



Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World

Katherine Zoepf

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World

Katherine Zoepf

Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World

Katherine Zoepf

For more than a decade, Katherine Zoepf has lived in or traveled throughout the Arab world, reporting on the lives of women, whose role in the region has never been more in flux. Only a generation ago, female adolescence as we know it in the West did not exist in the Middle East. There were only children and married women. Today, young Arab women outnumber men in universities, and a few are beginning to face down religious and social tradition in order to live independently, to delay marriage, and to pursue professional goals. Hundreds of thousands of devout girls and women are attending Qur'anic schools—and using the training to argue for greater rights and freedoms from an Islamic perspective. And, in 2011, young women helped to lead antigovernment protests in the Arab Spring. But their voices have not been heard. Their stories have not been told.

In Syria, before its civil war, she documents a complex society in the midst of soul searching about its place in the world and about the role of women. In Lebanon, she documents a country that on the surface is freer than other Arab nations but whose women must balance extreme standards of self-presentation with Islamic codes of virtue. In Abu Dhabi, Zoepf reports on a generation of Arab women who've found freedom in work outside the home. In Saudi Arabia she chronicles driving protests and women entering the retail industry for the first time. In the aftermath of Tahrir Square, she examines the crucial role of women in Egypt's popular uprising.

Deeply informed, heartfelt, and urgent, *Excellent Daughters* brings us a new understanding of the changing Arab societies—from 9/11 to Tahrir Square to the rise of ISIS—and gives voice to the remarkable women at the forefront of this change.

Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World Details

Date : Published January 12th 2016 by Penguin Press

ISBN : 9781594203886

Author : Katherine Zoepf

Format : Hardcover 258 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Feminism, Politics, History, Womens, Religion

 [Download Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Wh ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are

From Reader Review Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World for online ebook

Jo says

(A long review but this book really makes you think)

Katherine Zoepf isn't alone in that the events of 9/11 triggered a greater interest in the Arab world, but she has made this interest the center point of her career as a journalist. In *Excellent Daughters*, she has written an eminently readable and truly fascinating book where the voices of real people, in particular women, come through on every page. She gives women from Syria, Egypt, Dubai and Libya room to put their point of view, to explain and protest and teach and to express opinions that for us in the West ring honest and true and at other times leave us scratching our heads.

I really appreciated little details like the fact that many Arab women adore Oprah, that one of the girls wants her wedding at Disney World, that girls at school were dressing up as men in thobes as a minor act of rebellion, perhaps because it is these elements that link our cultures and make us feel that we aren't so different.

What was touching too were the stories of Arab men who stood up and defended their wives and daughters like the supportive husband, of Norah Al-Sowayan, one of the female drivers in Saudi who talks with outrage at her treatment. The high ranking Muslim clerics who were prepared to question interpretations of the Koran that lead to female oppression, illustrate that we cannot generalize about Arab men any more than American or English.

The point is made that "Men are simply from this society," and therefore, they cannot know anything different about the treatment of women. The same rings true for so many women who have been sheltered over the years and only know one way in which to live and be treated. Imagine if you didn't have access to satellite TV, books, the internet. How would you know that there was another way of living? Zoepf writes, 'Saudi women, likewise, tended to defend the Saudi way of doing things because it was the only thing they knew.'

There are, however, in the book women advocates who question this view of men and their supposed care for the women in their family; it is referred to as "contemptuous chivalry" at one point. The point being that the care and concern is simply a way of denigrating and controlling the women even further. Yet what surprised me was how many women defended this control, how there were women protesting against the protesters for female freedoms. Many women spoke of how they valued the guardian ship of the males in the family, how it made them feel valued and safe.

Yet there is a disturbing side to this 'guardianship' and this is clearly shown with the story of Zahra in Damascus in 2007. This shocking honor killing brings into clear focus the problems with fundamentalism and certain interpretations of the Koran which, I was unaware, is not where the concept of honor killing comes from, having its roots in the pre-Islamic Bedouin culture of the region. This chapter stretches our understanding and acceptance of such a culture or religion despite the fact that this particular case did cause a great deal of discussion in Syria.

Interestingly one explanation for this obsessive control is that because of the declining political and economic situation at the time in Syria - which has clearly declined even more over the last nine years- 'Syrian men who could control nothing else about their lives could at least control the women in their families.' This does not excuse this practice by any means but is interesting in that poverty and a lack of control over their lives have also been posited as reasons for the rise of fundamentalism.

Katherine Zoepf shows us that it is important not to tar all these countries with the same brush, of not mixing the actions of extremists with every day Muslims. Many of the women, particularly in Syria and Saudi Arabia are highly educated, have travelled and some hold positions of power but as in the West we continue to work for equality in women's wages, so there is always further to go.

To dismiss these women as simply brainwashed would be to patronize and infantilize them, something that Zoepf never does and as access to the West grows ever easier, it is evident that thinking for themselves and other women is becoming part of the Arab female experience. Yet we cannot simply compare them with us or think that our way is better, there may even be parents in the West who would love to have children 'competitively describing what dutiful, excellent daughters they each were.'

Katherine Zoepf manages to have a voice in the book but at the same time, she doesn't make this a book about her -this isn't a memoir, this is a book about the opinions and ideals and wishes of Arab women, not a Western woman projecting, but a talented journalist giving a voice to her interviewees and allowing them to speak for themselves.

Penny Schmuecker says

Thank you to NetGalley and to the publisher for allowing me an advance copy in exchange for an honest review.

Katherine Zoepf has written a well-researched and informative book about the lives of Muslim women. The subtitle of the book, "The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World," however, is somewhat misleading. Definitely, the lives of these young women are cloaked in secrecy, as is much of Islam to a Westerner, and through the author's interviews the reader is allowed access to the lives they lead, literally, behind closed doors. However, I think the phrase "transforming the Arab world" is a state that sadly, has not yet been reached, and the few changes that have been made cannot be said to have occurred in all countries of the region.

Zoepf, a journalist, conducted face-to-face interviews with the women and it is clear that she has both a love for the people and a respect for the culture, and that she used both of these to approach delicate subject matter with the women who sometimes became defensive of the questions she posed. The first thing that is noticeable about this book is that not all Moslem countries are the same when it comes to how they regard women's rights. There are varying levels of freedom granted to women in each of the countries but it is clear that they are regarded as property and are not afforded the same rights as the men in any of the countries across the board. In other words, there are glimpses of hope and advancement in Saudi Arabia but the same cannot be said for the women in war-torn Syria.

As Zoepf details, the most recent changes in allowing more freedom for women probably stemmed from the 2011 democratic uprisings, known across the region as the Arab Spring. For instance, in Egypt, uprisings resulted in the removal of Hosni Mubarak from power. The protests involved both men and women working

at the ground level--with little regard to gender, organizing and rallying temporarily for a common goal. Yet once order was restored, this street level success did little to improve the lives of Egypt's women; policies toward women did not change with an installment of a new government and gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence prevail, possibly at an even greater level than before.

Saudi Arabia has the strictest gender based laws in the world. However, most of the women who were interviewed de-emphasized their rights in favor of recognizing that these restrictions are necessary to protect both their religion and Saudi values. For instance, "ikhtilat" (public gender mixing) prohibited women from employment in sales jobs for fear of having to speak to or interact with a male outside of her family. After a previous attempt to try to grant more employment opportunities as sales associates in lingerie shops failed, activists tried a new approach. Proponents of the change used the idea of shame to make their appeal that no Saudi woman should have to discuss something as personal as underwear with a male sales associate. The campaign was a success and women are now allowed to be employed in lingerie shops and male sales associates are prohibited. Success came as a result that it would be in violation of Saudi values if the old ways continued, not because there was value in employing women or to grant them additional rights.

In this reader's opinion, one can see that there are small gains being made to better the lives of women, but again, they are not the sweeping changes that might be called a transformation. If this book does one thing, it makes the reader notice that there is much work to be done in countries where women's rights have remained virtually unchanged for centuries.

I will conclude by saying that I enjoyed this book. Ms. Zoepf is thoroughly committed to giving the reader an unbiased, honest glimpse into the lives of the women of this region and it was a very informative read.

Eileen says

This was a fascinating glimpse deep into the Arab world. Because the author is a woman, she was allowed direct access to numerous Muslim women. The genders are so fiercely segregated that a male journalist would have been denied such interaction. How far removed are we in western society! Of course, one tends to be comfortable in the familiar, but I was struck by the seeming complacency of so many. Numerous women are content, even grateful, in their tightly controlled existence. The selection of one's spouse by the parents is generally a respected, cherished practice.

In Saudi Arabia, there is no driving, no social interaction between the sexes – the list goes on. One activist explained that 'she now believed that the right to drive was almost beside the point while Saudi women were still denied far more basic rights, while they were not treated like citizens with rights to be protected. The problem was so bad that many Saudi women didn't believe they wanted or needed these rights. They have low self-esteem, even if they are very well educated'. It's easy for us, raised with freedoms readily taken for granted, to view with all this with disdain. And yet, the author carefully demonstrates a vital understanding that one is in some part a product of one's environment. She quotes an activist as follows. 'In our society, men don't see the woman as a human being. But I don't mean to say that men here are bad. Men are simply from this society. Men grow up and their families are like this, their schools teach them this, and adult society is like this. When they get married, actually, they have many problems because they aren't used to dealing with women at all'. However, there are those courageous young women who are starting to resist, to fight for access to the outside world, and the author interviewed many of them. It was exciting to see the emergence! The book was so worthwhile, and very readable. I'm really glad I now have a slightly better grasp of the world behind the veil.

Shomeret says

Since my first two wins from Goodreads giveaways took place in New Zealand, I uttered that famous Monty Python intro phrase "and now for something completely different" when I won *Excellent Daughters* by Katherine Zoepf from Goodreads . New Zealand is a fascinating place and I am delighted to visit it through the pages of a book, but Goodreads Giveaways was starting to become predictable.

Excellent Daughters was intermittently interesting, but there were times when I thought Zoepf's comments weren't insightful. I don't regret reading the book because I did learn some important things--particularly about the status of women in Saudi Arabia.

For my complete review see <http://shomeretmasked.blogspot.com/20...>

Carol Douglas says

Katherine Zoepf is a journalist who has spent years in Arab countries. In this book, she interviews young Muslim women in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Syria.

The young Saudi women are upper class, and several either are in college or are going to college. One is about to be married. They have strong female friendships, but they know that when they are married their husbands can make them end those friendships. That has happened to some of their friends.

Although the girls want education and professional jobs, they say that they have no problem with the idea of their parents choosing their husbands. They hope for husbands who will allow them to continue their education. They don't know men outside their immediate families, and accept their situation. They profess to be religious and to have no problems with the restrictions their government puts on women in the name of religion. They say there are a few lesbians in King Saud University, and said they didn't want to go there for that reason.

The girls Zoepf met in Beirut are different. They are influenced by French traditions and care very much about their appearance. Even if they have little money, they will save up to have just one nice outfit. Some of them go to bars and flirt, but they try to keep men from pressing them to go too far. They'll try to avoid losing their hymens. If they do lose their hymens, many young women will have surgery to "restore" them. Some say they want to marry men who won't care if they aren't virgins, but those who are that idealistic are often bitterly disappointed.

The Syrian women live with more restrictions, and those have become even worse since the war, Zoepf said. She had lived in Syria before the war and enjoyed it. She writes about a famous "honor" killing of a girl who had been raped. Without any women's shelters, Syrian authorities would put girls who had been raped in jail for their own protection. Few girls believe that their families would kill them, says a woman who works with the girls, but she has to tell them they are probably wrong.

Zoepf felt a connection with sheltered Arab girls because her mother is a Jehovah's Witness and she had been brought up as a religious fundamentalist herself. She is never patronizing. She is a valuable witness to these girls' lives. She notes that many of the girls resent westerners' focus on the veiling of and restrictions on Muslim women, and wish that writers would emphasize their intelligence and desire for education. Zoepf does that, but she shows that their lives really are circumscribed.

???? ??????-????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? ??????

[illegible]

Fantastic.

Amanda says

I'd like to have a word with her editor about that subtitle. I started the book imagining I would hear some optimistic tales. The Arab world is being transformed, certainly, but I'm not sure that young women are doing much of the transforming... or benefiting much at all. This was a fascinating look at women's lives and it was inspirational in the sense that living under harsh conditions is inspirational. And women find ways to express themselves; they are strong willed, opinionated, etc... but there is a lot more to be disheartened by here than not. Is it possible that we've made so little progress in allowing women to run their own lives, even in 2016? We're still fighting to stop honor killings of innocent rape victims, anything resembling equality

seems hopelessly far off. I still recommend it as a good read, though!

Terry says

I am grateful to BookRiot's 2016 Read Harder challenge, because I may have never read this book without it. It was an interesting read; it definitely challenged my assumptions and reminded me that there's no one monolithic "Middle East"--Lebanon is very different from Saudi Arabia which is very different from Egypt, and so on. So I'm really glad I read it for that reason alone.

However, I do agree with several other GoodReads reviewers that the subtitle is very misleading: Zoepf actually seems to come to the conclusion that many women in "the Arab world" are quite happy with their culture and the way their lives are--to our eyes--limited/circumscribed by that culture. There is very little "transformation" and very few women doing that transforming.

Finally, I was surprised--because of her elite education and, frankly, elite job covering the Middle East as a journalist for institutions like *The New York Times*--that Zoepf comes across as maddeningly naive to the point of romanticizing life in the Middle East, especially for women, and making connections between her upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness and the women she meets that, again, seems naive and intellectually shabby.

Esil says

Excellent Daughters is an excellent book. But its subtitle is a bit deceiving. The author, Katherine Zoepf, is an American reporter who has spent a number of years in the Middle East. For the purposes of her book, she spent time in a few Arab countries, where she got to know a number of young Muslim women. She reports on her conversations with them and on her observations of their lives. Her observations are not uniform -- young women have different lives depending on the country they live in and their specific family circumstances. Some of what she reports is horrifying -- honour based violence. Much of what she reports seems unfathomable to me -- young women who are never in the presence of a man except immediate family members until marriage, young women getting university educations who won't have an opportunity to work, young women playing no role in selecting their husbands, young women who need their husband's or father's permission to work or continue with their education or to travel, forced virginity tests, etc... Clearly Zoepf forged strong ties with many of the women she interviewed, and she goes out of her way to make sure that readers understand that they are smart, educated, funny, very kind and respectful to her, and that many of them have no real complaints about their circumstances. She does make reference to some small changes or to a number of individual or groups pushing for change, but it's hard to see that what she depicts lives up to the book's subtitle "The Secret Lives of Young Women Who Are Transforming the Arab World". I didn't get a sense that there's a groundswell of change afoot, or even that Zoepf had tapped into a broiling sense of injustice. On the contrary, with a few notable exceptions, Zoepf seems to mostly have found a fairly set and rigid world. And where there is activism, the resistance to change is tremendous and often even violent. It's not really possible for me to read this book and assess this world Zoepf presents without judgment, but I do appreciate the look the book gives me into the various communities of young women Zoepf got to know. I also appreciate that the only way she could realistically write this book was by forging positive relationships with the women she met and by approaching them with respect and without imposing her own views on

them. Zoepf doesn't apologize for anything she discusses, but she is never harsh or explicitly critical; leaving much for the reader to imply and mull over. Thanks to the publisher and Goodreads for an opportunity to read an advance copy of *Excellent Daughters*.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

This is an engaging, readable account of a young journalist's experiences in the Arab world, and particularly the women she met. It's not as fascinating or information-packed as Geraldine Brooks's fantastic *Nine Parts of Desire*, which you should absolutely read if you have any interest at all in women's lives in the Middle East. But it is fun and informative, a great introduction to the topic. And from her writing, Zoepf seems adept at breaking through cultural barriers to connect with individuals, with the result that the women she profiles sound like people you might actually meet.

Each topic has a different overarching topic and location, with Saudi Arabia and Syria getting the most page time, while Lebanon, the UAE and Egypt get a chapter each. Other reviewers have commented that the book overall seems more "excellent daughters" than "bringing change." I'd say it's about evenly split. Saudi Arabia in particular feels static in Zoepf's depiction, and those chapters mostly cover life as it is, focusing on topics like female friendship and matchmaking (though with some hints of change). Other chapters deal more with social problems and change: the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt; honor killings in Syria; young women migrating to the UAE in search of work, a practice that would have been unthinkable not long ago. But it's true that the change that's chronicled here is incremental.

Meanwhile, the book is very readable, and if you've read many stories in the *New York Times* over the years, you might just recognize some of it (in one case I did, which made me feel great about my memory!), since the book is drawn from the author's research as a reporter. But it works smoothly as a whole, and though I recognized some of the material, the book never felt cribbed together from articles.

Overall, while this isn't the most in-depth account you'll read, it is still a good book. It's a bit like having a conversation with a smart, perceptive, nonjudgmental and extremely well-traveled friend. I recommend it.

Diane S ? says

Their lives are so incredibly different from ours, it is hard to comprehend. The author takes us to various countries in the Middle East, talking to girls and women in these places and though different supposed freedoms vary in different countries, most are at the mercy of the men in their lives. Female circumcision, so hard to read, but the one that really got to me was the story of the young girl killed in a honor killing, absolutely heartbreaking because what happened to this girl was not her fault. Other girls at risk for honor killings are put in prison for protection until they are eighteen, shelters for abuse victims do not exist.

Although I found the title a misnomer, small strides may exist but I only found larger differences in the Persian gulf. There women are working though many still follow the strictures from their home societies but do find when going back that even these little freedoms are hard to give up. Many defend the systems they are raised under, considering it disrespectful and against their religion not to do so. Many cannot conceive of any other way. The men seem not to take responsibility for anything, they are allowed unlimited freedoms though some are more tolerant and lenient than others.

A very eye opening book, one that is timely with all the attention that has been drawn to the Muslim religion as a whole. Change if it comes to this region will be slow and will have to gain the support of more of the male figures, I fear.

This is the first time I have gone back and added something to my review, but this book has really made me think. There are a few things they have that we no longer do, families are very close, often raised within distance of each other and a sense of family is revered. Here, families are often miles apart and it is hard to gather a whole family unit together. Also women time, the women spend much time of course with other women. Here that is often not possible with our busy lives, jobs and other responsibilities. This is not to excuse that seclusion and lack of choices these women face, nor their mistreatment at times at the hand of men but I guess there is a tradeoff, with freedom comes a loss of other things.

ARC from Netgalley.

Caren says

I think some of the situations for women in Islamic countries are known in the West, but here the author, a journalist, allows the reader an inside view of the lives of young women she met in the Middle East over the span of a decade. Because she herself was a young woman, not very much older than the unmarried girls she came to know, she was allowed access not available to many. She lived in Syria, before the civil war, and in Lebanon (a somewhat freer society, yet one in which young women walk a fine line between appearing beautiful and provocative, yet staying chaste). She lived in Egypt during the Arab spring, when there was so much hope, for naught it would seem. She lived in Saudi Arabia, one of the countries with very strict control of women, where she met leaders of the protest to allow women to drive and to work in retail stores (in particular, stores that sell underwear, since women had been forced to buy underthings from men sales clerks, which they found embarrassing). The sexes are kept strictly apart there once adolescence is reached. There was one exception to that, one which I found odd: (from page 149)

Typically, Saudi girls must confine themselves to the female sphere from earliest adolescence, but Rasha's family had been slightly more relaxed at first, she said.

"Until I was in ninth or tenth grade, we used to put a carpet on the lawn and we would take hot milk and sit there with my boy cousins," Rasha said. "But my mom and their mom got uncomfortable with it, and so we stopped. Now we sometimes talk on MSN, or on the phone, but they shouldn't ever see my face. Before I was born, my mom tells me that she and my uncles used to play Uno together sometimes. But it's stricter now. You couldn't do that today.

"My sister and I sometimes ask my mom, 'Why didn't you breast-feed our boy cousins, too?'" Rasha said. Rasha was referring to a practice called milk kinship that predates Islam and is still common in the Persian Gulf countries. A woman never had to veil in front of a man she nursed as an infant, and neither do her biological children. The woman's biological children and the children she nursed are considered "milk siblings" and are prohibited from marrying.

"If my mom had breast-fed my cousins, we could sit with them, and it would all be much easier", Rasha said. I pointed out that this would also rule out the possibility of marrying one of these cousins, and Rasha sighed. Rasha had missed the company of all her male cousins, once the gender separation was enforced within the family. But she also quickly realized that she'd developed strong feelings for a particular male cousin....
[end quote]

The author includes an extensive discussion about veiling, with explanations from the Qur'an and from

history as to how the practice evolved. Young women are apparently taught that the sight of their hair or the sound of their voice can just drive men wild, to the point that things could happen over which the man has no control. Here is an account of one exchange she records:

(from page 50)

One morning in class, the first Arabic teacher I had in Syria, a deeply religious young woman named Asma, explained why she wore the hijab.

"What if a man sees you girls walking in the street with your hair uncovered and becomes so aroused that he goes and abuses a child?" Asma asked.... "Wouldn't you feel that it was your fault that this child was raped? I know that I could never live with myself if something like that happened. That is why I wear the hijab."

[end quote]

This strict separation means that restaurants need partitioned sections for families so that women can remove their veils enough to eat....

The author profiled one of the freest places for women in the region: Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, where young women aspire to become flight attendants, at which they can make a nice income and see the world. Dubai is another country that allows women more freedom. From page 178:

The openness can be particularly liberating for young women, Saoub said.

"In Jordan your managers control your time and always make sure you feel like you're their employee", she said. "There's very, very little room to move up. In the Gulf, everything is more flexible. You prove yourself and that's it. People don't care if you're a woman. People don't care if you're married yet.

"In Jordan, if the office finds out that a woman has boyfriend, it can be the end of her career." Saoub said.

"It's amazing to come here and find that people only care about how you do your job. The fact that there is real competition, combined with the freedom, is very exciting. It makes you want to work harder and to prove yourself."

[end quote]

Yes, well, those are some of the positive points, but the author doesn't shy away from the darker stories. Her account of an honor killing in Syria in 2007 is horrifying: The 16-year-old girl had been abducted and raped, so she was put in a detention center "for her own protection from her family". Her cousin got her out by marrying her, but a month after their marriage, when her new husband had left for work, her brother came in and stabbed her to death as she slept, to avenge the family's honor. She also includes a story of a girl who was detained by police during a demonstration in Egypt and was given a forced virginity test. The description made me cringe.

I found this passage from page 112 very interesting:

These discussions came perilously close to forbidden political discourse, al-Kadi explained. Arab society's attachment to the idea of personal honor as something bound inextricably to the virtue of female relatives was becoming even deeper than it had been historically. Partly this was a result of the wave of Islamization that had been sweeping the Arab world since the 1980s. But an obsession with the control of female sexuality was also, al-Kadi and his fellow activists believed, a symptom of political despair, of a society on the edge of collapse. After decades of dictatorship, Syrian men who could control nothing else about their lives could at least control the women in their families, al-Kadi explained.

"Our parents tell us that there was an earlier day when honor meant that you were honorable in your work, that you didn't take bribes, for example", al-Kadi told me. "But now, the political and economic situation is so bad that some degree of corruption is necessary to survive. People will say that you're a good earner for your family; they won't blame you. Historically speaking, all our other ideologies have collapsed. No one talks about loyalty to country, about professional honor. Now it's just the family, the tribe, the woman. That's the only kind of honor we have left."

[end quote]

The subtitle of the book is: 'The Secret Lives of Young Women Who are Transforming the Arab World'. Frankly, I think that is a bit of an overstatement. It felt to me as though change was very incremental and only in small pockets of places. All I could really think at the end was, 'I am so glad I live in the West!' Thanks to Esil for putting this book on my radar.

Stephanie Jane (Literary Flits) says

I received a copy of *Excellent Daughters* by Katherine Zoepf from its publishers, Penguin Press, via NetGalley, in exchange for my honest review.

Women in Middle Eastern countries aren't often given much of a voice in the European press and media so, when I saw this book by journalist Katherine Zoepf, I was keen to read it. Zoepf spent over a decade meeting and talking to mostly young women across the Middle East, discussing their lives: education prospects, marriage plans, religion, social interactions, and hopes for their futures. Her writing was first published as articles in the *New Yorker* which results in some repetition across this relatively short book, although I believe the articles have been re-edited with new material added.

Excellent Daughters is written for a American audience so, understandably, has a strong Western filter. However, I liked that many of the conversations are reported word for word and, while Zoepf makes observations such as Saudi girls appearing younger in their behaviour than their American counterparts, she doesn't give this negative or positive connotations. Zoepf discusses how women are opening Islamic schools for girls, allowing them to read, interpret and argue Koranic laws from a female perspective. Others are taking advantage of new employment opportunities and the resultant financial freedom. Most interesting for me though was her conversations with women who, although they would like to change some aspects of their lives, don't want our Western ideas of commercialisation and individuality over community.

This survey attempts to portray many changes across a half dozen different countries, each of which has its own ideas of proper behaviour for its women. The country differences in themselves are fascinating, showing the popular Western media's idea of 'how Muslim women live' to be a wild misconception. However, I would have preferred a longer, deeper book, or a narrower subject focus because I often felt that Zoepf was just skimming the surface and there is much more to say.

See more of my book reviews on my blog, [Stephanie Jane](#)

Jeanette says

If you desire to read ear witness knowledge for the women, especially young women, of the Arab World, this is the book for you. They speak. Overall it is a book of opinion, expression, and emotion. The author doesn't set herself in their path of discourse too much. She does shift them on occasion but does not negate or interpret. So getting their context status quo for numerous personal choices especially within the work place or education and other personal factors for their future life direction- it's here. But on the other hand, the title was, for me a misdirection. More than considerably inaccurate.

Because this has overwhelming choice to "submit". Still quite there and in some ways more so.

Having the family pick your husband at 17. The lack of mobility being nearly acceptable regardless of the school or job. Islam means "to submit". This may be a change, but it is certainly not evidence of a feminist transformation. The change would occur in their attitude toward the submission itself. Hmmm!

Certainly they are not transforming the strictures that control their severe limitations but instead seem to rationalize and accept them further for the few perks (like segregated advanced education) that they have achieved. Seeing progressions in other countries during my lifetime for feminine cultural choices and numbers that opt for former non-traditional or personal choice role? Well, this peacefulness with the conditions that they accept with such satisfaction; it seems actually a step backwards for me.

But it is full of information. And the author probably does not hold many of the same definitions of abstracts that I would. Nor do these women. But still, in most of this discourse? It's like because you can paint the walls, you don't mind being locked in one room. Their public life, if at all, eliminates half the human race. Is that transforming by any definition?
