

# Cross-dressing in Photographs of 1920s and 1930s Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon

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This issue will not be complete without the eclectic representation of women in the following intriguing photographs that I found while looking for photographs for this issue. All nine photographs are part of the Arab Image Foundation, an inspiring archive of photographs from the Middle East and North Africa.

The photographs defeat the binary association of women as feminine and men as masculine. Femininity becomes the site of cultural mediation, the sign of political and social challenge; it assigns new meanings to female subjectivity through cross-dressing, and in posing and acting as men. The women in the photographs look like they were ‘constructing’ or ‘reconstructing’ the image of womanhood while masquerading as men. By pretending to act like men in the photograph, they attempt to counter the predominant patriarchal system.

In plate A, taken in 1935, Marguerite is leaning against a low wall of the roof of a Jerusalem house smoking a cigarette, dressed up in a man’s suit. In plate B, taken around the same period, Adeline Abiad poses in a man’s suit in her sitting room in Haifa. She is also holding a cigarette and looking straight at the camera lens.

In plate C, Marie el-Khazen, a prominent photographer of 1920s Lebanon, and her sister, are both sporting a *tarboush* and men’s suits, and are sitting under their father’s portrait also sporting a *tarboush*.

Most of these photographs are staged portraits in which the photographer and the subject have carefully thought about what to include and what to exclude within the image in order to generate new meaning and assign new roles for women.



Plate A. Marguerite, dressed up as a man. Jerusalem, Palestine, 1935. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Alice Agazarian. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.

It seems that the photographer and the subject had thought about the choice of pose and background beforehand, as well as considered the subjects’ attire all of which had been meticulously arranged. It is as if the subjects in these photographs for reasons yet to be determined were mimicking an appearance while constructing themselves as men.

Notice the short bobbed hair *à la garçon* in plate I (p. 63), the white silk handkerchief tucked in the woman’s upper left pocket, a typical masculine

bourgeois, or dandy practice. In addition, the carefully chosen and confident pose, with one hand in the pocket, and the other leaning on the chair. The white bowling hat is another prop that is representative of the subjects' social class. This woman looks as if she sported a man's suit in order to pose as a man in the photograph.

This particular phenomenon of cross dressing did not necessarily occur in urban contexts; the photographs in plates C, E, and F were taken in the North of Lebanon. The act of masquerade in the photographs with a *tarboush*, commonly worn by men during the ottoman empire to indicate authority and higher education may have been imported from Egypt as seen in both photographs in plates D and G.

All photographs are evidence of a cosmopolitan life style that existed during this period in the region but is not well documented by the mainstream media today. They may represent freedom of expression and equal rights for women at the time.



Plate C. Dressed up as men. Zghorta, Lebanon, 1927. Marie el Khazen. Collection AIF/ Mohsen Yammine Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate B. Adeline Abiad - Abiad house. Haifa, Palestine, 1920-1930. Anonymous photographer. Collection AIF/ Aimée Sacy. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation



Plate D. Woman dressed up as a man Egypt. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Amgad Neguib Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate E. Woman dressed up as a man. Tripoli, Lebanon. Muhamad Arabi. Collection AIF/ Mohsen Yammine. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate F. Tripoli, Lebanon. Muhamad Arabi. Collection AIF. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation



Plate G. Fatma Ahmad Al Hussein dressed up as a man. Helwan, Egypt, 1926. Hilmy. Collection AIF/ Shahwar Hegazi. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation

Women appear liberated from attire restriction and social expectations on how to behave, pose and act as women. Most of these photographs are part of private collections and might not have been publicly accessible during the second decade of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that little information is available about these photographs today, I believe that it is worthwhile pursuing further research on this topics. Such photographs generate codes and associations that raise many questions about socially assigned gender roles, and open up new ways of looking into gender as an analytical category in writing history (Najmabadi, 2005).

While I am confident that there are many photographs of this genre yet to be discovered, I believe that a collection of photographs of this genre establishes a particular visual repertoire of Arab women in 1920s and 1930s Middle East and North Africa that can pave the way for critical writing on gender representation in photographs and on photographers in the region.

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Plate I. Woman dressed up as a man. Beirut, Lebanon, 1920-1930. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Azar-Choucair. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



Plate H. Woman in a riding costume. 1920-1930. Unidentified photographer. Collection AIF/ Azar-Choucair. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.

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