

# Doria Shafik

Born 1908. Campaigner for women's rights.  
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# 1. Introduction



*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Wikipedia website at [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org).*

Doria Shafik (1908 – 1975) was an Egyptian feminist, poet and editor, and one of the principal leaders of the women's liberation movement in Egypt in the mid-1940s. As a direct result of her efforts, Egyptian women were granted the right to vote by the Egyptian constitution.

## **Early life**

Doria Shafik was born on 14 December 1908 to Ahmad Chafik and Ratiba Nassif in Tanta, Egypt. She studied in a French mission primary school in Tanta and a Tanta secondary school for girls in Tanta until 16 years then studied in Cairo to study last 2 years of secondary education called baccaloria . At the age of 18 she became the one of first Egyptian girls to earn the degree of baccaloria secondary school . She was awarded a scholarship by the Egyptian Ministry of Education to study at the Sorbonne University in Paris.

She also studied for a PhD in philosophy at the Sorbonne. She wrote two thesis, one refuting the merely utilitarian ends generally associated with Ancient Egyptian art, and the second, arguing about recognised women's equal rights. She was awarded her PhD (Doctorat d'Etat) with high qualifications (Mention très honorable). In 1935 and as a girl in Egypt, she entered a beauty pageant, which sparked controversy. While in Paris, Shafik married Nour Al Din Ragai, a law student who was also on scholarship and working on his PhD.

## **Career and activism**

Upon her return from France to Egypt in 1940, Shafik hoped to contribute to the education of her country's youth, but the dean of the Faculty of Literature of Cairo University denied her a teaching position on the pretext that she was "too modern."

In 1945, Princess Chevicar, the first wife of Egypt's then former King Fuad I, offered Shafik the position of editor-in-chief of *La Femme Nouvelle*, a French cultural and literary magazine addressing the country's elite. Shafik accepted the position, and with Chevicar's death in 1947, took complete responsibility for the magazine, including its financing. Under her direction *La Femme Nouvelle* gained regional status. Also in 1945, Shafik decided to publish an Arabic magazine, *Bint Al Nil* (Daughter of The Nile), intended to educate Egyptian women and to help them to have the most effective role possible within their family and their society. The first issue came out in November 1945 and was almost immediately sold out. In 1948 Shafik created the *Bint Al Nil* Union, to help solve women's primary social problems and to ensure their inclusion in their country's policies. The union also worked to eradicate illiteracy by setting up centres for that purpose throughout the country, set up an employment office and a cafeteria for working women.

## **Storming Parliament**

In February 1951, she managed to secretly bring together 1500 women from Egypt's two leading feminist groupings (*Bint Al-Nil* and the Egyptian Feminist Union). She organized a march of people that interrupted parliament for four hours after they gathered there with a series of demands mainly related to women's socioeconomic rights. Mufidah Abdul Rahman was chosen to defend Shafik in court in regards to this. When the case went to trial, many *Bint al-Nil* supporters attended the courtroom, and the judge adjourned the hearing indefinitely. However, in spite of receiving promises from the President of the Senate, women's rights experienced no improvements.

## **Female military unit**

In 1951, Shafik "started a uniformed paramilitary unit of the Daughters of the Nile". In January 1952, she led a brigade of its members to surround and shut down a branch of Barclays Bank, though she was arrested by the police when the demonstration turned "rowdy".

## **Bent El-Nil Party**

After the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, Doria Shafik requested government recognition of *Bent El-Nil* as a political party, with Doria Shafik herself as its president, which the government accepted to grant.

## **First hunger strike**

On 12 March 1954, Doria Shafik undertook an eight-day hunger strike at the press syndicate, in protest at the creation of a constitutional committee with no women on it. She ended her strike upon receiving a written statement that President Naguib was committed to a constitution that respected the rights of women.

## **Trip around the world**

As a result of the interest sparked by her hunger strike, Doria Shafik was invited to lecture in Asia, Europe and the United States about Egyptian women. She travelled to Italy, England, France, the United States, Japan, India, Ceylon and Pakistan.

## **Right to vote**

As a result of Doria Shafik's efforts, women were granted the right to vote under the constitution of 1956, with the proviso, however, that they must be literate, which was not a prerequisite for male voting.

## **Second hunger strike**

In 1957 Shafik undertook a second hunger strike in the Indian embassy, in protest over President Gamal Abdel Nasser's dictatorial regime. As a result, she was put under house arrest by Nasser, her name was banned from the press and her magazines from circulation.

## **Literary work**

In addition to her magazines, Shafik wrote a novel, *L'Esclave Sultane*, several volumes of poetry published by Pierre Fanlac, her own memoirs which is translated into many languages.

## **Seclusion and death**

Following her house arrest Doria Shafik led a solitary life, even when her movement was no longer restricted. She spent her last years reading, writing and mainly in the company of her daughter and grandchildren. She came to her death after falling from her balcony in 1975. The New York Times regretted not printing her obituary and finally printed one in 2018.

## **Personal life**

Shafik married Nureldin Ragai in Paris in 1937. He would go on to become a prominent lawyer in Egypt and to support all of her efforts. They were together for 31 years and had a daughter Jehane.

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## 2. Daughter of the Nile

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Cairo Review at [www.thecairoreview.com](http://www.thecairoreview.com). It was written by Nadeen Shaker and was published in Spring 2018.*

### **Daughter of the Nile: A profile of Egyptian feminist and founder of *Bint Al-Nil* journal Doria Shafik.**

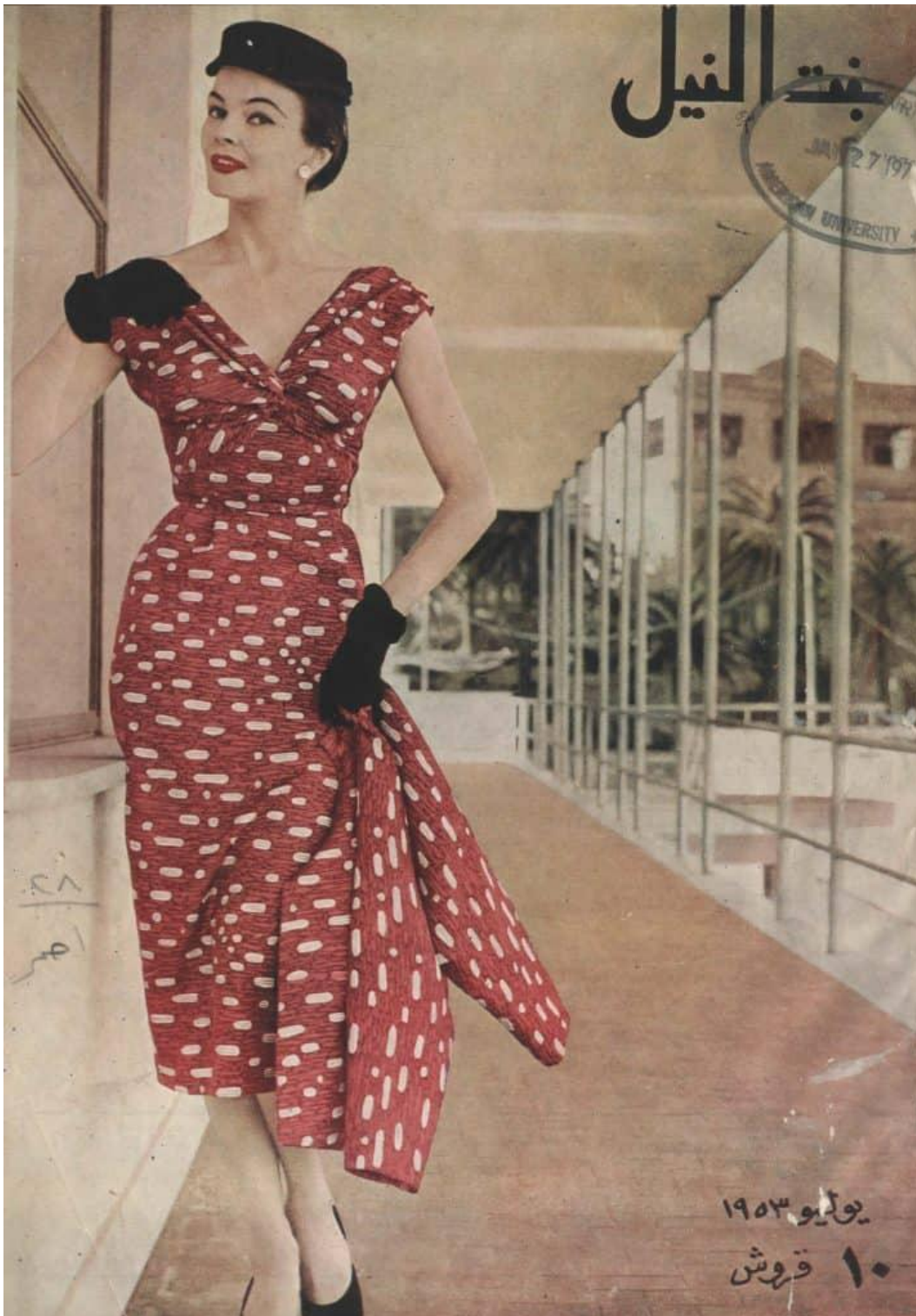


*Doria Shafik. Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library/Van Leo Collection.*

Doria Shafik, Egypt's best-known feminist and suffragette, started the women's journal *Bint Al-Nil* at a low point in her life. She wanted to counter the public's image of her as being "too French." As editor-in-chief of *La Femme Nouvelle*, a Francophone culture magazine, Shafik was often associated with its publisher Princess Chevikar, the vengeful and publicly hated divorcee of King Fouad of Egypt. This association caused Shafik to be excluded from the Egyptian Feminist Union and regarded as one of Chevikar's opulent "ladies of the *salon de thé*"—a tea-sipping detached elite, removed from the suffering of common Egyptians. Moreover, Shafik was bored with her job as a French-language inspector in the Education Ministry, and was frustrated with the limited progress made on women's rights in her country. Her burning desire was to enter public life. To her, journalism was the gateway into that world.

The glossy Arabic-language *Bint Al-Nil* journal appeared on newsstands in November 1, 1945. It sold out within the first two hours, and did not stop

circulating until 1957, when the government forced its closure. With a name derived from Shafik's own self-identification as the "daughter of the Nile," the purpose of the journal was to awaken Egyptian and Arab women to the women's rights movement.



*July 1953 cover for Bint Al-Nil Journal. Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library.*

Looking through the select articles of the journal made available by the American University in Cairo, one encounters an archetypical lifestyle

magazine, featuring motherhood tips, philanthropic news and profiles of celebrated women in history, but the occasional dip into activism is hard to miss. Shafik used *Bint Al-Nil* as a platform to broadcast her radical feminist voice and promote better conditions for women.

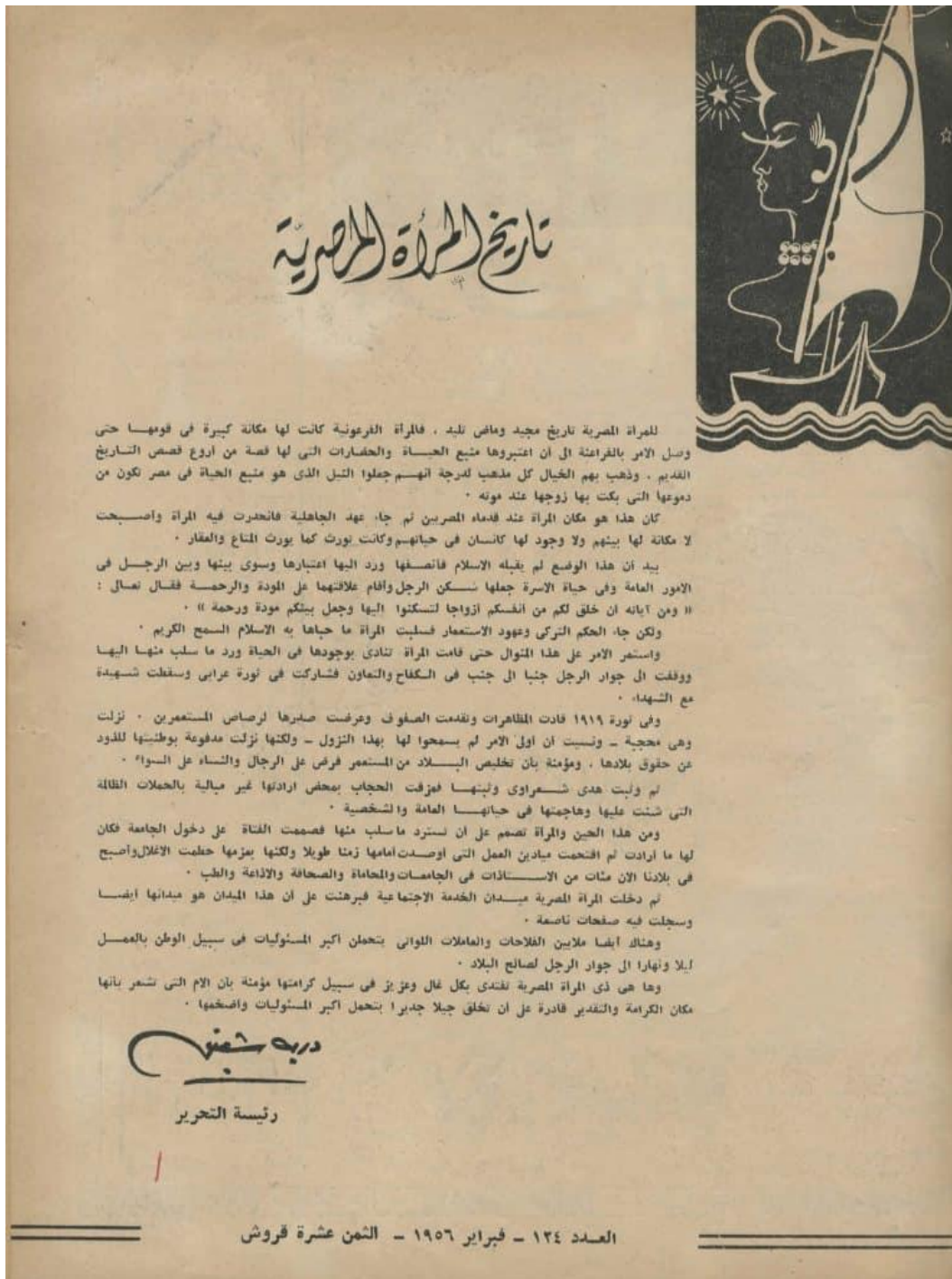
The magazine successfully turned heads at a time when the women's movement was buried in the heightened nationalism that marked the run-up to the Gamal Abdel Nasser-led revolt against the British and the ruling monarchy in 1952. Close reading reveals the evolution of Shafik's own intellectual thought and entrance into public life, which led her to some of the most profound feminist undertakings in her lifetime and in the Egyptian suffrage movement.

The journal also raises questions about the difficulties of generating a feminist discourse within a culturally impenetrable and patriarchal society in a country that gave women the right to vote only in 1956. As the editor, publisher, and owner of *Bint Al-Nil*, Shafik faced such challenges head-on. The first such challenge came from within the publication.

In the first two years of *Bint Al-Nil*, Shafik's editorial partner, Ibrahim Abdu, toned down her language in her editorials after they had been translated from French in order to avoid the "Al-Azharites' immediate wrath and violent opposition to *Bint Al-Nil*." At the time, Abdu claimed that Al-Azhar—Egypt's top religious body—was strongly against women entering the same workforce as men. Aware of the mounting opposition to her project, Shafik fought hard to maintain editorial and financial independence.

By 1949, four years after the journal's launch, Shafik was fighting criticism from the public and the press that she was inciting women to ignore their domestic responsibilities and engage in politics. Three times during the span of a year, she churned out editorials defending her publication's mission and identity, arguing that it was neither a political organization nor did it aim to embolden women against religion. In the May issue of 1949, Shafik maintained that the magazine only hoped to encourage women to fight for their political rights. That women's lack of political emancipation was at the core of their oppression pervaded Shafik's feminist thinking.

In another editorial, she scoffed: "What will our men in Paris say when they are asked about the status of women in political life? Do they say they are at its bottom? [...] Or do they say that they are at its zenith but are not equal to an illiterate carpenter or shoemaker who can fingerprint the ballot." She signs off the piece with a call to parliament to grant women suffrage.



An editorial written by Doria Shafik in the February 1956 issue of *Bint Al-Nil* journal. Courtesy of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library.

Understandably, Shafik was locked in a fight with the public, whose antagonism toward her was deepening. As she intensified her efforts to bring women political and social rights such as curbing one-sided divorce and polygamy, her foes multiplied. In 1948, when she created a union named after the journal, she came under attack from the clergy, conservatives, and progressives alike, and even the older generation of feminists, who were students of famed feminist Huda Al-Shaarawi. Although Shafik's feminism reconciled Islam with equality and modernity



and aimed to reconceive public life for women through political participation, her beliefs were hardly tolerated.

Against this backdrop, Shafik's political consciousness radically shifted from a bourgeois understanding of women's rights to a more class-conscious, and later militant, kind of feminism. By the early fifties, Shafik began to enter the political fight, Marxist lawyer Loutfi Al-Kholi, who was involved in the work of the magazine, noted. "She transformed *Bint Al-Nil* into a movement that related the liberation of women to the larger political struggle," he is quoted in Cynthia Nelson's biography of Shafik as saying.

In February 1950, an intensity emerged in Shafik's writing. In an editorial addressed to the Egyptian prime minister, she writes with incisive irony: "Why are we doubting the prime minister's words? Didn't His Excellency, Mustafa Al-Nahas, announce last summer that the Wafd [Party's] primary goal was to grant Egyptian women the right to vote?" It was time to change tactics, she added—"to assail men, surprise them right in the middle of injustice, that is to say, under the cupola of parliament." Her bold words hinted at a major protest that she was planning.

In the afternoon of February 19, 1951, Shafik, along with 1,500 women, stormed parliament. They held a four-hour demonstration before being received in a parliamentary office and extracting a promise from the president of the senate to take up their demands for suffrage, amendments to the personal status law, and equal pay with men. Although a draft bill was in the pipeline, the prime minister blocked shepherding it through parliament.

Shafik stood trial for staging the sit-in, and her case was postponed indefinitely. Then, after a group of army officers calling themselves the "Free Officers" took over the country in July 23, 1952, things slightly looked up: Shafik praised the new rulers and wrote that they would herald "the beginning of a renaissance" for women. But the officers' authoritarian bent soon became apparent, and in response to the lack of female representation on the constitution-writing committee, Shafik held a hunger strike.

Lasting for ten days, the strike turned Shafik into an international figure and earned Egyptian women a written promise by the government for full political rights. However, the 1956 constitution granted women only vaguely-worded political rights on the condition of literacy. Unassuaged, Shafik headed an all-out confrontation against Nasser, protesting in the Indian embassy and holding a "hunger unto death" strike against what she viewed as his dictatorial rule. Nasser himself ordered Shafik's house arrest and banned her publication. Shafik withdrew into an eighteen-year period

of seclusion before allegedly throwing herself off the balcony of her apartment.

Shafik's solitary demise was shocking for a woman who had pioneered feminist consciousness-raising and championed women's suffrage and advancement for many years. Her publication and organizing are key to Egyptian women's emancipation even today. Finding solace in poetry during her final days, Shafik reflects on her broken legacy and the lone march ahead: "My name begins with a D/and I am a woman... Daughter of the Nile/I have demanded women's rights/My fight was enlarged to human freedom/And what was the result?/I have no more friends/So what?/Until the end of the road/I will proceed alone." But it is only after her death that Egypt began to mourn the loss of Shafik and understand the sacrifices she has made for feminism.

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### 3. A Personal Tribute

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Women of Egypt Mag website at [www.womenofegyptmag.com](http://www.womenofegyptmag.com). It was written by Alexandra Kinias and was published in December 2018.*

#### Dinner With Doreya Shafik on her 110th Birthday



A reporter once asked me, if I could have dinner with one Egyptian woman, dead or alive, who would it be? My instant response was Doria Shafik.

Doria died when I was 11-years-old. She ended her life by ‘plunging to her death’ out of her balcony at the age of 67. I never heard of her before her death, and I am ashamed to admit, I didn’t learn about her accomplishments until decades later.

Doria was not an ordinary woman. She was a feminist, a poet, a philosopher, an editor, founder of *Bint El Nil* (Daughter of the Nile) magazine and *Union*, which became the first and only women party in Egypt. A protégé and successor of Hoda Sharawy, the leader of the Egyptian suffragette movement, Doria’s activism led to major changes for Egyptian women. Her life journey was challenging and inspiring, even by today’s standards – in spite of its dramatic ending.



Among the many amazing suffragettes who played substantial roles in leading and influencing the Egyptian feminist movement at the first half of the twentieth century, Doreya's name stands out. Not only she was the one who culminated their efforts, but who also took the fight for women rights beyond the social and educational levels to the political arena. Her efforts propelled the advancement of women political rights. Because of the pivotal activism, they gained the right to vote and have representation in the parliament. It was politics that galvanized her movement, gained her fame, made her an icon – but it was also politics that burned her at the end.

I often wonder what women status in Egypt would have been today had her advocacy and career not been interrupted by her house arrest.

Born on December 14, 1908, to a middle-class family in Tanta, Doria attended the Notre Dame des Apôtres School for her primary education. After her mother's death, she moved to live in Alexandria with her father. At 16, she became the youngest student to receive the French Baccalaureate and ranked 2nd place on the national level.

Doria, not your typical Egyptian girl in the 1920's, who would have been content to marry and start a family – she sought Hoda Sha'arawi's assistance to pursue her studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. Sha'rawi, who later became Doria's mentor, arranged with the Egyptian Ministry of Education for the financial assistance Doria needed for her scholarship.

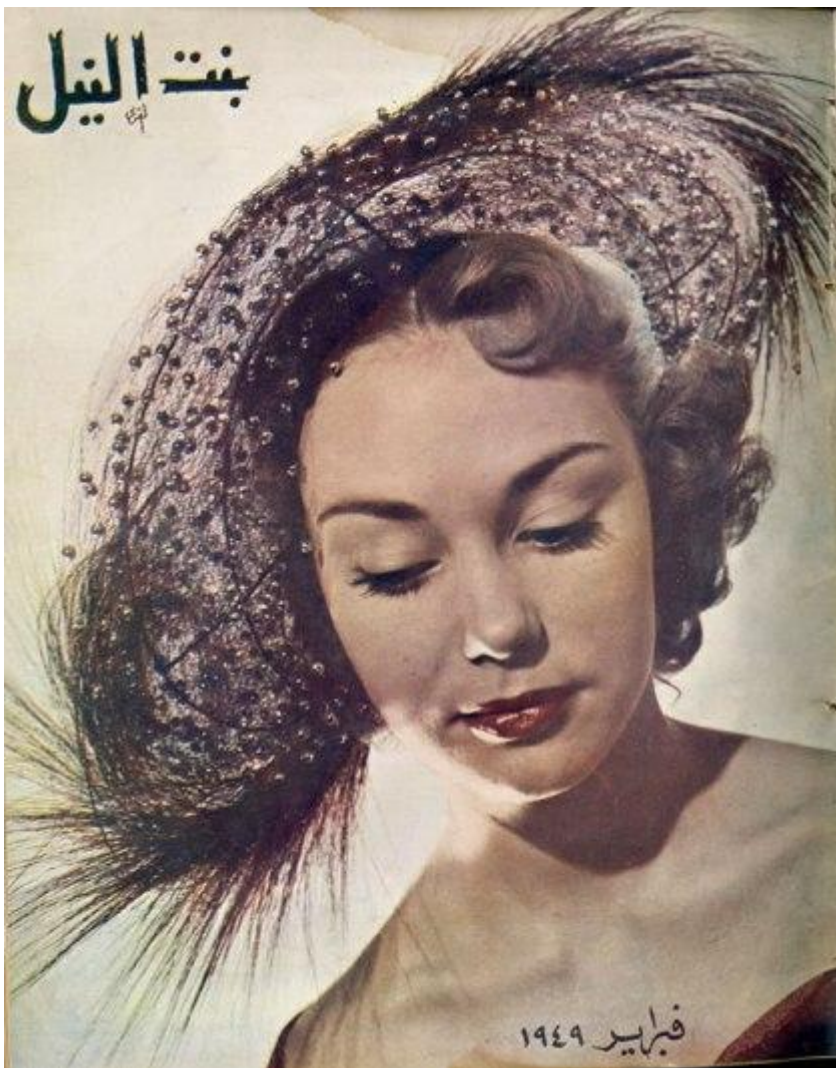


In 1928, at the age of 16, Doria moved to Paris. She completed her Licence libre and Licence d'état in 1932, a major achievement for the young Egyptian woman. The 4 years she spent in the French capital were transformational in influencing and developing her already progressive mind. They changed her perception on women's role in society and planted the seeds for the ideas that formed the journey she later led.



Doria had to return to Egypt to apply for a new scholarship for her PhD. Back in Egypt, she worked as a teacher at the girl's Lyceé. She felt alienated and constrained with the social pressures in general, especially the pressures put on her to marry. In the 3 years following her return from France, two major events took place in Doria's life. In 1935, she participated in Miss Egypt Beauty Pageant and was runner up. Her participation created controversy among her social circle. It was uncommon for a young woman of her stature to compete in such events. A rebel she was, Doria defended her action by saying, "In Paris I had asserted myself in the intellectual sphere. Now I wanted to assert myself in the feminine sphere."

After a short-lived marriage to journalist Ahmed al-Sawi, Doria returned to Paris in 1936 with a new scholarship, to obtain her PhD in philosophy. There, she met her cousin Nour al-Din Ragai, who was studying for his PhD in commercial law. They married in Paris. Together they had 2 daughters and were divorced in 1968.



*Cover of Bint Al Nil Magazine – Feb 1949.*

With a PhD from the Sorbonne in philosophy, Doria was denied a job, in 1939, to teach at the University of Cairo under the pretext that, “her beauty and modern style were not suited for the instruction of young men.” Instead, she worked for the Ministry of Education as a French language inspector in secondary schools throughout Egypt. She also took a job as an editor-in chief of the French language magazine *La Femme Nouvelle*, founded by Princess Chevikar, King Fouad’s first wife.

Advocating to the affluent and the elites was not Doria’s main objective. She wanted to reach and educate the main stream Egyptian women about their rights and to guide them towards new political changes. To accomplish that, she realized she had to address them in Arabic. She launched her Arabic magazine, *Bint Al Nil*, which she followed by founding *Bint Al Nil Union*. The Union, which also strived to offer women jobs and eradicate illiteracy, became the first and only women political party after the 1952 Nasser’s military coup.



Doria created the first female military unit of Egypt, which consisted of 200 trained women. She became known as the militant activist. In 1951, she galvanized and led a demonstration of 1500 women. They marched down the streets of Cairo and stormed the gates of the parliament while in session, calling for the rights of women to vote and participate in the political life. They also demanded social reforms for women that included equal pay for equal work, limitations on polygamy and divorce – a request criticized and denounced by the religious institution. Nonetheless, she became a national celebrity.



*Doria Shafik on a hunger strike 1954.*



*Doria Shafik meets with president Mohamed Naguib.*

In 1954, Doria staged a hunger strike at the syndicate of journalists, alone at first. Later, she was joined by 14 of her colleagues. The hunger strike



lasted for 10 days to protest the absence of women in the constituent committee formed to draft the new constitution. The hunger strike caught the attention of national and international media. The women ended the strike after President Mohamed Naguib promised to ensure women political rights. In 1956, Egyptian women were granted the right to vote for the first time.

The hunger strike brought Doria international fame. She was invited to speak at women conferences and events worldwide. In 1954, news agencies named her as one of the most important women in the world. On the other hand, Egyptian authorities became less tolerant with her activism. She had crossed the line and was widely attacked in local newspapers and magazines.



*Doria Shafik on World Tour in 1954.*

When Nasser's regime began tightening its grip on publications, Doria fought head on with Nasser, in spite of the increasing criticism she widely received in the press. In a miscalculated decision, Doria staged a second hunger strike in 1957 at the Indian embassy. This time, she swam against the current alone. In a letter addressed to the UN, she demanded the Egyptian authorities to put an end to the dictatorial rule. On Nehru's personal intervention, Doria was allowed to leave the embassy without being arrested, but was put under house arrest. She lived for the next 18 years in seclusion.

Embarrassing Nasser in front of the world was an unforgivable mistake she paid dearly for. She lost her freedom. Her office was seized and her private documents destroyed. Her magazine was banned, her publications were confiscated, her party dissolved, and her name 'expunged' from the

Egyptian press and textbooks. And it goes without saying, she was not allowed to write. Doria was left to fade out of history.



*Doria Shafik on World Tour in 1954.*



*Doria Shafik on World Tour in 1954.*

What was worse than locking her up was to erase her from life, while she was still alive. The consequences of her house arrest not only affected her, but women in general. With her disappearance from the scene, women movement came to a halt. It's a shame how the torch she carried was left to burn out.

Even though her name was intentionally wiped out from history books, women in Egypt, without knowing her tragic story, are enjoying their political rights because of her remarkable achievements.

If I had the chance to dine with her, I would like to know her opinion of women's status in Egypt today, and what advice she would give them.

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## 4. Note on the Author



*The following profile of Alexandra Kinias (above), the author of the preceding chapter, was achieved in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Linked In website at [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com).*

Alexandra Kinias is screenplay writer, novelist, women rights advocate and a freelance market research consultant on Egyptian women's issues. Her passion for movies, books, art, travel and women issues and empowerment is reflected in her writings and advocacy.

Born and raised in Egypt, Kinias is bilingual. She writes in English with the same proficiency as in Arabic. Kinias graduated with a BSc. in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Alexandria in Egypt. She pursued her passion for writing after she moved to America. She studied creative and screenplay writing and took fiction writing and critique classes with a writing coach. Her English self-published fiction *Black Tulips*, is inspired by her life growing up in a male dominant society. Her Arabic book, *Cleopatra and her Sisters*, is a satirical collection of stories about women's relationships in Egypt.

She co-wrote the movie *Cairo Exit*, a drama about a forbidden love affair between a Coptic Christian woman and a Muslim man. The movie received international recognition and was screened in Tribeca, Dubai Film Festival and Washington Arabian Nights Festival. It also won best non-European Film in the Independent European Film Festival. Her screenplay "Leila's World" was short listed among best 10 screenplays at RAWI Screenplay Lab in Jordan.

Kinias is dedicated to gender equality, in Egypt and around the world. In the age of social media and cyber connectivity, Digital Advocacy has become a powerful and influential tool and as effective as on-site advocacy. With that in mind, and capitalizing on the growing power of social media, Kinias founded Women of Egypt Initiative, a Green Social Digital Advocacy platform with over 650,000 global followers that aims to empower Egyptian women and reinvent the advocacy movement by bringing into focus important issues and positive change.

Building on that success, Kinias also founded Women of Egypt online magazine to spread the message. With only a small group of volunteers and a lot of hard work and dedication, Women of Egypt (WOE) has become an international platform and the voice of Egyptian women often quoted and sought by media and organizations around the globe.

She also gives presentations about women's issues and status in Egypt to American audiences. She works as a fiction writing coach and content editor. Her articles are published in various newspapers, magazines and blogs in MENA and the U.S.

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