

<https://womenofegyptmag.com/2016/10/01/marie-assaad-the-life-journey-of-an-egyptian-social-pioneer/>

Women of Egypt Mag

An Advocacy Movement to Empower the Women of Egypt

OCTOBER 1, 2016

Marie Assaad: The Life Journey of an Egyptian Social Pioneer



– **By Heba Abu Ahmed**

Saturday October 1, 2016

With the approval of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of a new law that imposes harsher prison sentence of up to seven years in jail, for those who perform the outlawed procedure of female genital mutilation (FGM), one must acknowledge and credit Marie Assaad's efforts to combat this procedure.

Born in Cairo on October 16, 1922, Marie Assaad is an anthropologist, activist, and one of the pioneer social scientists who conducted research and wrote about FGM in Egypt and Northern Africa, in the 1950s.

Assaad's extraordinary life journey with social work began at a young age. While still a schoolgirl at the Cairo American College for girls, she volunteered to assist underprivileged families that suffered from tuberculosis, and helped their children with education and literacy. At the age of 13, Assaad became a member of her local YWCA (Young Women Christian Association), and in 1947 she represented the movement at the second World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo.

In 1953 she was appointed as the first Egyptian woman to serve on the World YWCA in Geneva, where she served for a year as a Program Assistant in the Youth Department. She then emerged to the position of Secretary-General of the Egyptian YWCA. Despite her resignation after getting married in 1954, she continued to volunteer for the organization.

Assaad graduated from the American University in Cairo with a BA in Sociology and Anthropology and in 1965, she joined the university's Social Research Center, where she focused her anthropological research on population studies.



Her groundbreaking study on FGM in Egypt and Africa was published in 1970; the first of its kind to reach such a wide range. Her study later became the base of work for the committee preparing for the UN's International Conference for Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994. Assaad also headed a taskforce to combat FGM, which brought attention to a topic that has formerly been regarded as taboo. Despite her refusal to undertake formal positions, Marie exerted great effort to support the government in combatting this prevalent practice in Egypt. Consequently, battling FGM became one of the main focuses of the National Council for Motherhood and Childhood.

Assaad was chosen as deputy Secretary-General of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1980, making her the first woman and non-clerical figure to be appointed to the executive structures of the organization.

During her six years of work in Geneva, Assaad worked with the Christian Medical Commission. She placed women's issues on the council's agenda and presented numerous studies on women and sexuality.

Assaad was the first to advocate of the need to separate and sort garbage at source. She played a significant role in establishing the Moqattam-based Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE), where she worked as a volunteer for more than 20 years in the Zabbaleen area in Moqattam, one of the poorest slums in Cairo. By volunteering, dedicating and committing to countless projects, Marie, with the help of the APE, was able to empower the Zabbaleen (garbage collectors) community through education and entrepreneurial projects. Promoting innovative recycling methods in Cairo, she enabled the Zabbaleen community to recycle about 85% of the trash they collect. Furthermore, Marie and her partners developed a four-point approach in order to enhance the living conditions of the Zabbaleen community. The approach, which included topics such as how to articulate your thoughts and accept others, focused on health, education, capability building, and interpersonal relationships.



After all she has accomplished, saying that Marie Assaad is an inspirational woman would be an understatement, as she is much more than that. Assaad is a woman of the people; a woman on a mission. A mission that not only transformed the people she helped, but transformed an entire nation. Marie Assaad shined a light on vital issues, stimulated substantial projects, and paved pathways to success.

Diane Mariechild's quote, "A woman is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform," exquisitely represents and characterizes Marie Assaad.

Edited by: Maryam Meshal