

Adele Azar: Public Charity and Early Feminism

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The notebook of Adele Shamat Azar (1886–1968), “Mother of the Poor” as she was known in wartime Jaffa, is an autobiographic narrative of her early struggles on behalf of destitute women in the early twentieth century, written in the form of an extended letter to her grandchildren. The notebook is illuminating in that it sheds light on the linkages between endowed charitable associations, the schooling of girls, and early feminism. It also dwells on the engagement of the Arab (*Rumi*)¹ Orthodox movement in the creation of independent non-sectarian women’s associations. Her struggle on behalf of women, like that of her contemporaries – Qasim Amin and Huda Sha‘rawi – is permeated with a modernist discourse. Her early life and schooling in Jaffa indicates her indebtedness to the Protestant and Catholic mission schools, from which she was later to disengage.

I was born in Jaffa, Palestine, in 1886. My parents, Nicola Bishara Shamat and Asina Yousef Ghandur, were renowned for their piety. Being the only child, my parents sent me to school at the age of two. My school, known as Miss Arnot’s Mission School, was established under the supervision of Ustaz Constantin Azar, and located in al-‘Ajami neighborhood, where we used to live. . . . a friend of the family used to pick me up from home every morning and take me there, thus the love of learning was ingrained in me at such a tender age. . . . after finishing the intermediate education at the age of 14, I was transferred to St. Joseph’s, also in Jaffa, to study

French. I had barely finished my first year, in 1899, when I was engaged to Mr. Afteem Ya'coub Azar. In 1901, two years later, we were married.²

Yet Azar's name is virtually unknown in the annals of the Arab and Palestinian women's movement. She does not appear in the chronicle of the history of early feminism covering the first half of the twentieth century,³ nor in the major compendium of activists in the women's movement for the first half of the twentieth century, published in several volumes by Fayha' 'Abd al-Hadi.⁴ She is also absent from Ela Greenberg's groundbreaking work on female education in Mandatory Palestine,



Figure 1. Adele Azar's notebook, Jaffa 1914. Photo from Afteem Azar.

Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow, even though she was a primary force in the creation of local schools for females at the end of the Ottoman era.⁵ Among the multitude of writers on the women's movement I could only find reference to her work in the writings of Asma' Tubi (*'Abir wa Majd*) and Ellen Fleischman (*The Nation and Its "New" Women*).⁷ Fleischman cites the Azar work as a source for a nascent feminist movement at the turn of the century.

There are two reasons for this absence. The first is a predisposition among feminist writers (radicals and avant-garde) to treat charity and charitable associations as outside the domain of the women's movement – or at best, as a precursor to the involvement of “women of leisure” in philanthropic activities that undermined an autonomous consciousness for women.⁸ There is also a tendency to subsume Orthodox women's groups, of which Azar was a pioneering advocate, within the constellation of sectarian and missionary associations. My objective here is to challenge these assumptions, and to demonstrate how the work of Azar and her contemporaries in the schooling of destitute and working class girls was a revolutionary episode in the creation of the women's movement at the turn of the century. A major obstacle in this regard is the limited and incomplete nature for the sources of our knowledge of Azar and her period. Her notebook is fragmentary and a truncated record of her life. Furthermore, her papers and those of her associates were obliterated by the war of 1948, as was the whole population of the city that gave rise her work and ideas. To fill in the gaps we are compelled to examine published material from the press, and the proceedings of meetings and conferences from that period, as well as interviews of surviving members of these groups.⁹

In examining the sources on the history of the women's movement and the emergent feminist consciousness, it is useful to distinguish two types of writings – those who

wrote about women in a new vein, and those who were actively engaged in groups and associations on behalf of women. The former group included literary figures and intellectuals whose careers gained momentum during World War I, such as May Ziade, Sathej Nassar, Malak Hafni, Kulthum Odeh, Anbara Salam, and Asma' Tubi. The latter group comprised the “doers” – activists, patrons, and organizers who were engaged in institutional movements such as Ceza Nabrawi, Zulaykha Shihabi, and Adele Azar – the subject of this essay. Very few women, like Huda Sha'rawi, and possibly Halide Edip (in her early educational career in Syria), combined both tasks: organizational work with women, and a literary career of writing about the emancipation of women.

The Great War engendered major population displacements among the civilian populations with significant impact on the world of women in both rural and urban areas. The most noticeable impact was the absence of the adult male population from urban centers, the creation of war orphans, and the relocation of refugees from Anatolia in the Syrian provinces. Palestine also experienced wholesale evacuation of the civilian population of coastal cities, Gaza and Jaffa in particular, as the war progressed. The impact of these events on women, often left to fend for themselves in the absence of adult males, has been recorded in documents dealing with the famine, the locust attack, and the medical emergencies encountered by the civilian population. Edith Mudeira, a nurse working with the Red Cross and Red Crescent in war-time Palestine, produced a detailed report on the health of the urban population in those times.¹⁰ Kulthum Odeh, the Nazarene writer who was a student in the Russian seminary in Bayt Jala, captured her own predicament, and those of women in traditional Arab society, in that period:

My arrival to this world was met with tears, for everyone knows how Arabs like ourselves feel when we are told about the birth of a female, especially if this unfortunate girl happens to be the fifth of her sisters, and the family has not been blessed by a boy. Such feelings of hatred accompanied me since an early age. I do not recall my father ever being compassionate with me. The thing that increased my parents' hatred to me was the fact that they thought that I was ugly. This is why I grew up to avoid talking, evading meeting people, and focusing only on my education.¹¹

Like many young women of her period, Odeh saw her freedom as coming from receiving an education – often against the will of her family, as Azar will demonstrate. But the period also saw the entry of urban women into the public sphere: enhanced education for girls, and the creation of the earliest women's associations – many of them based on charitable enterprises aimed at taking care of war refugees, and orphans.¹²

Much of the writings on the genealogy of the women's movement in Palestine and the Arab world posit a periodization which sees a progressive evolution from women's involvement in philanthropy and charity, to increased politicization in the struggles of the Mandate period and beyond.¹³ Islah Jad, in the often cited *From Salon Ladies to Popular Committees*, suggested a dichotomy in which upper and middle class women's

involvement in charity and patronage of the poor is contrasted with the later radicalization of religious and nationalist women in feminist movements with a social agenda.¹⁴ Stephanie Abdallah suggests a three- pronged periodization of the movement: the predominance of identity issues and anti-colonial struggles in the 1920s, struggle for voting and citizenship on the 1960s, and the emergence of struggles for social legislation, equality and Islamic feminism in the 1990s.¹⁵ In all of this literature the early years of the war are either ignored, or subsumed under the rhetoric of the single issue



Figure 2. Doctors, nurses, and patients at the Jerusalem Muristan (public hospital), 1898, established by the Ottoman Administration at Prophets Street, off Jaffa Road in Jerusalem. The Muristan included local and foreign female nurses working through the Ottoman Red Crescent Society. Photo from Mona Halaby, private collection.

of *sufur* (unveiling) movements. The earliest memoirs and biographic narratives of May Ziade, Kulthum Odeh, Anbara Salam, and Halide Edip provide a rich alternative to this absence. They expose the significance of war, and the preceding constitutional revolution of 1908, as pivotal moments for new women’s sensibilities.

Another source for depreciating the work of these charitable movements in the history of early feminism is related to the presumed elitism and bourgeois character of those pioneers. In most cases the elitism is seen as a derivative of the class privileges enjoyed by women like Halide Edip, Anbara Salam, and Huda Sha’rawi. Yet many of those activists, including Sha’rawi, saw their upper class status as chains on their emancipation since it restricted their freedom of movement under the guise of “protecting the family name.” Some flaunted their bourgeois placement as a marker of modernism, setting them apart from veiled and domestically confined lower classes. A portrait of the Jaffa “rebel” Alexandra Zarifeh taken in 1919 shows her wearing the latest Paris fashion in a coquettish gesture (figure 3). A few writers have pointed out that it was precisely their middle class status, and their ability to have domestic servants, that freed these women from the burdens of domesticity in order to undertake charitable work.¹⁶ In the case of Azar, and Siksik (the leader of the Orthodox Society for the Destitute in Jerusalem), charitable work was aimed at uplifting the poor while patronizing them. In any case this type of criticism is hollow. In Syria and Palestine during and after the war, unlike the situation in Western Europe, there did not exist a popular movement of working women that one can contrast with the work of these charitable societies.

In her history of the early women’s movement in Palestine, Ellen Fleishman lists the Rum Orthodox women’s association – of which Azar was one of the early founders – as the earliest existing native women’s association. Others include the Orthodox Aid Society for the Poor in ‘Akka (1903), the Jaffa Orthodox Ladies’ Society (1910), The Haifa Ladies’

Orthodox Society (1908), and the Orthodox Society for the Destitute and the Sick (1919) in Jerusalem, run by Katherine Siksik.¹⁷ In her history of the Women's movement Matiel Moghanam mentions one Muslim group only, the Mohammadan Ladies' Society, from the World War I period in Jerusalem – apparently a reference to the Arab Ladies Association headed by Ni'mati al-'Alami, daughter of the Musa Faydi al-'Alami, the former mayor of Ottoman Jerusalem, established in 1919.¹⁸ Another Muslim group was the Arab Women's Union Society in Nablus, established in 1921. Those groups were the confessional precursors of the Arab women's associations that emerged in 1929 within the ranks of the nationalist movement. The early groups were confessional, meaning that they served the charitable needs of their religious community, but were not sectarian, since they targeted and served the destitute of all religious communities. Men's nationalist activities were conducted in parallel to women's charitable associations, in a process that Fleischman identifies as “the feminization of benevolence.” This allowed for a niche within the nationalist movement, often initiated by women, giving religious associations the freedom to maneuver independently of men's control, but within the parameters of legitimacy and “respectability.”

Azar became aware before the war for the need of alleviating the conditions of poor women through providing schooling for girls who had no access to mission schools. In 1910 most girls were unable to enter those schools due to the economic crisis at the time. She writes:

At my initiative a number of Jaffa Orthodox women sought to establish a national women's association to educate orphan and needy girls. This association was the first national women's group in Palestine. It was established on 15 February 1910 with the objective of launching schools for the teaching of girls. We called our society the Orthodox Women's Organization for the Support of Orphans in Jaffa [*Jam'iyat al-sayidat al-Urthudhuksiyya li-'adad al-yatimat bi-Yafa*].

In *Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow*, Ela Greenberg discusses the impact of the constitutional revolution of 1908 on the establishment of public schools in Palestine by the Ottoman administration (*nizamiyya* schools), as well as by native educators, as a counterweight to missionary educational activities. Of the latter, the Dusturiyya College by



Figure 3. Alexandra Zarifeh, Jaffa, ca. 1919. Hand-colored photo, from the Zarifeh family collection.

Khalil Sakakini, and Dar al-Ma'arif headed by Muhammad al-Salih, were the most noteworthy. However, neither of these establishments provided for girls' schools although they did recruit women teachers. The Ottoman administration established a number of primary school (*al-ibtida'aiyya*) for girls in major towns (Jaffa, Haifa, Nablus, and Jerusalem). Thus the field for girls' education continued to be dominated by Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish



Figure 4. Adele Azar at her son Saba's wedding, Jaffa, 1942, Azar family collection.

(Alliance) foreign schools. This monopoly affected urban society as a whole, since Muslim upper and middle class girls were also compelled to attend these European and Europeanizing schools. The significance of the Arab Orthodox movement was thus in attempting to break the hegemony of foreign missionary control of girls' education.

Adele Azar's deputy in the Orthodox Women's Association was Alexandra Kassab Zarifeh, an activist for women's rights. Born in 1897 in Jaffa, she was the daughter of Jurgi bey Kassab, a Damascene Ottoman civil servant who moved to Jaffa and became engaged in commercial activities. In her early youth she was active in both the Red Crescent and Red Crescent societies, in addition to her charity work in the Orthodox Women's Association. During the British Mandate years, she led women's demonstrations in Jaffa against British policies during the 1936 rebellion. She was particularly opposed to Haj Amin's call for ending the rebellion in 1938. During the 1947 military engagements with the Zionists, *Filastin* newspaper published a satirical list of Christmas gifts for Jaffa figures, in which Zarifeh was given a tank to take her to the Front.¹⁹ Unlike Azar, Alexandra began her early schooling in Zahrat al-Ihsan (Flower of Charity) Orthodox school in 1903.

The Flower of Charity was established in 1880 by Labiba Ibrahim Jahshan by a women's group in Jumayza, Beirut, whose objective was to secure a "modern, scientific" education for females in the Orthodox community.²⁰ The school was inaugurated on 13 August 1881 and headed by Labiba Jahshan and Zarifeh Sursuq. The school consciously saw itself as an indigenous answer to missionary activities in female education:

The success of our project was rooted in its response to a burning need within the Orthodox community to meet [the missionary] challenge. Beirut was in the second half of the nineteenth century experiencing a sudden and speedy growth as a result of becoming the capital of a large Ottoman province which included Mount Lebanon [and Northern Palestine]. Within the Rumi Orthodox community emerged a rich and extended bourgeois class which sought education and scientific knowledge to enter the modern world. The challenge came from the Catholic and Protestant missions that

were heavily engaged in recruiting and mobilizing Orthodox young men and women in their educational establishments. The attraction posed by these missions became a major concern and provocation for Orthodox clerical and lay circles – especially within the middle classes. They rallied to establish modern educational facilities to teach science, technology, and modern languages to their members. Zahrat al-Ihsan was thus established to be the first institute for Orthodox females in Lebanon at the turn of the century. It prided itself for teaching Arabic, French, and English – in addition to the principles of Greek and Russian.

Zahrat al-Ihsan was a magnet not only for women’s education in Lebanon, but also for young women, like Alexandra Kassab Zarifeh, from the Syrian and Palestinian communities, and the school became a model for similar educational groups in Jaffa, ‘Akka, Tripoli, and Jerusalem. Azar narrates how the Orthodox Women’s Association combined their charitable orphanage work with schooling. It was in those years that Adele Azar became known as the “mother of the poor” for her charitable activities and, after the school was established, as *al-za’ima* (the boss). Together with her compatriots they continued to send their girls to Miss Arnot’s school in Jaffa, and to the Flower of Charity School in Beirut. To confront a society that was still hesitant to accept the education of females, “we continued to arm these needy girls with the weapons of science and virtue to face life and find work.”²² The war years disrupted much of their educational efforts, since travel became hazardous, and resources dearth. Immediately after the termination of hostilities, the women’s association shifted their main focus from relief work for the poor to the establishment of their own school for girls in Jaffa.

After the war, the British occupation authorities had requisitioned the Jaffa school to serve as a center for war orphans. Azar found herself negotiating the fate of those orphans with army officers:

The government would not give us this school unless we gave assurances that we would continue to care for those orphans who had no place to go to. Thus we took over the school building. We transferred the school for boys under the tutelage of the Orthodox Charitable Society, while we established a separate section for girls under the control of the Women’s Association. We called the school the Orthodox National School for Girls in Jaffa. At its inauguration in 1924 it contained one hundred local Christian and Muslim girls. They were taught by Najla Musa, Suriyya Battikha, and Lisa Tannus. In the next few years the number of students increased to twelve teachers and 250 students.

The curriculum of the school was vocational in order to prepare the students for employment. The languages taught were Arabic and English – in contrast to French and German which prevailed in girls’ missionary schools. The school included a workshop

for tailoring and dressmaking, and had its own girl scout unit. The main resource for funding the school and the workshops came from Orthodox endowments – mainly the revenue of Orthodox Waqf estates belonging to St. George (*al-Khadr*), and private family endowments from the estates of wealthy orthodox families.²³

Virtually all the women’s associations in the postwar years were engaged in an activism defined in terms of charity, whether involving alleviating poverty, work with orphans, or the teaching of destitute girls. Both Alexandra Zarifeh, and Adele Azar use terms like *'adad* (support), *ihsan* (charity), or *irtiqā'* (elevation [of the poor]), to describe

their activities. Zahrat al-Ihsan, the most prominent women’s organization from the 1880s, took charity as its motto and *raison d’être*. But this was not the charity of endowments – of soup kitchens and *takaya* (hospices) – that continued to follow the tradition of Haski Sultan. Using the language of Christian orthodox benevolence, it was institutional work of middle class women aiming at delivering destitute women from poverty through the education of girls, and their gainful employment, as the road for their independence and elevation. One of their mainly unstated objectives was to save these girls from missionary groups. With few exceptions, their work in the aftermath of World War I maintained a distance from authority and from political confrontations, but they were at the same time keenly aware of the political implications of their work. Fleischman notes that.

Distinctions among [the categories of] political, charitable, and social in Palestinian society, [were] fluid. . . A major dichotomy in the early women’s charitable organizations existed in their maintaining gender subordination though support of the tradition of women’s work in a ‘separate sphere,’ while simultaneously creating power for themselves though collective action that ultimately had social and political implications extending beyond “helping the poor.”²⁴

Charitable work did not cease with the transition of the women’s associations into direct political activism during the 1930s, but the main focus of their activity began to acquire the adoption of objectives and slogans that subordinated their work to the national movement.



Figure 5. A photo from the Library of Congress, with the following caption: Calisthenics at Miss Arnot’s Mission, Jaffa, Palestine. Copyright 1900 by Underwood & Underwood.



Figure 6. Orthodox Women's Association, Jerusalem, in front of the Madaba map, ca. 1929. Photo by Savides, from the private collection of Dr. John Tleel, Jerusalem.

The “Mother of the Poor” Becomes *al-Za‘ima*

The main problem facing the Orthodox Women's Association after the establishment of the girls' school was the securing of work opportunities for their graduates. Except for traditional involvement of rural women in agriculture, there were social pressures against the engagement of urban women in public employment except in the more acceptable arenas such as teaching and domestic tailoring.

It was objectionable in the public mind when our school opened for young women to engage in public employment . . . even needy families who were desperate for income, resisted permitting work to their female relatives. I spent extensive efforts in convincing [those families] that there is no shame in their women seeking gainful employment, as we can witness by then in the neighboring countries of Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Eventually I was able to secure employment for these graduates in the departments of postal services, telephone exchanges, and in government civil service. I was able also to find work [for them] in commercial establishments and in hospitals as nurses. For this work I became known as *al-za‘ima* [the boss].

Azar's work with the destitute was an unarticulated emancipatory discourse, similar to what she saw in the work of her contemporary champions of women's rights such as Ceza Nabrawi and Qasim Amin in Egypt, and Sathej Nassar in Palestine. This was expressed in her reference to the need of “catching up” with the situation in Egypt and

Syria, rather than in terms of the struggle for *sufur* (unveiling) which is recurrent theme in the work of Anbara Salam and Sha'rawi.²⁵ This was partly due to early involvement with the Jaffa Orthodox community, where veiling was not an issue, and possibly to the absence of a social agenda in her struggle for women's rights. In her mind working with girls' education and employment was an essential component of her work in charity (*a'mal al-ihsan*) for the poor and destitute.²⁶ During the 1930s she began to appear in public circles as speaker on behalf of the women's and national movements. She also held a salon for literary figures at her home – but this is related in passing and we know very little about the nature of this salon, or the people who used to frequent it.²⁷

Azar's activity in the national movement evolved from her leadership of the Orthodox Women's Association and its linkages during the 1930s with nationalist agitation. In 1931 she was elected chair of the Palestinian Women's Congress, held in Jaffa. During the meeting she issued a call for "Ya nisa' Falastin, sa'idna ummatakunna wa qadimina hilikunna" (Women of Palestine, help your nation, by giving your jewelry).²⁸ During the Arab Rebellion of 1936–1939 the Jaffa branch of the Arab Women's Movement was established. The organizing meeting was held at Azar's home. She was elected deputy head of the association, whose executive by then was evenly divided between Muslim and Christian (mostly Orthodox) members.²⁹

The association was particularly active in Jaffa in support of the rebellion. Azar and Zarifeh, both members of the executive committee, used their experience with the



Figure 7. Adele Azar, "the Boss," in a public rally with the last Arab mayor of Jaffa Yusuf Haykal to her right, 1947. Photo from Azar family collection.

Orthodox Women's Association to establish workshops belonging to the Arab Women's Union to train young "destitute women" in crafts and tailoring. We are not told what crafts these were, but they targeted the "daughters of this suffering humanity."³⁰ During the winter years of 1936–1939 the society began a campaign in support of the militants. Azar details, "We delivered packages of winter clothing – coats, shirts, and woolen pullovers to the fighters (*mujahidin*) in their trenches and in mountain areas. We also sent food packages cooked in our kitchens to the fighters and to their families."³¹

The Association had a mixed and problematic relationship to the British colonial authority. Initially Sa'da Tamari, the first president of the association, and Adele Azar had to negotiate with the British the terms of using the orphanage and the teaching facilities. Azar explains the terms imposed by the military government were acceptable to their movement since it involved accommodating the large number of war orphans that the government was unable to take care of.³² During the 1920s Adele entertained public officials, including the high commissioner, at her "literary" salon (an exaggerated term since she seems to have limited literary talents).³³ The years of the rebellion changed this relationship; the leadership of the Orthodox Association supported the strike and sent material aid to the *mujahidin*.

Several members of the executive objected to the Nashashibi leadership (Defense Party) and its call for the strike in Jaffa port, which – in their view – resulted in moving commercial activities from Jaffa to the newly established port facilities in Tel Aviv.³⁴ Some also distanced themselves from the Husayni leadership. Alexandra Zarifeh in particular objected to Husayni's call for ending the rebellion in 1939, feeling as she puts it, "that he was working at the behest of the British."

A turning point in Azar's career took place in 1944 when she was invited to Cairo to attend the Arab Women's Congress headed by Huda Sha'rawi in 7 December 1944. Six years earlier Sha'rawi had organized the Eastern Women's Congress for Palestine in Cairo (1938). Although Tarab 'Abd al-Hadi was the official head of the delegation, it was Sathej Nassar who stole the thunder, with a long speech on the dangers of Zionism not only for Palestine, but also for the Syria and Egypt. She made headlines in the Egyptian press as an articulate and militant defender of the cause of Palestine.³⁵ But there was very little on women's rights in her speech. Like all her colleagues from Palestine their intervention was political and aimed at mobilizing women from the Arab world, Turkey, and Iran in support of Palestine. Palestine was represented by Tarab 'Abd al-Hadi (Nablus), Zulaykha (Zlikha) Shihabi (Jerusalem), Asma' Tubi (Nazareth), and Sathej Nassar (Haifa). Jaffa was not represented for unknown reasons, but Adele Azar sent a telegram in support of the conference in her capacity as vice president of the Arab Women's Union, and president of the Orthodox Women's Association. In 1944 however Adele was officially invited as a leading representative of Palestinian women, with an agenda in which the social conditions were highlighted alongside the usual political platforms. She saw this as a crowning moment in her feminist career.³⁶

I went to Cairo in my combined role as the head of the Orthodox Women's

Association, and the deputy head of the Arab Women's Union in Jaffa. In my speech to the congress I focused on the call to strengthening "Arab unity," and reinforcing Arabic as the language of education. I also stressed the need for the education of rural and peasant women.³⁷

The delegation used their visit in Cairo to meet with the press, and with other members of Egyptian and Arab women's groups, as well as with political figures, including a meeting with the prime minister Ahmad Maher Pasha. They visited 'Abdin Palace, and were entertained by Queen Farida, and Princess Shwaykar. King Farouk also invited them for a trip on the royal train to Anshas. Azar was in her element with royalty. She also dwelt at length on her reception and public entertainment organized for them by Sha'rawi, including musical concerts with Um Kalthum, and the cabaret performances by Bad'iya Masabni, the "queen of dance." Masabni was well known to the Palestinians, as she had held several summer concerts in Jaffa and Jerusalem.³⁸

During the war of 1948 the Orthodox Association maintained their charitable activities in protecting destitute girls, and worked with the remnants of the Arab community in the deserted city. Alexandra Zarifeh took over as the principal of the girls' school, and maintained the semblance of teaching, but only for a short period.³⁹ Most of the members of the Association became refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, and reconstituted themselves as the Society of Palestinian Women (1949). Their main work was with refugee children, for which they established Dar Is'ad al-Tufula (Institute for Childhood Happiness) in Suq al-Gharb, Lebanon. During the later years of Palestinian resistance in Lebanon, the institute received the children of Palestinian martyrs at the request of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Adele Azar died in 1965. Zarifeh died in 1969 and was eulogized by Yasir Arafat and Shafiq al-Hout.

Conclusion: A Missing Link?

The prevailing view in the literature on the women's movement in Palestine before 1929 is that it was either non-existent or dominated by charitable associations and upper class "ladies' societies." In the words of Hamiza Kazi, "the participation of women was passive, inarticulate and unorganized. Under a strict social order, freedom of movement for women was almost non-existent."⁴⁰ This perspective, as we have demonstrated, is both factually inaccurate and misconceives the feminist content of early charitable associations, especially during and after World War I when charity was linked with the education of girls, and preparing them for employment.

The linkage between charitable associations for orphans and the destitute to religious endowments is very old. In Ottoman Syria these endowments were often patronized by princely families and upper class women since the sixteenth century. Both public and private (*dhirri*) *waqf* were often allocated by propertied women for supporting the education of poor girls. At the turn of the twentieth century education for girls was

mainly confined to foreign mission schools (Catholic and Protestant). Public schooling for Muslim girls was confined to Qu’ranic (*kuttab*) schools, and to the few primary schools for girls launched by the Ottoman *nizamiyya* schools in the second half of the nineteenth century. During World War I native Arab women were involved in charitable work for the relief of famine victims, war orphans, and war refugees. Nursing was one of the few public employment arenas open to urban women. The work of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society allowed for a number of women (and men) to serve war victims, while ostensibly performing a national duty.

In my view the most important feature of Azar’s modest diary is that it provides a missing link demonstrating the process by which local indigenous women’s associations provided a base for a wider national women’s movement. Adele Azar’s notebook highlights the significant role of Orthodox women’s associations in initiating schooling of destitute girls, and later vocational training for employment in the public sphere. The objective of those associations was to “rescue” the girls from missionary education, and to ground them in a “national” Arabic curriculum – even though many of those activists, including Azar and Zarifeh, were themselves the beneficiaries of mission schools. The Orthodox women’s associations were among the first, if not *the* first, indigenous women’s groups devoted to the teaching of girls. During the 1930s many of these groups adopted nationalist agendas, against Zionism and for nativist cultural education. A major factor reinforcing this nationalist turn was the internal struggle within the Christian Orthodox community against the Greek ecclesiastical hierarchy for the control of the vast resources of the church. This internal struggle was peculiar to Palestine, since in Syria and Mount Lebanon, the Arabization of the church and control over its resources was resolved earlier without a conflict with the ruling authorities. This brought the Rum Orthodox leadership, including the leadership of women’s associations, up against the Ottoman administration, and later the colonial Mandate government. Azar’s memoirs also demonstrate the manner in which the Orthodox groups were precursors to Arab women’s associations, involving joint Christian and Muslim women activists in the national struggle.

These early associations are often dismissed or marginalized in the history of the women’s movement as resting on the preoccupations of “salon ladies” – upper class or bourgeois women divorced from the fate of the working poor. Malek Hassan Abisaab in his discussion of “Unruly Factory Women,” for example, questions the feminist credentials of these upper class women. He highlights the manner in which many of them, including the work of Anbara Salam’s putative feminism, allied themselves with their patrician families, and with traditional nationalist groups against the working poor, including aiding state repression of labor demands for working women.⁴¹

The problem with this critique is that it conflates class struggles belonging to a later period of the Mandate beginning in the 1940s, with an earlier period at the turn of the century, when the focus of struggle for women’s rights was either embryonic or non-existent. It also assumes a non-existent dichotomy – derived from the history of European women’s struggles – in characterizing early Arab feminism: one which

posits a radical women's trade union and social struggles pitted against middle class institutional demands. During the constitutional revolution of 1908–1909 and World War I, the only movement for women's rights was indeed a “bourgeois movement” often led by aristocratic women like Huda Sha‘rawi, Halide Edip, and Anbara Salam. The objectives of these women were confined to the struggle for unveiling (*sufur*), the expansion of public education for women, and for public employment – mostly in socially accepted fields. Women who belonged to what later became identified as a feminist genre were intellectuals who lamented the social conditions of women in the Arab East, and aimed at catching up with a European modernity, or an Islamic adaptation to a women's modernity. They were writers such as May Ziade, Kulthum Odeh, Malak Hafni, and Ceza Nabrawi, who – with very few exceptions – did not belong to those associations.

Adele Azar in this context acquired a feminist consciousness before the term was utilized. Her path was that of charity and the utilization of religious endowments for the elevation of the conditions of poor women. There is a distinct difference however between the charitable works of Haseki Sultan on behalf of the urban destitute, one in which upper class women immortalized their names through good deeds, and the charitable associations of Azar's generation. Her work consciously targeted females whose fate was sealed in the domestic sphere and in the poor house (orphanages). The movement she launched was forged while trying to establish alternative educational facilities to mission schools, and developed in the context of the nationalist struggle against Zionism and colonialism, but it had one major focus that constituted its feminist core – the training and teaching of girls to become independent human beings.

One should be cautious, however, about extrapolating too much from the fragmentary diaries of Adele Azar. The terms “feminist consciousness,” “national movement,” “indigenous,” and “sectarianism” are used here retrospectively to describe groups and processes that began to appear during and after the Great War. All of the women's associations that are described were a highly localized endeavor. They emerged concurrently but separately in cities like Acre, Jerusalem, Haifa, Nablus, and Jaffa, where the devastation of war produced a crisis in the traditional social fabric of society. Charitable work which henceforth involved the work of upper class women in benevolent endowments (*waqf*), alms (*sadaqat*), and Christian Orthodox charities (soup kitchens and bread distribution), suddenly was transformed and energized by middle class women who initiated a movement to help the poor through education and the creation of employment possibilities. While using the same vocabulary of benevolence, these women consciously, and sometimes unconsciously, set up radically new forms of women's organizations that did not exist before.

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Endnotes

- 1 I use the term Rum Orthodox, or Arab Orthodox, here rather than the usual Greek Orthodox as a more appropriate reference to the Christian orthodox community in the Arab East, where the term “Greek” refers to the ethnic composition of the patriarchate and its ecclesiastic hierarchy. In Arabic this duality of terms does not exist, since the standard term for the Church is “Rum Orthodox.” An earlier version of this essay appeared in Salim Tamari, *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017). The author wants to thank Anita Vitullo for her close reading and helpful critical comments on the article.
- 2 “The Notebook of Adele [Shamat] ‘Azar,” (unpublished Arabic manuscript, 2), translation by author. The notebook was written in the mid-1960s and spans the period 1912–1948.
- 3 Yusif Mustafa Rashad Issa, *The Women’s Movement in Palestine, 1900–1950* (Cairo: Arab Union Catalogue, 1997); Izzat Daraghme, *The Women Movement in Palestine, 1903–1990* (Jerusalem: Maktab Dia Studies, 1991).
- 4 Fayha ‘Abd al-Hadi, *Adwar al-mar’a al-Filastiniyya fi al-thalathiniyyat: al-musahama al-siyasiyya lil-mar’a al-Filastiniyya, riwayat al-nisa’, nusūs al-muqabalat al-shafawiyya* (The Palestinian Women’s Movement in the 1930s: Political Contributions and Oral Histories (al-Bireh: Markaz al-mar’a al-Filastiniyya lil-abhath wa al-tawthiq, 2005); Fayha ‘Abd al-Hadi, *Adwar al-mar’a al-Filastiniyya fi al-arba’iniyyat, 1940s, al-musahama al-siyasiyya lil-mar’a al-Filastiniyya, riwayat al-nisa’, nusūs al-muqabalat al-safawiyya* [The Women’s Movement in the 1940s: Political Contributions and Oral Histories] (al-Bireh: Markaz al-mar’a al-Filastiniyya lil-abhath wa al-tawthiq, 2006).
- 5 Ela Greenberg, *Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow: Education and Islam in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
- 6 Jihad Ahmad Salih, *Asma’ Tubi, 1905–1983: ra’idat al-kitaba al-nisa’iyya fi Filastin* [Asma’ Tubi, 1905–1983: Pioneer Woman Writer in Palestine] (Ramallah: Ministry of Culture, 2011).
- 7 Ellen Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 104–5.
- 8 See Stephanie Latte Abdallah and Valerie Pouzol, “Citizenship, Gender, and Feminism in the Contemporary Arab Muslim and Jewish Worlds,” in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, ed. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); see also Ellen Fleischmann, “Nation, Tradition, and Rights: The Indigenous Feminism of the Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920 1948,” in *Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race*, ed. Ian Christopher Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall, and Philippa Levine (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 9 I am grateful to Dr. Afteem Azar, Adele’s grandson, who gave me her notebook and a number of photographs from the family collection, during an interview with the author in Amman, 20 December 2014. For published references see, for example, the Association of Arab Women, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women of the East Congress, Cairo, 15–18 October 1938* (Cairo: Modern Press, 1938).
- 10 See Edith Madeira, “Report for Nursing Service, 1917–1918,” Pennsylvania Historical Society, online at discover.hsp.org/Record/ead-2053/Description#tabnav (accessed 27 February 2016). Edith Madeira (1865–1951) served as the chief nurse for the American Red Cross Commission to Palestine from June 1918 to January 1919. The Commission was formed “to look after the sickness and starvation of the civilian population in the occupied area of Palestine.” Her report, detailing the Commission’s work in Palestine, examined the medical and hospitalization conditions in Palestine during World War I.
- 11 Quoted by Iqbal Tamimi in “Remembering Professor Kulthum Odeh, 1892–1965,” in *London Progressive Journal* (17 October 2008), online at londonprogressivejournal.com/article/view/284/remembering-professor-kulthum-odeh (accessed 18 February 2018). The original quote, poignant in Arabic, was taken from Umar Mahamid, *Brufisur Kulthum ‘Awdah Fasilifa: min al-Nasira ila Sant Bitirsburgh fi al-watha’iq al-mahfutha fi arshif akadimiyat al-‘ulum al-Rusiyya* [Kulthum Odeh from Nazareth to St. Petersburg] (Kafr Qara: Markaz abhath hiwar al-hadarat - ma’had i’dad al-mu‘alimin al-‘Arab, Bayt Berl, 2004).
- 12 See Greenberg, *Preparing the Mothers of Tomorrow*.
- 13 Fayha ‘Abd al-Hadi, *The Role of Palestinian Women in the 1930s: The Political Participation of Palestinian Women, Women Oral Narratives*

- (Ramallah: al-Nasher, 2015), 11–14. (For Arabic text, see n4.)
- 14 Islah Jad, "From Salons to the Popular Committees: Palestinian Women, 1919–1989," in *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, ed. Jamal R. Nassar and Roger Heacock (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990).
 - 15 Abdallah and Pouzol, "Citizenship, Gender, and Feminism."
 - 16 Fleischmann, *Nation and Its "New" Women*, 101.
 - 17 Fleischmann, *Nation and Its "New" Women*, 104–09.
 - 18 Matiel E. T. Moghanam, *The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem* (Westport, Conn: Hyperion Press, 1976).
 - 19 Edward Zarifeh, "Alexandra Kassab Zarifeh, Sirat Munadhila" [A Biographic Note]. (unpublished essay).
 - 20 Jamila Costa Kusti, *Zahrat al-Ihsan: A Historical Study* (Beirut: Rum Orthodox Parish, 1996), 236. See also "Flower of Charity School," online at ar.orthodoxwiki.org (accessed 23 February 2018).
 - 21 Kusti, *Zahrat al-Ihsan*, 241.
 - 22 Azar, "Notebook," 3.
 - 23 Azar, "Notebook," 4–5. Among the family endowments cited by Azar was the religious waqf established by Urjwan al-Far, which came from the revenue of commercial stores in al-'Ajami, Jaffa.
 - 24 Fleischmann, *Nation and Its "New" Women*, 103.
 - 25 Azar, "Notebook," 10.
 - 26 Azar, "Notebook," 4–5.
 - 27 Azar, "Notebook," 10–11.
 - 28 Hanna Issa Malak, *al-Juthur al-Yafiyya* [Jaffa Roots] (Jerusalem, 1996). Malak devotes a whole page to the life of Adele Azar. In her notebook Azar does not mention this episode of her work.
 - 29 Azar, "Notebook," 11. Azar lists the executive members as follows: Wajiha Abu S'ud, president; Adele Azar, vice president; Alexandra Zarifeh, Secretary; Fatma Abu Laban, treasurer; Jamila Qunbargi, member; Fortuna Sukkar (Rock), member.
 - 30 Azar, "Notebook," 11–12.
 - 31 Azar, "Notebook," 12.
 - 32 Azar, "Notebook," 3.
 - 33 Azar, "Notebook," 10.
 - 34 Zarifeh, "A Biographic Note," 2. "Fakhri Nashashibi initiated the movement to extend the strike to Jaffa port. He was on close social terms with the Zarifeh family, as was his brother Azmi, the *qa'emaqam* [governor] of Jaffa. Alexandra warned him that the Jews will establish [an alternate] port in Tel Aviv, which happened shortly thereafter. He was exposed after the rebellion, and was pursued by a young man from the well-known Madhoun family, Jaffa seamen. He followed him to Baghdad and emptied several bullets in his head."
 - 35 Association of Arab Women, *Proceedings*, 188–193.
 - 36 Azar, "Notebook," 13.
 - 37 Azar, "Notebook," 12–13.
 - 38 Azar, "Notebook," 13–14.
 - 39 Zarifeh, "A Biographic Note," 4.
 - 40 See Hamida Kazi, "Palestinian Women and the National Movement: A Social Perspective," online at libcom.org/library/palestinian-women-national-liberation-movement-social-perspective-hamida-kazi (accessed 17 February 2018).
 - 41 Malek Hassan Abisaab, "'Unruly' Factory Women in Lebanon: Contesting French Colonialism and the National State, 1940–1946," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 55–82. See also M. H. Abisaab, *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).