THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SEWING MACHINE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Can we write the social history of an object? It surely has been done, since we have studies dealing with such diverse “things” as certain items of clothing or furniture, the Persian rug, musical instruments, the machine gun, or even the potato. While focusing our investigation on a new mechanical or technological device or method, we must not, of course, neglect the human inventors, distributors and consumers. Even the introduction of small objects or inventions can sometimes have far-reaching consequences and they therefore qualify for a place in social history in the sense of Charles Tilly’s “How people lived the big changes”.1

“Do machines make history?” remains a crucial question. Although we would like to put man (and woman) in the center, we tend to accept the premise that machines (as well) do, with the proviso that “certain ‘cultural’ aspects” must be taken into consideration.2 This, indeed, is the point which needs elucidation: labor, gender, and social conditions differ from country to country, from era to era, or from one social class to another. We also have to bear in mind, that there is no point in repeating what is obvious or banal with regard to the introduction of new European or American inventions into the Middle East (which anyway is complex as a region). We have to sort out those aspects which are different and worth giving thought to.

1 I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Ruth Roded of the Hebrew University for her useful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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Most historical accounts tend to deal with big technologies (steam power, electricity, aeronautics or computers). However, small machines have no less an impact. With some exaggeration it might be argued that “[n]ext to the plough, the sewing machine is humanity’s most blessed instrument”; and “with the exception of the clock, [it] was the first piece of mechanism to be introduced into the home.”

We would therefore suggest a distinction between “big” technologies which arrived from Western-Europe or North-America as turnkey projects, often to the benefit of foreign or local elites, and “small” technologies—sometimes what we would call today “consumer durables”. Though the latter were perhaps not immediately diffused to all social strata, they became gradually available to and affordable by large populations, and proved their benefit to them. Although Marx understood the revolutionary potential of the recently invented sewing machine and particularly its negative effects on labour relations, he failed to see its more beneficial use in a home environment.

One is also reminded of a statement by Mahatma Gandhi: “Every machine that helps every individual has a place, but there should be no place for machines that concentrate power in a few hands and turn the masses into mere machine minders, if indeed they do not make them unemployed.”

The importance of the invention, or rather the development of the sewing machine for European industrial and technological development, e.g. the clothing industry, shoe-making, glove-making, saddlery and book-making has been highlighted by David Landes, as well as by Eric Hobsbawm. The social consequences of this invention include...

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2 Karl Marx, Das Kapital (Berlin 1951), pp. 494-505.


4 David Landes, The Unbound Prometheus (Cambridge 1969), p. 294; Eric J. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire (London 1969), p. 175. The development of the sewing machine, as so many technological innovations, must be seen as a series of inventions and patents, e.g. the needle with a point and eye on one side (around 1755), an abortive breakthrough by Barthélemy Thimonnier (1841), the perfection of the shuttle principle by Elias Howe, and Isaac Meritt Singer (b. 1811) who turned it all into an engineering as well as a commercial success. Cf. on Germany:
tion maybe even further stretched: ".. it made ordinary women seamstresses and seamstresses tailors, and so doing hastened the transformation of what had once been the task of every woman into a professional activity."\textsuperscript{7} Undoubtedly, the development of a large scale garment industry in the United States cannot be envisaged without the sewing machine and the availability of cheap female labor, often immigrant women, many of them working in sweatshops or from their homes.\textsuperscript{8} Clothes became more refined, and as early as the 1860s-1870s, one discovers a mutual connection between mass-production and enhanced fashion consciousness, which crossed class lines. This break-through differs remarkably from developments in the Middle East.

Of all producers of sewing machines the success of the Singer company stands out. Its efficiency in mass production was unequalled, particularly as it was matched by a network of dealers, showrooms, depots, repair workshops and after-sales services, and sustained by advertising campaigns. Singer itself also provided instruction in the homes of new customers and executed repairs on the spot when needed. This applied to the United States itself and soon also to its agencies abroad.

But Singer’s outstanding success was probably due in the first place to its innovative marketing strategy, providing easy long-term credit for the purchase of an implement which was very much in demand, but beyond the immediate cash reach of a family. Machines were sold directly to the customer by the company’s own salaried agents. After making the last of an agreed number of monthly installments, the purchaser would receive a final bill of sale. It was Edward Clark, Singer’s partner, who seems to have developed the easy payment scheme, which ultimately became successful in the Middle East as well. Initial fears entertained by men that such a payment would make women more independent were apparently soon overcome.\textsuperscript{9}


\textsuperscript{7} Landes, p. 119.


\textsuperscript{9} R. Brandon, \textit{Singer and the Sewing Machine, a Capitalist Romance} (London 1977,
From 833 machines manufactured in 1855, annual production in the USA rose to 2,564 in 1855 and even more steeply to 13,000 in 1860 and 464,254 in 1870. Indeed, graphic representations show a very steep, almost vertical rise in sales between approximately 1867 and 1872, which was almost certainly due to the famous “new family” model for domestic use which was introduced in 1865. This machine was particularly easy to master, easy to power, and easy to transport.

In 1867 an overseas factory was set up in Clydebank near Glasgow, a location chosen for its iron and cotton industries, as well as for its shipping connections. Somewhat later another plant was built in Kilbowie nearby. By 1913, Singer in Glasgow produced no less than 1,301,851 machines a year, thereby becoming the largest sewing machine factory in the world, in fact in history. This ‘overseas’ plant—in itself another business novelty—, exported to various parts of the world, including the Middle East, and, for a long time, represented a third of Singer’s production capacity. More factories followed in Podolsk, Wittenberg, Monza, Bounièrè, Blankenloch and Campinas. Thus, Singer became an early multi-national. “Singers, it may be said, are the Fords of the sewing machine world but much earlier.” The Singer company, characteristically, also built one of the first skyscrapers in New York as its headquarters (1908).

The Singer emblem of later years—a capital S embracing the world—was not chosen haphazardly. Indeed, it was the first American industry producing a mass product to seek a global market.
From 1853 onwards the company participated with a spacious showroom of its own in International Exhibitions (e.g. London 1853, Paris 1855, Vienna 1973, Chicago 1893), a fact which was always proudly advertised. In 1893 it distributed to the public colored plates representing Serbs, Hungarians, Swedes, Bosnians, Japanese and Zulus all called “intelligent” and using Singer machines to make their traditional clothing. “The Singer Manufacturing Co., with its factories and offices reaching out and covering every quarter of the globe, is better able than any other company in the world to understand just what is required in a sewing machine for family work…”

An American—possibly writing on behalf of the Singer company—imagined a universal sisterhood (though also one with ethnic stereotypes), boasting as early as 1880:

“On every sea are floating the Singer machines; along every road pressed by the foot of civilized man, this tireless ally of the world’s great sisterhood is going upon its errand of helpfulness. Its cheering tune is understood no less by the sturdy German matron than by the slender Japanese maiden; it sings as intelligibly to the flaxen-haired Russian peasant girl as to the dark-eyed Mexican señorita, it needs no interpreter, whether it sings amidst the snows of Canada or upon the pampas of Paraguay; the Hindoo mother and the Chicago maiden are to-night making the same stitch; the untiring feet of Ireland’s fair-skinned Nora are driving the same treadle with the tiny understandings of China’s tawny daughter; and thus American machines, American brains, and American money are bringing the women of the whole world into one universal kinship and sisterhood.”

Up from an estimated 6 million machines sold in 1880, sales in 1904, indeed, were already estimated at 20 million. Singer claimed to have three quarters of the world market.

In Russia, for instance, Singer sales started in 1866, to sour to 110,000 machines sold by 1900, and 700,000 by 1914. Also in Japan, earlier trademark, represented a spool, two needles and a thread modeled in S-shape.

16 J. Scott, Genius Rewarded, the Story of the Sewing Machine (New York 1880), p. 34. Note the absence of the Middle East from this description.
17 Frederick Vernon Carstensen, American Multinational Corporations in Imperial Russia. Chapters in Foreign Enterprise and Russian Economic Development, Ph-D Thesis, Yale University, 1976, p. 87 et passim. The elevated Singer globe on its headquarters
Singer machines were introduced in the 1860s, and sales seemed to be successful for several decades, till that country started its own mass production and then restricted imports in 1937. On the other hand, Singer operations in China were not particularly successful, at least not in the 1880s (when intensive efforts were made to penetrate this market), owing to Chinese reservations about the rigid stitching of seams.

Marketing and Consumption in the Middle East

Though the Middle East had not only a long-standing reputation in textile production but also a tradition of its own in needlework, the above quoted Singer company’s publicity material of the late 19th century hardly mentions the Near or Middle East. While the European market had become totally covered by Singer and its rivals, the Dutch correspondent of a trade journal, in 1884, saw Turkey still as an interesting new option. Indeed, it would seem that the Ottoman-Turkish market had first been approached in 1881 by Georg Neidlinger, the Singer company’s agent in Hamburg. As a German immigrant to the USA he had worked his way up “from carrying water for the man and doing odd jobs”, to becoming the key marketing figure for most of continental Europe and the Middle East till his retirement in 1902.

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20 Ibid., p. 320.

21 According to L’Indicateur Ottoman of 1881 (Istanbul 1881), Neidlinger had established himself as Singer Agent at the Beltazzi Khan, rue Voyvode 69, but E. Eldem’s Bankalar Caddesi (Istanbul 2000) does not mention him in his survey of this famous street.

Though the new appliance was advertised in Beirut as early as 1860, it took apparently some time to enter public consciousness: the influential journal *al-Muqataʻaf*, for instance, on the verge of moving from Beirut to Cairo in the 1880s, published two articles on the new invention.23

Singer embarked on a long running advertising campaign in the local press addressed both at the workshop owner and the private consumer.24 Advertising in women’s journals, too, probably contributed much to the Singer sewing machine’s diffusion.25 Typical Singer advertisements in *al-Muqataʻaf* in 1902 still disclosed an upper class bias, using Neidlinger’s appointment as purveyor to the courts of the Sultan, the Khedive and the Prince of Bulgaria. However, instruction and repairs were to be done at the purchaser’s domicile, and special mention was made of the Singer’s payment scheme and its moderate prices.26

Singer, indeed, seems to have been the first to introduce its innovative payment scheme to the Middle East as well.27 Of course, here,

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23 *Hadīqat al-Akhbār*, 29 March 1860, where an advertisement with illustrations refer the reader to the editorial office for the name of the sole agent in town of the new American implement (with thanks to my colleague Dr. Fruma Zachs for this reference); *Al-Muqataʻaf* 1883, vol. 8, p. 684, and more extensively with illustrations 1884, vol.9, pp. 93-96.
too, given the low economic potential in the region, the purchase of a sewing machine meant a relatively large expense, and the sort of hire-purchase arrangement as proposed by the Singer agents, definitely advanced sales. With some envy, Ernest Weakly, wrote in his extensive report on Syria to the British Board of Trade in 1911:

... although a machine can be obtained for 8s. less if bought for cash, comparatively few can afford or are willing to make cash purchases when payments are allowed to be spread out over a series of weeks or months ... The organisation has been admirably thought out, and, being so thoroughly suited to the conditions of the country, it has very materially helped the wide sale which the American machine has in the country. Local dealers who import German and British machines are also obliged to sell largely on credit, ... and their terms in many cases have to be more liberal in order to obtain some small share of the trade, which would otherwise be monopolised by the American agencies. There does not seem much to choose, as regards price, between the American machine and other makes prices varying between £T. 3 and £T. 3.75 for hand machines...

Also Donald Quataert sees a break-through in Singer’s marketing success around 1900 and equally emphasizes in this connection its monthly payment system. On the whole, this marketing policy proved highly successful and is often highlighted by our sources; in the first decade of the 20th century it allegedly pertained to 80% of all sales of sewing machines, overtaking competing English, French and German brands. However, it also could have its draw-backs. At least, in the early 1930s in Syria, hundreds of machines were re-possessed by the Singer company for defaults of payment.

Since the establishment of a Singer depot in Ma’muret-ül-‘Azîz

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29 Report upon the Conditions and Prospects of British Trade in Syria by Mr. Ernest Weakly (London 1911), p. 191 [hereafter: Weakly]. Also earlier British trade reports lamented British conservatism with regard to affording advance credit, as the Italians, Germans, Austrians and Belgians did. I would like to thank my colleague Gad Gilbar for lending me a copy of the above source and other trade reports, and for discussing with me some of the issues raised in this study.
30 Donald Quataert, Manufacturing and Technology Transfer in the Ottoman Empire, 1800-1914 (Istanbul, Strasbourg 1992), p. 15.
31 Thompson, Engendering, p. 73.
(Elazığ) in 1900, commercial activities branched out to Diyarbakır, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. By 1903, 1,230 machines had been sold in what was called Asia Minor. 32 Around 1900, 400 machines were said to have been sold in the Kharput region, up to Diyarbakır, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, and some 375 in Bursa, 250 in Konya. In İzmir 16,000 were sold between 1903 and 1905 alone. Sivas accounted for 2,000 machines. 33

In the first decade of the twentieth century sewing machines entered many Ottoman households. In the satirical press criticism could be found against women working hard on the machine, as well as against the machine invasion in general. 34 Paul Fesch estimated in 1907 that some ten thousand American and German-made sewing machines were owned in Istanbul, and twelve thousand in Damascus. In the Ottoman capital, the well-known French department store of Orosdi-Back acted as local depot for Singer. 35 This firm also acted as Singer agent in Beirut. 36

Arthur Ruppin, moreover, reported in 1920 that Singer had been very successful in keeping competitors on the sideline. American sewing machines were alleged to have 60% of the Syrian market; in Damascus alone, by 1912, the annual turn-over was Fr.130,000, and in Tripoli (Lebanon) even Fr. 150,000. Considering that a machine cost Fr. 80-120, it meant that in each of these places over a thousand pieces were sold every year. 37

In the region of Palestine, the local agent was Yitshaq Hayutman who was to become one the founders of Tel Aviv in 1909. Upon his arrival in Jaffa in 1905, Yeshayahu Lewin, a friend from Metulla, arranged the Singer job for him: “You can be successful, putting its business in order, adding clerks, salesmen, collectors and technicians

34 Fesch, p. 517, and p. 604.
36 Ruppin, p. 214, and p. 310.
from among our brothers, in order to distribute this product in towns and settlements. The main director in Beirut is also a Jew ...". Hayutman’s store at Bustrus Street became much more than an outlet for sewing machines,—a focus of information and activity on the Zionist enterprise, and indeed a first point of absorption for arriving immigrants. In Palestine, but probably elsewhere as well, at first, sewing machines were sold to professional tailors, then to housewives. All were still pedal-driven, as electricity would not be readily available for a few decades to come.

Hayutman was a dynamic person, who sold his merchandise far beyond the boundaries of his urban environment. He even ventured into the desert to demonstrate and sell sewing machines to nomads, as a highly illuminating anecdote told by the zoologist Aharoni attests. During the “Italian war in Tripoli”—probably in 1911—Aharoni, on one of his exploratory excursions, had been arrested and jailed in Karak, apparently after arousing the suspicion of the Ottoman authorities because of his “Italian-sounding” name and lacking a proper travel permit for the Hijaz. It was Hayutman’s accidental arrival on a sales mission in Karak, and his intervention with the local governor (and his telegrams to influential Zionist notables in Jerusalem) which ensured his speedy release.

Singer gradually established a large network of agents throughout the Middle East. In Syria (in the 1930s) it had 16 offices and 168 employees. In Egypt (1951), its headquarters were located at Sharifayn Street in the modern business district of Cairo with branches in Alexandria and some thirty branches in provincial towns all-over the country, from Damiette, Rosette and Port Said in the north, to Luxor and Aswan in the south.

Unfortunately, we have no systematic data on the regional imports of sewing machines, or even a total; where sewing machines are specifically mentioned among other hardware, the volume of trade is

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58 Zehkarya Hayut (Hayutman), ‘Im Yitshaq Hayutman, Meyyased Metulla we-Tel-Aviv (Haifa 5728 [1967-8], p. 143, pp. 157-8, pp. 178-9.
59 Y. Aharoni, Zikhronot Zo’olog ‘Ivri (Tel Aviv 1946/7 ), vol. 2, p. 51. I wish to thank Prof. B. Hayutman in Jerusalem for this reference.
60 Thompson, Engendering, p. 73, and her Colonial Citizens, pp. 34-35.
sometimes given in money values, and sometimes in weight or crates. However, it is clear that rather large quantities—also other brands than Singer from the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy—continued to be imported over the next decades.

### Use of the Sewing Machine in Industry

Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, a Damascene ‘ālim who has left us an interesting lexicon of professions in his city at the end of the 19th century, notices—not without misgivings, it seems—that the spread of sewing machines, “one of the works of the Franks which dazzle the mind”. While stating that this implement, much quicker than manual work, is widely used by Christian tailors, especially those making uniforms for the army or the civil administration, he adds that the use of the sewing machine has spread to some Muslim women as well.

Much academic credit for drawing our attention to the significance of the sewing machine in the Ottoman industrial context goes to Donald Quataert. He has shown its importance for the production not only of ready-made clothing and shoes, but also of umbrellas. Even more important is the link which he establishes between the massive diffusion of sewing machines and the revival of Ottoman manufacturing which took place between 1870 and 1900. Thanks to cheap labor, a small ready-made garment industry in

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42 E.g., Bulletin Consulaire, p. 82, e.g. in 1909: 9,950 kilograms, 1910: 11,200 kilograms etc., Great Britain, Report for the Year 1898 on the Trade of the Vilayet of Aleppo, p. 11; idem for 1902 on Damascus, p. 12; idem for 1903 on Damascus, p. 13; idem for 1905 on Aleppo, p. 10; idem for 1906 on Damascus, p. 10; idem for 1907 on Beirut, p. 5—all in Pounds Sterling. Cf. HaHerut, 12 sivan 5669 [1909]: 100 sewing machines at value of 6,000 Franks, as quoted by Shelomo Sheva and Dan Ben-Amotz, Eretz Tzion Yerushalayim (Jerusalem 1973) [in Hebrew], p. 188. Or 224 crates to Baghdad in 1907, Issawi, p. 183.


44 Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, Qāmūs al-Sinā‘āt (Paris, The Hague 1960), vol. I, p. 131. The production of uniforms, not only for the army and the civil service, but also for high school students, and later for para-military youth movements, calls for more research. Many such uniforms were manufactured at home.

45 Quataert, Manufacturing, pp. 22-25. Oresdi-Beck in Istanbul operated a large workshop for assembling umbrellas from imported parts.
Istanbul began to emerge, and the shoe-making branch, threatened by Western imports and tastes, went through a revival, at least for some decades. Quataert has ascribed a new impetus given to the faltering Syrian textile industry to sewing machines in the 1890s; women, for instance in Damascus, working on knitting machines at home, started to produce hosiery. Part of this went on in small sweat-shops, often run by one family, part of it was the work of women as a cottage industry. In Salonica, too, an advanced center of the Ottoman textile industry, some hundreds of women were employed in the female ready-to-wear industry.

**Home Industry**

Machines, indeed, were purchased by tailors and cobblers, as well as by non-professional women. The sewing machine may have worked as a catalyst to the rise in the formal away-from-home employment of women in the Ottoman Empire, at least where it existed, and on a small scale. Indeed, traditionally, women who contributed to the Middle Eastern textile industries, e.g. spinning, weaving or embroidering, did so usually from their homes rather than from bazaar workshops.

Indeed, one gets the impression that the availability of machines led to the development of a new home industry, e.g. of socks and stockings in Damascus. In Istanbul shoe-making workshops women would complete the work done on machines by men. This “invisible economy” has continued ever since, enabling both urban and rural women to gain some additional family income from the pri-

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46 J.A. Reilly, *Women, Property and Production*, MESA Conference Nov. 1991, quoted by Thompson, *Engendering*, p. 50; or his “from Workshops to Sweatshops, Damascus Textiles and the World Economy in the last Ottoman century”, *Review* 16(1993), p. 210. This point needs further research as sewing and knitting machines may have been confused.


vacy of their homes. A form of pre-mass production, one could say, which exceeded the consumptive needs of the family. Sewing machines also became a much desired element in the dowry of women getting married.

While seamstresses can be found in both urban and or rural settings, possibly in slightly variegating production roles, sewing machines belong also to the regular outfit of nomads.

Gender Aspects

Sewing machines are operated by both men and women, but the exact gender division of labor may differ. Gender roles in factories are often determined by the size, weight, strength and speed of the production tools. Looking at pictures from the Middle East

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53 We know near to nothing about the exact distribution of sewing machines between industrial workshops and factories and private homes; even anthropological studies which pay attention to TV-sets, laundry machines or electric fans, fail to mention whether the household owns a sewing machine. One exception, a study on Istanbul (1991), states that 60.6% of the households own one, quoted in M. Sönmez, Statistical Guide to Istanbul in the 1990s (Istanbul, n.d.), p. 30.


56 A very perceptive overview is C. Overholt et al. (eds.), Gender Roles in Development Projects, a Case Book (West Hartford 1985), see for instance p. 72.
one often gets the impression that sewing machines have become a feminized implement; men operating such low-tech machinery, on the other hand, may be less willing to be photographed.

Middle Eastern textile and garment manufacturing branches, in their production as well as their marketing aspects, have always been strongly segregated. Indeed, a conspicuous gender aspect (not only) in the Middle East is that tailoring is mostly by gender: women’s clothing is fitted by women, and men’s clothing by men.57

Like elsewhere in the Third World, in Middle Eastern countries with a sizeable industrial labor force it is mainly the textile branch (not only the clothing industry) in which women are overwhelmingly represented. Though “needlework” and embroidery—as in many countries—were a compulsory part of the curriculum of girls in elementary schools, this was not enough, however, to vouch for their capability to be smoothly absorbed in an industrial plant.58

For lack of data, one has to be careful with assumptions of large-scale feminization. During World War II, a Syrian newspaper was quoted as portraying women to have given up their sewing machines and typewriters for heavier jobs, held in normal times by males.59

There could be much European-centered bias in this quotation. We found only one documented case—in Aden (1977)—in which the status of tailoring was allegedly depreciated because of a take-over of tasks from men by women, working for smaller wages.60

Though home-working in the textile and garment sectors is still very popular in Egypt, and probably also in Turkey and other countries of the Middle East, it seems that economic liberalization can reverse the process. With the Infitah in Egypt, and with new private investments in the garment industry, women, previously in home industries, were seen moving into industrial jobs.61


59 Le Jour, 22 May 1943, quoted by Thompson, Engendering, p. 194.


61 V.M. Moghadam, “Manufacturing and Women in the Middle East and North
The personal ownership of a sewing machine, however, is emi-
nently important where it gave some measure of initiative, and even
economic power, to women. There are ample examples in the litera-
ture.62 Single women sometimes operated an atelier with two or three
seamstresses where richer women had their dresses made.63 Not only
could a village seamstress support herself by making clothing for
individual customers, but she could in some cases even enter into
a business relationship with an urban shop-owner.64 Enterprising
women could become itinerant seamstresses, selling their services
from home to home.65 Also Leila Ahmed tells of a spinster, a relative
who supported herself by making clothing for entire families in
their homes, bringing her own Singer machine along.66 Another case
would be that of refugee women, e.g. Armenian women in Aleppo,
who found a new existence by means of their sewing machine.67

Women’s journals not only carried advertisements for sewing ma-
chines, but initiated from an early stage onwards columns or pages
on sewing.68 Fashion in general became more important; European
and American styles seen at the movies were also imitated for home-
made dresses.

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62 However, the interesting recent collection of essays by Barbara Burman (ed.)
The Culture of Sewing, unfortunately ignores the Middle East.
63 As captured in the memories of Elias Petropoulos, “Ah Allegra” in Salonique
64 S.Schaefer Davis, “Working Women in a Moroccan Village” in L. Beck and
65 Baron, Women’s Awakening, p. 158, quoting E. Cooper, Women of Egypt, p. 121
and p. 123.
67 Ch. Rouyer, Femmes d’Outremer (Constantine, 2nd ed., 1941), pp. 13-17 quoted
by Thompson, Engendering, p. 28.
68 Cf later Les Echos de Damas [?], 14 March 1934 as quoted by E. Thompson,
Colonial Citizens, p. 217. Also the use of paper patterns in the Middle East deserves
more investigation.
The Sewing Machine as a Tool of Development

Already in the 1930s, bourgeois women’s volunteering organizations in Syria started providing sewing machines and work to their poorer sisters.⁶⁹ Revenues from table cloths embroidered by village women were channeled into the purchase of sewing machines.⁷⁰ Because of the positive advantages of the sewing machines in terms of cost-benefit analysis, the provision of sewing machines and training courses has become a common phenomenon not only in the Middle East—in community centers, village associations, and charitable organizations.⁷¹ Sewing clubs have become a classical type of development project in many Third World countries, providing poor women with the possibility to manufacture family clothing themselves, and possibly even generating some additional income from their homes.

In Yemen, in the 1970s, for instance, the Women’s Union set up a sewing cooperative and provided training for the women working there.⁷² Similarly, a monograph on an Upper Egyptian village in the 1970s, shows that this aspect is by no means exhausted yet. In Hanya village, a government appointed sewing teacher arrives once a week to train local women in making clothing for their children, as well as for sale at the village bazaar.⁷³

The Singer company itself opened in 1982 in the Baq’a refugee camp in Jordan, a workshop for the manufacturing of ready-made clothing, mainly school uniforms, thereby providing jobs for women within the confines of the camp. In the larger Wahdat camp sewing courses were provided.⁷⁴

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⁶⁹ Washington NA [?], as quoted by Thompson, Engendering, p. 73.
⁷¹ E.g. a spontaneous settlement area of Cairo, B. Tekçe L. Oldham and F. Shorter, A Place to Live, Families and Child Care in a Cairo Neighborhood (Cairo 1994), pp. 50-51 and 59.
⁷² Molyneux, p. 20.
⁷³ Marileen van der Most van Spijk, Eager to Learn (Leiden 1982), p. 26, , and p. 45 and p. 77. This is undoubtedly a charitable project, as this source adds that a local social worker also provides cheap cloth.
Ready-Made Clothing

An interesting related issue is the fact that, in spite of the introduction of sewing machines, and in spite of existing potential, no large-scale confection industry for local consumption in the Middle East has emerged till rather recently. Weakly, for example, mentioned in 1911 that a local ready-made clothing industry had sprung up in Beirut, giving employment to some 300 to 400 persons, and ascribed this to the proximity of Egypt which had “given people a taste for a certain smartness in dress and appearance.”

Imports, however, remained dominant for a long time. With the impact of the penetration of Western manufactures and fashions into the Middle East, trade reports for the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries also make specific mention of rising imports of ready-made clothing, predominantly from Austria-Hungary (or rather Bohemia) and Germany. Undoubtedly, these imports were destined only for the fashion-conscious elites. Ready-made clothing was often sold at the luxurious department stores, such as Orosdi-Back and others.

But as a rule, even one generation back, and even in relatively westernized cities, such as Port Said, women went to the dressmaker for lack of a choice of ready-made clothes in stores; cloth (and patterns) were often selected under the impact of American movies they had watched. All women of the then Saudi Finance Minister’s household, to cite one more example, were said to be dressed in the same material purchased from the suq. In San’a’, Serjeant commercial training center in Sinak, Baghdad, see large advertisements in Iraq Times, e.g. 23 January 1953 (“Make yourself a dress as you learn home dressmaking”).


J. Berque, Imperialism and Revolution (London, [transl.] 1972), p. 332. At some department stores also local made-to-measure clothing could be ordered. Ready-made clothing was, and often still is more expensive than home-made clothing.


Kay, p. 179, quoting from Marianne Ali Reza, At the Drop of a Veil (Houghton 1971).
observed in the early 1970s a growing preference for ready-made clothing over tailored clothing, though women also went on sewing themselves. The Egyptian economist Galal Amin who analyzed social mobility over three generations noted in 1995 that “the figure of the seamstress coming and going” had recently become superseded as even wedding dresses were now ready-bought.

Large popular classes, both urban and rural, still prefer hand-made clothing, either produced at home or in small sweatshops, or in their neighborhood by a familiar tailor or seamstress. Middle Eastern clothing styles (e.g. *galabiyyas*) are relatively simple, without too much variation or whims of fashion, and are therefore easily manufactured at home. Men, on the other hand are more likely to go to a professional tailor especially where their (western-style) garments require better skills.

Data are lacking on which segments and/or percentages of the diverse populations have their clothing made at home or in the neighborhood, and which purchase ready-made confection. Personal observation at the relatively spacious cloth sections at *ṣiqs* in many a Middle Eastern country, would suggest that the former populations are still very large. However, Middle Eastern societies are marked by complex stratification, and superficial impressions may be misleading. It all depends on one’s vantage point. Unmistakably, however, the purchase of ready-made clothing has been on the rise, a process undoubtedly differing according to country, region, population, gender, class etc.

83 This is also true for school uniforms.
84 Men, however, often do the fancy stitch-work. Comments kindly supplied to this author (5 Sept. 2001) by Andrea R. Rugh, author of *Reveal and Conceal, Dress in Contemporary Egypt* (Cairo 1986).
85 Ready-made clothing was even sold in the village by itinerant peddlers, cf. Fakhouri, p. 54.
There are several indications for this, such as the following observation:

“The people who wear ready made are mostly the middle classes including
the newly arrived lower middle classes (women) who care about locally
defined fashion whether it be a Western style or the latest Islamic dress.
Certain mosques sell at subsidized rates or give out the Islamic dress in a
fairly conventional form and this creates an industry of sorts for seam-
stresses.”86

Trade liberalization and Infitāh tendencies have probably
contributed to this trend.87 In Istanbul, Tekbir, a small workshop
which started with only two sewing machines, has in recent years
become a large company with branches in Turkey and Saudi-Arabia,
allegedly producing no less than 10,500 garments a week for the
“Islamic chic market.”88

Conclusions

In societies, or sectors of societies, which entertain strong reser-
vations against women working or trading outside the home, the
sewing machine comes as a perfect solution. In the Middle East, the
sewing machine remains relatively affordable “small” technology, one
which can be beneficially put to use within the confines of a private
home, which can increase family income or savings, and which has
the capability of empowering women. While Singer had to close its
factories in Clydebank in 1969 owing to declining demand by women
in America and Western-Europe, the private market for sewing
machines in the Middle East, for the time being, does not seem to
have been exhausted yet.89

86 Andrea Rugh, see footnote 84.
87 Singserman, p. 24.
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89 The Singer company, once a jewel in the American industrial crown, was taken
over by new entrepreneurs in Hong-Kong, henceforth called Semi-Tech. Its archives,
however, were transferred to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison.