

Lifestyle | Feature



Egyptian fashion model Mariam Abdallah poses during a photo session at the studio of UNN Model Management agency in Cairo. —AFP photos



(From left to right) Egyptian fashion models Zeina Ehab and Mariam Abdallah pose during a photo session at the studio of UNN Model Management agency in Cairo.



(From left to right) Egyptian fashion models Mariam Abdallah and Zeina Ehab try on clothes during a photo session.

The Egyptian modeling agency 'decolonizing beauty standards'

Between the frenzied rush of wardrobe changes and photographers readying for shoots, Iman Eldeeb's agency is slowly breaking new ground for Egypt's fashion scene by hiring a diverse line-up of models. Eldeeb forged an international career in European fashion capital Milan, where photographers told her she was "the first Egyptian model they had ever seen". Seven years later, she returned to Egypt in 2018 and set about shaking up a fashion scene where old stereotypes prevail. In the Arab world's most populous nation, modeling has long been dominated by "girls from Eastern Europe, with fair complexions," said Eldeeb.

The 28-year-old said such "obsolete" standards have made it difficult for Egyptian and Arab models to break into the industry. "Beauty cannot be limited by the appearance and shape of a face and so on. I feel this is a misconception of beauty," Eldeeb told AFP. "Hair color, eye color, all these things were part of a very old understanding of beauty and this is something we are moving away from as much as we can." According to The Fashion Spot, a website specializing in the industry, "models of colour" accounted for more than 43 percent of those on global catwalks in fall 2021 — making it "the most racially diverse season on record".

Travelling the world as a model, Eldeeb said she sensed a new trend of more diverse faces and bodies was emerging. Back in Egypt, she and her sister Yousra then founded UNN Model Management—the name meaning "rebirth" in the language of the black Nubian minority. The agency offers a platform for budding talents in Egypt who lack support in the fiercely competitive industry. "The fashion industry is still developing in the Arab world," said Eldeeb. Today, UNN

oversees around 35 contracts with top brands including Louis Vuitton, Adidas and Levi's, making it a leader on the nascent Egyptian scene.

Race issues

Mohsen Othman, a freelance photographer also known as Lemosen who works with UNN regularly, praised the agency for its "daring" approach. In the industry in Egypt, "we have creative people but we lack the means, and training remains old-fashioned," he said. For Sabah Khodir, an Egyptian activist against gender-based violence, UNN is a force for "decolonizing beauty standards" and "deconstructing internalized racism".

"Being more represented in fashion, on-screen or elsewhere, can save lives. It humanizes you in the eyes of the world,"

Khodir said of the situation for under-represented women. Adhar Makuac Abiem, a model from South Sudan, has long endured racial taunts and insults in the unforgiving streets of Egypt's bustling capital Cairo. When she settled in Egypt as a refugee in 2014, she never imagined she would be hired by a local agency. Often she was told that she was "too black" or "too ugly" to get any work, she said. But since 2019, the 21-year-old has managed to build a career as a model working with UNN.

Egypt is similar to "the West where prejudices persist about dark-skinned" people, said Marie Grace Brown, a University of Kansas researcher who authored a book on women's fashion in Sudan. But that has not stopped Abiem from trying to "become a positive role model" for young black women in the industry.

'A form of healing'

Mariam Abdallah, 22, who was busy styling her hair before a photoshoot, said she has been doing more modeling overseas than in Egypt. "We're not very interested in 'exotic' top models," she told AFP. Beyond battling discrimination in a highly predatory industry, where there have been high profile cases of sexual misconduct, getting parental consent is another challenge in the conservative Muslim country. According to Eldeeb, three-quarters of parents fear images of their model daughters could be "misused" online.

There are also concerns about revealing clothing, as well as working "inappropriate hours" for young women. "Whatever the profession, parents always try to decide for the girls," she added. The World Bank says that fewer than 20 percent of Egyptian women had a job in 2019. But Eldeeb has managed to secure work visas for some of her models in France, a first for home-grown talent. Abdallah left Egypt for the first time recently thanks to the contracts she now has with around a dozen agencies in Europe and the United States, giving her a sense of independence and purpose. For the activist Khodir, the emphasis on developing Egyptian talent for global fashion houses is much more than just good business. "It's a form of healing that we badly need," she said. —AFP



Egyptian fashion models Mariam Abdallah (second right) and Zeina Ehab (left) attend a photo session at the studio of UNN Model Management agency in Cairo.