eight women joined the national government before women could vote in many European countries such as France, Italy and Switzerland.

1931-present Nawal el Saadawi is a renowned writer and doctor in Egypt. She founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and was one of the founders of the Arab Association for Human Rights. A longtime advocate of women's rights and women's health, el Saadawi wrote *Women and Sex* (1972), which became internationally recognized. It addressed issues of violence against women. She has worked in many universities in the U.S. and Egypt, for the Egyptian government, and for the United Nations.

1993-1996 In 1993, Tansu Ciller (born in 1946), an economist and professor, became the first woman Prime Minister of Turkey. She held office until 1996. She later served as Foreign Affairs Minister of Turkey from 1996-1997. She is part of a small group of women internationally who have been elected heads of state in their countries.

1946-present Hanan Ashrawi (born in 1946) is a Palestinian politician, activist and scholar. She has served since 1996 as a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. She has founded several organizations and worked for human rights, dialogue and democracy. In 2003, she was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize.



[Sohn, Carsten. Photograph. 2008. *ASHRAWI*.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ASHRAWI.JPG>,
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2003 Shirin Ebadi (born in 1947) is an Iranian lawyer, human rights advocate and former judge. She founded the Defenders of Human Rights Center in Iran in 2001. In 2003, Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work towards democracy and human rights. She was the first person from Iran ever to receive the prestigious international prize. Ebadi continues to work for children's rights, women's rights, and political freedom in Iran.

2011

Tawakkol Karman (born in 1979) is a social activist and journalist from Yemen. In 2011, she was the youngest person ever to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (along with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and women's rights advocate Leymah Gbowee of Liberia). Karman founded the human rights group Women Journalists without Chains in 2005, and has organized regular protests against corruption and for freedom of expression and democratic rights, most notably during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.



[Pitt, Frank. Photograph. 2012. *Tawakkol Karman (Munich Security Conference 2012)*. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tawakkol_Karman_\(Munich_Security_Conference_2012\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tawakkol_Karman_(Munich_Security_Conference_2012).jpg) Attribution: [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Germany](#)]

Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/timeline/text/qwomen.html> and other historical sources.