



HAL
open science

Fashion victims and patriotic consumers: clothing consumption and its political and gendered issues in Lebanon during the French Mandate

Marie-Laure Archambault-Küch

► **To cite this version:**

Marie-Laure Archambault-Küch. Fashion victims and patriotic consumers: clothing consumption and its political and gendered issues in Lebanon during the French Mandate. *History of Retailing and Consumption*, 2023, pp.1-20. 10.1080/2373518X.2023.2169297 . hal-03963538

HAL Id: hal-03963538

<https://hal.science/hal-03963538>

Submitted on 30 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Fashion victims and patriotic consumers: clothing consumption and its political and gendered issues in Lebanon during the French Mandate

Keywords: consumption; Lebanon ; clothing ; Modern Girl ; taste ; women's movement.

Clothing as a tool to understand the gendered politicization of consumption

In 1936, a new advertisement for Standard, an American shoe company distributed in Beirut by Najjar & Bros, was published in the Lebanese magazine *al-Mar'ad (The Exhibition)*. Depicting two children next to a series of shoes, the illustration showed the boy shouting 'Mama', his hands raised to the sky¹. The advertisement clearly suggested that dressing the children was a mother's duty, and one that was necessary to ensure the happiness of one's offspring.

This article analyses the construction of sartorial consumption as a political and gendered issue at a time of nation-building. Since the end of the 19th century in Lebanon, the political dimension of consumption stemmed from a context of quasi-colonial domination and foreign economic interference and could not be separated from the assertion of the urban middle class. Clothing played a special role in the definition of the nascent middle class. In a multi-religious and cosmopolitan city such as Beirut, more and more signs of a Westernized lifestyle became visible at the end of the Ottoman era and during the French Mandate. This Westernization involved all aspects of material life such as furniture, home decoration, beauty products. The adoption of a Westernized attire mattered particularly because of the special role it played as a distinguishing sign in the social sphere. This sartorial Westernization and the hybrid appearance it resulted in characterized the nascent middle class.

¹ *Al-Mar'ad*, 3 May 1936, p.5. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

Distinctions still existed between confessional groups: thus, after World War I, most Beirut Christian women from the middle class abandoned their face veil. Practices and norms of Muslim women of the upper class varied greatly in this matter. On the contrary, across confessional groups, consumption was considered a social distinctive feature. As they displayed a desire to be modern yet authentic, these social groups expanded the consumption of clothes to function as a political tool. The agents whose discourses are examined in this present work were members of civil society, as perceived through visual contents and articles from press titles.

After World War I and until the end of World War II, Lebanese and Syrian territories were under foreign domination as the French Mandate was set up. The Mandate system was supposed to promptly lead to independence but took a colonial hue. It favoured the French economic position, in a context of Western commercial ascendance. Dress was especially important in this matter, as many textiles were imported from European countries. Since the second half of the 19th century, British, French, Swiss, and Austrian textiles were used to make both European and ‘traditional’ clothing. This was a paradox as the region had traditionally been home to an important textile industry. The importation of textile from Western countries continued through the beginning of the 20th century. During the French Mandate period, Japanese silk and cotton textiles were increasingly imported. This massive introduction of foreign textiles was at the forefront of debates about consumption and nationalism.

This research inserts itself within a trend of scholarly works aiming to better understand the politicization of consumption in the Middle East in the late Ottoman era and after World War I. Such historiographic developments have highlighted how issues of nationalism, gender, and consumption were articulated. Mona Russell showed how, in Egypt, consumption and home management shaped the ideals and realities of the ‘New Woman’². In a volume he edited, Relli Shechter insisted on the connections between the domestic life and larger social and cultural transformations, both from a

² Russell, *Creating the New Egyptian...*, p.6.

symbolic and tangible perspective. This present work seeks to apply and interrogate his assertion that 'resistance and agency of local consumers play a crucial role in determining' consumption patterns³ to the sphere of clothing, while aiming to analyse the political scope of clothing shopping practices. In a perspective of social history, Toufoul Abou-Hodeib showed how consumption strongly participated in the definition of the middle class in late Ottoman-era Beirut⁴. All these works embedded clothing in the politicization of consumption, but this paper aims to specifically investigate the way clothing articulated in a specific way gender and consumption. Thus, this reflexion also benefits from a field of studies looking into body and fashion as key to understanding the development of modernity in the Middle East⁵.

Clothing represents a particularly relevant realm to examine the relationship between gender, consumption, and political issues in Lebanon during the 1920s and 1930s. First, dress was an active object in the construction of political culture⁶. It bore a very strong political significance while allowing to set oneself socially apart. Moreover, looking at relations between clothing consumption and politics makes it inevitable to include gender as a category of analysis. Clothing and textile contributed significantly to the formulation of gender roles, while consumption of sartorial items could contribute to rigidify as well as twist these gendered norms⁷. Lastly, in Mandatory Lebanon, the textile and clothing industries specially suffered from Western competitors. This competition led to growing nationalist tensions. Because feminine fashion became a major part of this commercial rivalry, women were seen as politically sensitive figures of clothing consumption. The issue was also embedded in heated debates between rival definitions of authenticity and modernity, which situated women at the core of these values. Normative and illustrative sources, such as caricatures and articles from women's journals, reveal a discourse that conceptualized the figure of women buying

³ Shechter (ed.), *Transitions in Domestic Consumption...*, p.2.

⁴ Abou-Hodeib, *A Taste for Home...*, p.2-3.

⁵ Lewis and Nachabe Taan (ed.), *Fashioning the modern Middle East...*, p. 35.

⁶ Sorba, "Writing the appearances...", p.535.

⁷ Auslander, « Culture matérielle, ... », p.178.

clothes as constitutive of the process of building an independent nation. Why and how were women identified as crucial though problematic clothing consumers?

The analysed caricatures were published in *al-Dabbūr (The Hornet)*, a major satirical magazine from the period. Caricatures are particularly useful visual sources to study the politicization of dress consumption because they convey some of the mental schemes shared by the readership. Cartoonists used complicity in representations they shared with their readers⁸. Caricatures also illuminated debates and anxieties stirring society during that time. They thus inform not only norms but also how challenged and negotiated these norms were. The mobilised articles were published in *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda (The New Woman)*, *al-Khidr (The Boudoir)*, and *al-Hasnā' (The Beauty)* and dealt with issues of taste, sewing, and ways to support national manufacturers. These magazines acted both as a tool and a mouthpiece for the Lebanese women's movement, which developed mainly after World War I in Lebanon. It advocated for access to political and civil rights for women, while taking part in the struggle for national independence.

This paper adopts the approach of examining the two main types of documents and their discourses as both reflecting and participating in the changes during this period in the marketplace. The aesthetics and rhetoric are analysed within the context of representations of women as clothing consumers as developed in other parts of the world.

Fashion victims and national threats: overconsumption of clothes and its dangers

An immoderate love for fashion: women as impulsive, excessive buyers

Al-Dabbūr and women loving fashion

This section analyses the gendered archetypes associated with clothing consumption in caricatures. Mainly displaying feminine characters, these press illustrations were printed in the satirical magazine *al-Dabbūr*, founded in 1921 by Yūsuf Mukarzil in Beirut. It was consecutively

⁸ Georgeon, 'Women's Representations...', p.250.

edited by various members of the Mukarzil family (Michel, Fouad, and Richard) and came out continuously on a weekly basis until the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. It was considered the most popular satirical press during the French Mandate and was widely distributed throughout Lebanon⁹. As in Turkey, during the period following World War I¹⁰, women were a central subject for *Al-Dabbūr*'s cartoonists. Images of young women donning modern, Western-style dress were frequently published. A number of these illustrations demonstrate the relationship between gender anxiety¹¹, changing clothing practices, and the political dimension of consumption.

The initial aspect displayed is women's immoderate love for fashion¹². This fondness for fashion relates to discourse about fashion as a – mostly feminine – feature to discourage, in late-Ottoman-period debates about the values of authenticity, modernity, and moderation¹³. *Al-Dabbūr* frequently depicted frivolous young women resembling their European *flapper* sisters talking about fashion. Above all, these caricatures invoked the excessive spending associated with clothes. This feminine love for fashion was often depicted as morally and financially dangerous because it paved the way to overspending. Published in 1927, Figure 1 shows a man entering a room full of various types of hats. The caption reads, 'I swear my wife went to the *sūq* to buy [only] a hat'. The title – which probably refers to a Bedouin custom requiring a bride to visit her family a week after the marriage with food provisions, including butter, to show the abundance of her life – indicates a shopping craze, along with the many hats accumulated in the room.

[Figure 1 near here]

⁹ Nadine Méouchy estimates that 7000 copies are printed every week in 1929, which would make *Al-Dabbūr* the most widely distributed press title in Beirut at the time. See Méouchy, 'La presse ...', p.6. I sincerely thank Nadine Méouchy for her precious insight on the matter.

¹⁰ Georgeon, 'Women's Representations...' p.273.

¹¹ About gender anxiety in the Syrian and Lebanese press, see Thompson, *Colonial Citizens...*, p.171-172.

¹² An example is 'Love of Appearances', *Al-Dabbūr*, January 2nd, 1925, P.5 Consulted in the Special Collections and Archives section of USEK, Kaslik.

¹³ Abou-Hodeib, *A Taste for Home...*, p. 131-133.

Fashion imports and their cultural and economic consequences

The cartoon refers to the cultural dimension of the European imports, a major feature of the clothing market since the second part of the 19th century. As Western fashions and items became more readily available on the Lebanese market, the end of the 19th century witnessed the emergence of a middle-class culture, defined by the economic position of its members, their level of education, and a lifestyle characterized by a greater access to various commodities¹⁴. This characterization was especially true for Beirut, since being a port city exposed its inhabitants to a great deal of manufactured goods, whether imported or locally made. Beirut residents were exposed more frequently to foreign goods through department stores and advertisements. This saturation generated major cultural shifts, as women, a central group of consumers, craved and followed European fashion trends¹⁵. Because of the panic and distress the man is conveying, Figure 1 can also be read as alluding to men's anxiety to be unable to cater to their family's needs. Feminine overconsumption of clothes thus became not only a threat to men's manhood but also to the local economy itself.

Fashion was often characterized as an object of consumption prone to impoverish the population, especially if it was Western-produced¹⁶. The development of European fashion also had an economic impact in relation to the new consumption patterns. The unreasonable consumption of clothing items, designated as a specifically feminine flaw, was seen as increasing the dependence on foreign goods and, thus, hindering the access to national independence in both political and financial aspects. It was also these economic anxieties to which the abundance of hats displayed in Figure 1 referred.

[Figure 2 near here]

¹⁴ Abou-Hodeib, *A Taste for Home...*, p. 146.

¹⁵ Fleet, 'The Powerful Public Presence...', p.115-117.

¹⁶ For an example from the late Ottoman era, see Haddad, 'Ottoman Economic Nationalism...', p.75-84.

Published in 1929, Figure 2, entitled ‘Weightlifter’, depicts a dialogue between two men, one of them carrying a great deal of what appears to be clothing packages. The other one asks him: ‘Why did you change your habits and carry all the stuff?’ The man answers: ‘I got married...’. Here again, men are represented as victims of women’s immoderate consumption, displayed as dangerous to the financial and social balance of the family – and of society at large. Images of women buying too many clothes were also used by *al-Dabbūr*’s cartoonists as metaphors for undue spending in politics. In 1932, the magazine published Figure 3, entitled ‘The [Lebanese] Republic’s budget’, which represented a woman carrying packages twice, one image with only a few, and the other one with a stack of them in her arms. Under them is written ‘1922’ and ‘1932’. The caption added the mention ‘And if it goes on like this, we will carry the packages...!’, conveying the idea that the whole – manly? – nation was a victim of this *woman-like* government that spent more lavishly as years went by.

[Figure 3 near here]

Female shoppers as a threat to the social order: caricatures of the ‘Modern Girl’

The ‘Modern Girl’: a metaphor for local gender anxieties

From the late Ottoman era onward, consumption of clothing items contributed to discussions on values relating to authenticity and modernity; these debates took a clear political tone after World War I and the increasingly asserted claim of national independence. The notion of women consuming – or overconsuming – fashion became a minefield in the public opinion. Traditionally, women of the upper class purchased their clothes from door-to-door saleswomen, whose presence in the private sphere preserved gender segregation. Because of ‘modern’ patterns of consumption, women were more prone to be seen in gender-mixed spaces.

This was especially tangible in a modernizing city like Beirut, where public spaces, prone to mixing men and women, multiplied. During the late Ottoman era, the city witnessed the construction

of pedestrian, European-style streets that were crowded with shops and the opening of department stores, such as an Orosdi-Back offshoot.¹⁷ All these public spaces were visited by men and women. As in other Syrian and Lebanese cities, department stores attracted the most attention and business as mixed sites of consumption because they were built close to the financial district – almost exclusively male. Such practices of public space were considered a threat to the seclusion of women of the elite, a major requirement for the family's honour.

New patterns and spaces of consumption channelled political and social anxieties, as women's public presence in the marketplace proved difficult to control. Additionally, the visual content associated with press and advertising multiplied depictions of European fashion. These representations emphasized the globalization of women's consumption and established a connection between the purchase of European-style clothing and the loss of a so-called 'Arab' or 'Oriental' authenticity.

Published in 1935, Figure 4 reiterates the idea of women's shopping craze as a scourge for men having to endure the expenditures associated with it, but it also conveys another layer of meaning. The cartoon shows a woman and her husband chatting, both in European-style clothing, as numerous packages are scattered on the floor and the sofa. The wife complains about being 'tired after buying all these possessions but that [she] has cleared [her] head'. The husband answers that he – on the contrary 'has [his] pockets are cleared but [his] mind is full of worry'. What appears significant here is that not only the dialogue's tone and humoristic twist recall Figure 1 but also the drawing of the woman herself: as she sits, her legs are uncovered until high up her thighs, revealing her stockings. The cheeky aspect is emphasized by the way she sits with her legs widely open.

[Figure 4 near here]

¹⁷ Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, p.198-199.

This representation of a young, frivolous woman being offered to the viewer's eyes was far from an exception: over the years, *al-Dabbūr* published countless caricatures of women in suggestive poses with short clothes. Similar cartoons can be found in other Lebanese publications and Arab publications, in general. Along with postcards and paintings, these images constituted a body of widespread public representations of women from the 1920s. More often than not, the women depicted were scantily dressed, echoing and highlighting a fear that 'the desire their bodies were thought to provoke naturally in men symbolized a challenge and appeal to proper public behaviour'¹⁸. The role these images played was ambivalent to the public eye: presented in the pretence of supporting the idea of a modern, unveiled, sexually free woman, their intent was not to support political liberalism but to titillate the male readership¹⁹. This body of work can be designated as stereotypical representations of a 'Modern Girl'.

The figure of a 'Modern Girl' buying too many clothes and sporting improper attires, such as the woman depicted in Figure 4, probably referred to changes happening in public spaces. The 'Modern Girl' was seen both as dangerous, as she contested gender norms that epitomized notions of familial honour, and as endangered because her moral conduct could lead her to severe perils. Along with press articles describing crimes against women²⁰, caricatures such as Figure 4 not only expressed anxiety around women's consumption patterns and bodily behaviour in public spaces but also intended to regulate these fields of activity. In Figure 4, the contrast between the woman's shameless poses and outfit and the carefully buttoned coat of her husband could be seen as a criticism of this non-compliance with gender norms. These caricatures portraying the 'Modern Girl' evoked some real changes for women, who consumed clothing items and operated in the urban public spaces in new ways. The images also constituted a repulsive figure or as a red line for women

¹⁸ Scheid, 'Representations: Visual Arts: Arab States'.

¹⁹ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens...*, P.221

²⁰ *Ibid.*

not to cross regarding what they could do in terms of Westernization and of challenge to traditional gender standards.

The 'Modern Girl': a transnational figure of overconsumption

These localised concerns of feminine public behaviour and consumption should be considered in connection with the global emergence of figured and real 'Modern Girls'. These 'Modern Girls' were known under various names such as 'garçonnes' in France and flappers in the United States. They shared their consumption of products for bodily adornment and provocative femininity. New consumer patterns, global commodity and cultural flows, modernist aesthetics, and nationalist political claims characterized the period between World War I and World War II in many parts of the world. Similar visual representations of a 'Modern Girl' could be tracked down across the globe from that period²¹. Bobbed hair, an elongated body, and provocative clothing, identify the woman from Figure 4 as an example of these globalized representations. *Al-Dabbūr*, among other Lebanese magazines, published numerous cartoons of this 'Modern Girl', many of which were borrowed from European colonists and duplicated with an Arabic caption. Other ones were produced by Lebanese cartoonists themselves²². A mere portion of the illustrations published in *al-Dabbūr* were signed by their – Lebanese – author. By the first decades of 20th century, the practice of using a woman's image with erotic references to symbolise a perceived social and political decay already had a long tradition in European press; conversely it was a novelty in Lebanon that had all to do with the newly permissive diffusion of women's pictures in printing culture.

Looking at perceptions of the 'Modern Girl' from elsewhere offers an insight at the entanglement of specific and global issues around feminine consumption, especially pertaining to bodily ornaments. Indeed, some commodities such as 'high heels, cloche hats and fashionable, sexy clothes' were both globally advertised and identified with the notion of the 'Modern Girl'. Numerous

²¹ *The Modern Girl...*, p.2.

²² Scheid, 'Representations: Visual Arts: Arab States'

hats are scattered around the room in Figure 1, some of which are the cloche hats often associated with *garçonnes*. They convey the notion of overconsumption correlated to a modern form of femininity centred on commodities used to change the body's appearance²³. Consumption and gender anxieties thus seemed to be directly associated. These anxieties were not exactly a big novelty in the Middle East, as some caricatures from the late Ottoman era showed women as extravagant consumers²⁴. What shifted after World War I was the stereotyped dimension of these representations.

Analysing the caricatures from *al-Dabbūr* as localized outbreaks of the 'Modern Girl' enables a critical glance on this discourse regarding women's consumption of clothing, both in its specificities and its similarities with other parts of the world during the first part of the 20th century. In Lebanon and elsewhere, in the wake of the heavy diffusion of industrial commodities and the modern visual culture, the production of a new form of femininity centred on bodily ornaments created a huge social anxiety, which often focused on issues of consumption.

Shopping crazes make bad parents

Fashion and modern socializing as leading to bad parenting

In Lebanese and Middle Eastern societies of the first half of the 20th century, fashion commodities were an especially problematic realm of consumption, as they acted as a reflection of the link between the public and private spheres, the latter being traditionally confined to the family. In this way, the 'Modern Girl' constituted a conflicting archetype with the 'New Woman', another feminine figure that women's magazines developed. The 'New Woman' wasn't a figure specific to Lebanon, but she echoed localized notions of political womanhood in the double context of French domination and the strategies of the Lebanese women's movement to legitimize their claims for access to civic rights. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, the discourse about the redefinition of

²³ *The Modern Girl...*, p.19

²⁴ Brummett, 'Gender and empire...', p.281.

social roles of women in order to fully enter modernity – and thus gain political independence – multiplied. The term ‘New Woman’ stems from the title of a 1905 book by the Egyptian intellectual Qāsim Amīn in which he called for women’s liberation – with all the paternalism and ambiguities this notion could encompass. This ‘New Woman’ and the way she embraced her maternal duties were not depicted in *al-Dabbūr*’s caricatures. Rather, the cartoonists insisted on the threats fashion and a frivolous lifestyle posed to the families, hence to the nation itself.

[Figure 5 near here]

Two caricatures from *al-Dabbūr* exemplify the fear that some specific, ‘modern’ social conducts could lead to children’s neglect. Entitled ‘The Near Future’ from 1925, Figure 5 depicts two couples dancing, dressed in European fashion and with each of the wives carrying their baby in baskets on their back. The caption reads, ‘We will teach our children to dance with the milk’. In this cartoon, the satire as well as the admonition targeted both men and women. More than overconsumption, this cartoon criticized the new, expanding ways of socializing of the middle class: during the French Mandate, clubs, hotels, cafes, cinemas, and restaurants multiplied in Beirut and in other cities²⁵. These modern places of sociability drew in more women over the years. By putting the private realm of childrearing and the public space of social life side by side, Figure 5 portrays the charity balls’ enthusiasts as bad parents.

[Figure 6 near here]

Bad parenting also forms the subtext of Figure 6, entitled ‘Overload’, published in January 1935. It depicts two parents with their hands full of packages as they walk by shop windows with a boy at their side. The caption gives a voice to the child who says: ‘Daddy, daddy, carry me!’, but of course his dad’s arms are already full. The cartoon seemingly pointed to the excessive shopping

²⁵ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens...*, p.179

resulting from the Christmas period. Shopping for Christmas gifts, a new habit of consumption, was incorporated into the narrative of consumer culture as a factor of child neglect.

The 'Modern Girl' as a bad mother

Sometimes, the 'Modern Girl' was likened to a figure of a bad mother. As Elizabeth Thompson points out, frequent *al-Dabbūr* articles insisted that educated women were poor housekeepers. As a caricature entitled 'His Wife is Busy'²⁶ illustrates it, women's new extramural activities – and first of all their excessive shopping – led them not only to effeminate their spouse but, more severely, to neglect their family.

As the mundane dimension of the feminine movement's charity events became increasingly important over the years, cartoons such as Figures 5 could also act as a criticism of these activities. This hypothesis is even more plausible regarding Figure 5, as one of the major women's philanthropic actions was the Drop of Milk Society. Founded in 1922, its mission consisted in supplying poor mothers and their children with commodities such as sterilized milk, food, and clothing, along with medical advice. In this perspective, Figure 5 could be interpreted as a pithy response to these charities' perceived ambiguities.

These representations of a bad mother exceedingly invested in her shopping activities did not stand apart but coexisted with and contradicted other images of feminine consumption of clothing.

'The good shopper' and the nation: discourse and norms from women's magazines

Feminine magazines and the women's movement

This section aims to shift the perspective on women's consumption of clothing items by looking at articles from women's magazines, which constitute a complex historical subject. This press emerged, for the most part, after World War I. In the context of feminine 'revival' (*Nahda*),

²⁶ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens...*, p.171.

these magazines followed a literary, educational, and practical agenda. These magazines, most of which were active during the 1920s, constituted a community of readers within Syria and Lebanon that nourished the emerging women's movement. It was not specific to these territories, as titles published in other Arab countries circulated widely across borders. Among the major titles in terms of readership, *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* (*The New Woman*), founded in Beirut in 1921 by Julia Dimashqiya, should especially receive mention.

The magazines must be considered in the context of women's social and political actions in Syria and Lebanon. After philanthropy initiatives at the end of the Ottoman Empire, this movement really emerged after World War I. These women were invested both in social activism and the struggle for civil rights. In the early 1920s, the failure of the legislative struggle for women's suffrage led the movement's main figures to a new strategy to gain civil rights²⁷. As witnessed in European women's movements at the same time, the women's magazines proposed to demonstrate Lebanese women's patriotism in a wide range of material areas, including at home.

Through these magazines, the figures positioned themselves as 'model' wives and mothers in a quest to expand their civic rights: they claimed to be modern because they were educated and rational but, at the same time, authentic and attached to their homeland. This vision echoed and contradicted the representations of the 'Modern Girl' published in magazines like *al-Dabbūr*. This strategy also consisted of asserting an ability to effectively manage the home, including in very prosaic aspects. These issues took a patriotic turn when the concern for national consumption was displayed. Thus, the feminine press engaged with the most intimate yet political realm of modernization: the home.

Dhawq (taste) and moderate consumption as a political value for women to cultivate

²⁷ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens...*, p. 142.

Home as a place to cultivate taste

In the first decades of the 20th century, the home in Lebanon and beyond became a symbolically charged and intensely scrutinised matrix of morality and modernity, where notions of tradition and progress were questioned and executed through the fields of production and consumption. Home thus became a place for women to claim a public identity as citizens. From the beginning of the 20th century onward, new consumption habits and ideals increasingly connected the private and public spheres. During the French Mandate, being conscious of choices of consumption and active in the formation of the modern, national market became a distinctive feature of the 'New Woman' as developed by women's magazines.

The 'New Woman', a tasteful consumer?

In Lebanon, the notion of 'New Woman' was widely appropriated by the women's movement. Thus, it was not a coincidence that Julia Dimashqiya named her magazine *New Woman* in 1921. This figure should be considered both as a stereotypical, idealized image and as a reality. It was deeply connected to social disruptions and new commercial and consumption patterns, as mentioned above. The renewal of gender identities was also achieved through consumption, which enabled middle-class women to transform the definition of femininity according to their terms. New consumption patterns led to redefined notions of what was fashionable, decent, and even morally right. However, images of 'modern' women were ambivalent in the realm of consumption, as debates in the general press centred on the denunciation of an excessive, conspicuous feminine consumption.

Taste as a political value

At the same time, magazines such as *al-Hasnā'* (*The Beauty*) and *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* brought to the forefront taste as a value for women to cultivate. These journalists construed taste as a political notion and an argument for citizenship, as it applied to the consumption of everyday goods,

including clothing. The politicization of consumption in Lebanon began at the end of the 19th century as a way for the middle class, then in the process of articulating a distinct social identity, to appear as Ottoman and modern at the same time. The image of modernity to cultivate had to have an authentic overtone, qualified as ‘Oriental’ or even national after World War I. Westernization did not constitute a distinctive feature of the middle class per se. Many were very aware that material culture played a role in the nation’s future. As Toufoul Abou-Hodeib underlines it, ‘the politics and the relations of production between an industrialized world and its Middle Eastern markets embedded in these commodities reflected on their reception’²⁸. As foreign goods became affordable to a larger proportion of the population, consumption played a role in the refoundation and articulation of class distinctions. To guide customers through this range of foreign goods that department stores and advertisements made highly desirable, the press offered advice regarding taste (*dhawq* in Arabic).

These articles about advice urged the readership to favour authenticity and moderation in their consumption habits. They were part of a larger domesticity discourse demonstrating that home management was more than domestic work in the mind of social groups asserting their modernity. This narrative was largely intended for women, who were designated as responsible for instilling a concrete and specific sense of idealized middle-class taste in their homes. Still, it only became a distinctly gendered discourse when women’s magazines reclaimed this duty to support their claims to citizenship. In contrast to these narratives of authenticity, restraint in consumption constituted a globally produced middle-class value²⁹. One mission of the “New Woman” was to navigate among the market and to choose wisely the material goods – including clothes – not only for her but also for her children.

Educating to taste: articles about consumption norms and their ambiguities

²⁸ Abou-Hodeib, ‘The material life...’, P.584.

²⁹ Abou-Hodeib, *A Taste for Home...*, P.26.

As home became an increasingly political place in which to implement reforms, *Al-Hasnā'* and *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* published series aiming to educate their readership on issues related to taste. *Al-Hasnā'* was the first magazine in Syria and Lebanon dedicated to women, as it was first published in 1909 by Niqūla Bāz. It published two articles in 1912 under the title 'Education to taste'. Conversely, sections from *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* about taste were recurring. One section published throughout 1926 was entitled 'The sense of taste'. Between 1922 and 1927, other articles gave advice related to dress consumption, whether related to luxury or to the values related to fashion trends being promoted³⁰. From this viewpoint, taste could only be good or bad. Articles often referred to the *sahih* (correct) taste to acquire. It became not only a standard to distinguish lifestyles but also a feature to cultivate. Practical education on taste was not completely a novelty in the region. Since the Middle Ages and up until the late Ottoman era, prescriptive manuals indicated how to behave in social situations. Similarly, the Arabic word for taste (*dhawq*) referred to *adab*, i.e. the ethics of the cultivated man³¹.

Dress was an issue of taste from an aesthetical perspective, as well as other manufactured goods. *Al-Hasnā'* particularly gave advice aiming to convey the requirements for dressing tastefully as a modern yet authentic woman. In that sense, tasteful clothing meant articulating one's modernity with authenticity. That meant that European fashion items could be worn but also that some local principles had to be respected, such as the obscuring of the body's shape. Articles on fashion in a women's magazine such as *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* promoted virtues of thrift and taste, but they also encouraged the adoption of some European-style clothes. The magazine also published pictures of unveiled Muslim women, which were not common at the time.

Articles about how to dress tastefully devoted much attention to the question of consumption. Maybe as a response to the attacks on the supposedly excessive women's consumption of clothing,

³⁰ *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda*, August 1922, April 1926, January 1927, Consulted at Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

³¹ Abou-Hodeib, *A Taste for Home...*, p.126

articles from *al-Hasnā'* and *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* insisted heavily on thrift and rationality as central features of good taste. Conspicuous consumption was rejected as tasteless, and much effort was devoted to teaching the distinction between need and luxury. Even before the end of the Ottoman Empire, voluntary restraint was considered a middle-class feature. In the press, many advertisements directly addressed female consumers, especially regarding fashion items such as textiles and clothes. The articles thus handled issues faced by many middle-class women. The articles from *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* about taste also sought to convey the significance of helping the nation and its development by purchasing national textiles and clothes. More than in department stores or clothing stores, it was at home that the 'New Woman' could demonstrate her patriotic consumption of clothes.

Making and taking care of clothes as a feminine duty

Home as a place of clothing production

In late Ottoman-era press, articles about women as central domestic actors multiplied. As mothers and wives, women were deemed responsible for home as the territory of the nuclear family and the 'first school' of the citizen. While these duties seemed to reinforce notions of public/private and masculine/feminine, both girls' education and consumer culture redefined these dichotomies' boundaries. After World War I, middle-class women embraced new roles. As general purchasing agent and manager of the house, the 'New Woman' became responsible for its management. 'Scientific domesticity' not so much tied women to the redefined households than gave them a nearly professional status³². Articles from the feminine press used this maternal nationalism not only to push forward women's public presence but also to legitimate their claims to be recognized as citizens.

The hypothesis here is that the French Mandate became a period when these ideas of new, politically loaded, feminine duties became widespread and put into practice, especially in the realm of clothing. Various visual hints indicate the diffusion of the principle of women as responsible for

³² Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women...*, p.2.

the whole family's clothing, at least among reformist press and their readership. Thus, in 1927, among its 'Women's Issues' section, *al-Hadīth (The Modern)* used an illustration of a woman knitting³³. This Aleppo magazine featured articles about proper fashion manners. It used a didactic approach to propose a 'how-to manual for a modern middle-class lifestyle'³⁴ and displayed knitting as one of the 'New Woman's' features. Another indication of this feminine duty to dress the family's members is an advertisement issued in Beirut magazine *al-Mar'ad* in 1936. Promoting the American shoe company Standard, the illustration displays two children shouting 'Mama', and next to them, a series of kids' shoes³⁵. The caption insists on the cheap price of the items and indicates the location of the brand's distributor. The advertisement's assessment of the mother's duty to provide children with shoes incidentally suggests an apprehension of women's clothing consumption dramatically differing from *al-Dabbūr's* caricatures.

Julia Dimashqiya's *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* highlighted the practical responsibilities of women related to clothing at home. From 1922 to 1923, and then in 1927, the magazine offered a recurring 'tailoring and sewing' section, called 'crafts' in 1923. The instructions explained how to cut the fabric, put together the parts, and decorate a piece of clothing. They sometimes followed a pattern and suggested a selection of fabrics to use. There were also moral and practical comments about the purpose to pursue through sewing one's own clothes, which explicitly linked the section to the joint goals of home refoundation and feminine revival.

Out of 17 articles, nine pieces detailed a how-to manual for a children's clothing item. These could be a boy's shirt or a young girl's dress. One article even specified that the girl's dress was supposed to be worn at school, implying that norms of self-fashioning differed in that context³⁶. The focus on sewing children's clothing could have been to counter the accusations of frivolity around

³³ *Al-Hadīth*, 1927. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

³⁴ Watenpugh, *Being Modern...* P.45, 229.

³⁵ *Al-Mar'ad*, 3 May 1936, P.5. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

³⁶ See *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda*, respectively August 1922, September 1922, May 1922. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

women's interest for fashion. Thus, in the first occurrence of the 'tailoring and sewing' section, the instructions were preceded by a line of argument about why choosing 'elegant' clothes for one's children and seeking to embellish them was indicative of a good mother³⁷. Displaying the making of children's clothing as a modern woman's duty was a very genuine way to accentuate her responsibility and power at home. It also warded off representations of idle, lazy housewives associated with modern, Western women³⁸. On a daily and material basis, a clear distinction was established between unreformed upper-class women and the idealized, politically conscious 'New Woman'.

Other articles provided guidance to sew women's clothes, such as dresses, pyjamas, or jumpsuits³⁹. The articles encouraged women to display their sewing and embroidery skills by adding details⁴⁰. Thus, the section provided the notion that consumption was not always a matter of what to buy and in which quantities. Keeping up with European fashion trends was not rejected as tasteless or bad from a moral point of view, but it had to follow the principles of the women's renaissance movement: simplicity, moderation, and patriotism. On the contrary, fashion (referred to as *al-mūda*) was still criticized as the uncritical adoption of whatever came from Europe, as taste had to be localized in the national context⁴¹.

The 'tailoring and sewing' section was completed by another practical column dedicated to home management, which was not specific to *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda* but frequently addressed clothing. These articles explained how to wash, care, and iron clothing made of specific fabrics such as silk, wool, or coloured textiles⁴². This section was essentially about helping middle-class women become

³⁷ See *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda*, January 1922. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

³⁸ Kahlenberg, 'New Arab Maids...', p.459.

³⁹ *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda*, April 1922, November 1922, February 1923, March 1923, March 1927. Consulted at Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

⁴⁰ *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda*, January 1927, P.86. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

⁴¹ Abou-Hodeib, 'The Material Life...', p.481.

⁴² See *al-Mar'a al-Jadīda*, January to October 1924, 1926. Consulted at Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

modern and efficient housewives. The presence of such elements next to articles calling for the advancement of women's rights or praising the accomplishments of feminine leaders could seem paradoxical, but it was a very material way to implement an ideal of authentic yet modern femininity. Conveyed through the magazine's articles, the strategy of promoting this patriotic motherhood aimed to broaden the women's movement's appeal, but exalting domestic duties also served the promotion of women's access to civil rights. Securing the responsibilities of housewives at home was supposed to broaden their role in society at large⁴³.

The women's movement and the textile industry

The women's movement interest for the 'national textiles'

Magazines published by leaders of the women's movement also insisted on the difficulties faced by national industries and especially the textile sector. Within the 'Women's Actions' section of *al-Mar'a al-Jadida* regularly appeared mentions of figureheads of the movement visiting textile factories to support national manufacturers⁴⁴. Another magazine, *al-Khidr (The Boudoir)*, published a long article in 1927 entitled "National Industries"⁴⁵. The poor situation of Lebanese textile companies was explained, and ways to improve the state of affairs were offered.

Some suggestions directly involved leaders of the women's movement. For example, the beginning of the article related how the Women's Revival Society (*Jam'iyat al-Nahda al-Nisa'iya*) had organized a handicraft exposition to favour the purchase of local productions, especially in the realm of textile and clothing. The association was founded by Julia Dimashqiya, Ibtihāj Qaddūra, and others in 1924 to protect women's handicraft in the context of massive importations⁴⁶. The article also called for schools to make use of 'national textiles' for uniforms, with the idea that after

⁴³ Abou-Hodeib, 'The Material Life...', p.479, Thompson, *Colonial Citizens...*, p.142.

⁴⁴ For example, see *al-Mar'a al-Jadida*, January-February 1927. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

⁴⁵ *Al-Khidr*, January 1927. The magazine was published by Afifa Sa'b in Choueifat starting in 1919. Consulted in the microfilm section of Jafet Library, AUB, Beirut.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens...*, p.97.

graduating, girls would be influenced in their purchase choices and thus become patriotic consumers. More generally, the article reiterated the usual reformist idea that if the ‘educated’ women committed to purchase only locally produced clothing for themselves, it would lead women from popular classes to imitate them.

Nevertheless, the article did not limit itself to a strictly feminine sphere of action and encouraged the appropriation of production means. It also demanded the Lebanese government to support national manufacturers by heavily taxing the imports of foreign silk textiles and suggested that the Lebanese Republic’s president wore a national attire (*thawb*) to influence bureaucrats to do the same. Thus, the publishers of *al-Khidr* were not afraid to assert themselves not only as patriotic, politically conscious consumers but also as citizens with all rights to challenge the government about economic issues.

*Responses to the feminine movement’s claims for patriotic clothing
consumption*

[Figure 7 near here]

One last caricature from *al-Dabbūr* can be mobilized to perceive reactions to the women’s movement’s engagement with the patriotic consumption of clothing. In April 1928, the magazine published a cartoon precisely entitled ‘Promoting national industries’ (Figure 7). It displayed two ‘Modern Girls’ talking, both wearing the usual revealing attire. As the first woman wonders how to dress to support national manufacturers, the second one answers her: ‘Do as I do, wear a silk shirt, and the rest of *it* is a national merchandise’. The naughty undertone of the caption belittles the women’s movement’s actions. As the characters from the caricature were reduced to their appearance and supposed superficiality, the activism of the women’s movement as political agents asserting their legitimacy to take action in patriotic consumption matters was weakened. This type of

cartoon questions these activists' scope of action, as women would increasingly face critics when claiming a public, explicitly political presence as the 1930s transpired.

Conclusion

While women were frequently portrayed as frivolous, excessive clothing consumers, leaders and journalists of the women's movement acted to counter these accusations by highlighting both their moderate, tasteful management of clothing consumption at home and their support for the national textile industry in the public space. The sources analysed here call to adopt a cautious perspective and not judge the women's movement's actions as ineffective or an attempt to rigidify gender norms by reinforcing the relationship between femininity and bodily ornament. They demonstrated their agency in acting within a space they could navigate and with discourse they could mobilise to legitimise their claims. Home, as a space referred to as a feminine realm, could become a place where to start political action and to implement their own definition of femininity, while respecting gender norms.

Bibliography

Abou-Hodeib, Toufoul, "The Material Life of the Ottoman Middle Class", *History Compass* 10, n° 8, 2012, p. 584-95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2012.00866.x>.

A Taste for Home: the Modern Middle Class in Ottoman Beirut, Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2017.

Abu-Lughod, Lila (ed). *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2009.

Auslander, Leora, « Culture matérielle, histoire du genre et des sexualités : L'exemple du vêtement et des textiles ». *Clio*, n° 40, 2014, p.171-95. <https://doi.org/10.4000/clio.12163>.

Brummett, Palmira, “Gender and Empire in Late Ottoman Istanbul: Caricature, Models of Empire, and the Case for Ottoman Exceptionalism”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, n° 2 (2007): 283-302. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/220760>

Fleet, Kate, “The Powerful Public Presence of the Ottoman Female Consumer” in Boyar, Ebru, and Fleet, Kate, (ed.). *Ottoman Women in Public Space*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, p. 91-127.

Georgeon, François, “Women’s Representations in Ottoman Cartoons and the Satirical Press on the Eve of the Kemalist Reforms (1919–1924)” in Köksal, Duygu, and Falierou Anastasia (ed.). *A social history of late Ottoman women: new perspectives*, Leiden : Brill, 2013, p.249-280.

Haddad, Mahmoud, “Ottoman Economic Nationalism in the Press of Beirut and Tripoli” in Procházka-Eisl, Gisela, and Strohmeier, Martin (ed.), *The Economy as an Issue in the Middle Eastern Press*, Vienna: Lit-Verlag, 2008, p.75-85.

Kahlenberg, Caroline. « New Arab Maids: Female Domestic Work, “New Arab Women,” and National Memory in British Mandate Palestine », *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, n° 3, 2020, p.449-67. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743820000379>.

Kassir, Samir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, Paris : Perrin, 2003.

Lewis, Reina, and Yasmine Nachabe Taan (ed.), *Fashioning the Modern Middle East: Gender, Body, and Nation*, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021.

Méouchy, Nadine, « La presse de Syrie et du Liban entre les deux guerres (1918-1939) », *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, n° 95-98, 2002, p.55-70. <https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.226>.

Russell, Mona, *Creating the new Egyptian Woman: Consumerism, Education, and National Identity, 1863-1922*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Scheid, Kirsten, "Representations: Visual Arts: Arab States", in Suad Joseph (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, p.549-551.

Shechter, Relli (ed), *Transitions in Domestic Consumption and Family Life in the Modern Middle East: Houses in motion*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Sorba, Carlotta. « Writing the history of appearances and politics », *Contemporanea*, n°4, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1409/88340>.

The Modern Girl around the World Research Group (ed.), *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Watenpaugh, Keith, *Being Modern in the Middle East. Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.