

Renowned Egyptian feminist, author, activist Nawal El-Saadawi dies at 89

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Nawal El-Saadawi

Renowned Egyptian feminist, author, and activist Nawal El-Saadawi, who championed women's rights for decades, died on Sunday at the age of 89.

El-Saadawi was born on 27 October, 1931 in Qalioubiya governorate in the Nile Delta.

Throughout her career, she authored tens of important books such as *Al-Mar'a Wi Al-Gins* (Women and Sex), *Imra'ah E'end Noktat Al-Ssifr* (Woman at Point Zero), *Kasr Al-Hodoud* (Breaking the Barriers), *Mozakerat Fi Sign Al-Nnissa'* (Memoirs in the Women's Prison), and *Ma'raka Gadidia Fi Kadeyat Al-Mar'ah* (A New Battle in Women's Issues).

She also authored a number of books on the subject of women in Islam.



El-Saadawi was a strong voice against the phenomenon of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Egypt and the Arab World.

She was described by many as the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab World, in reference to the famed French feminist and author.

El-Saadawi often referred to herself as Nawal Zeinab El-Saadawi to honour the contributions of her own mother — Zeinab.

Her own daughter followed in her footsteps and used Nawal as a middle name.



El-Saadawi was the founder and president of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association and co-founder of the Arab Association for Human Rights.

She was awarded honorary degrees from three continents.

In 2004, she won the North-South Prize from the Council of Europe. She also won the Inana International Prize in Belgium in 2005 and the International Peace Bureau awarded her the Seán MacBride Peace Prize in 2012.

El-Saadawi graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University in 1955.

Her background as a physician, who was in frequent contact with female patients, allowed her to learn firsthand the issues that women face and the effects they have on them.

She also learned about the issues women could not speak about, such as being subjected to FGM, domestic violence, social repression, and sexual assault.

In her famous book, Women and Sex, she discusses the kinds of violence that women experience in Egypt, including harsh rural rituals to preserve a girls' virginity.

Women and Sex became very seminal in the feminist movement in Egypt in the 1960s and was translated to various languages.

In 1981, she founded a feminist magazine called Al-Moawgaha (The Confrontation).

Later that year, she was imprisoned by then-President Anwar El-Sadat, who deemed her views too radical for society and the state.

El-Saadawi once stated in an interview, "I was arrested because I believed El-Sadat. He said there is democracy, and that we have a multi-party system that allows for criticism. So, I started criticizing his policy and ended up in jail."

While in prison, she formed the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, which was one of the first legal and independent feminist groups in Egypt.

While in prison, she decided to write her memoirs, but she was denied a pen and paper, so she used a black eyebrow pencil and a small roll of toilet paper to record her thoughts.

After her release from jail following Sadat's death, she published her memoirs under the title 'Memoirs from the Women's Prison'.



El-Saadawi's views stirred controversy throughout her career. For example, she was a critic of the phenomenon of Muslim women wearing the hijab, describing the practice as succumbing to a "form of slavery". She also opposed all forms of polygamy, which is not prohibited in Islamic jurisprudence.

She was married three times. El-Saadawi married her last husband, Sherif Hatata - a well known physician, writer, and socialist - in 1964. The couple was divorced in 2010.

El-Saadawi is survived by two daughters.

Mohammed Saad

P.S.

• Ahram. Sunday 21 Mar 2021:
<https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/407474.aspx>