

On Arab Women Journalists and Their Struggles

Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World edited by Zahra Hankir. New York: Penguin Random House, 2019. Photographs. Notes. Paperback, 304 pp. USD\$17.

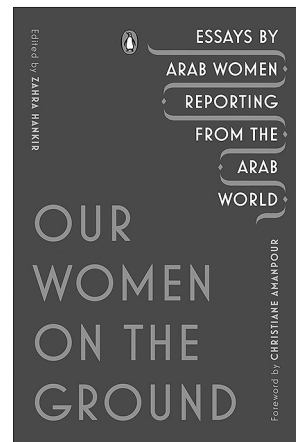
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Our Women on the Ground stands out as an innovative book that focuses on women journalists (or *sahafiyas* [xiii]) of Arab descent working and reporting in the Arab world. The editor, Zahra Hankir, explains that the idea for this book first came to her when she was compiling a list of journalists working in the Middle East. She quickly noticed that the list was mostly comprised of men of Western descent (xx). Consequently, this book focuses on the stories of nineteen women journalists whose career choices, for the most part, were challenged not only by their societies and their families, but also by their male coworkers, peers, and colleagues who often did not treat them as equals. In this sense, the book is revolutionary: it gives voice to the passion that moved these Arab women to create a place for themselves in the Arab journalism world, where they still stand out. At the same time, this book also shows their continuing struggle to make their voices heard in a world that often treats their aspirations and ambitions with contempt and, at times, violence.

Our Women on the Ground is similar in structure to Wendy Call and Mark Kramer's *Telling True Stories* (2007), with each chapter written by a different journalist presenting her personal experiences, perspectives, and challenges while working as a journalist in the Arab world. With a foreword by Christiane Amanpour and an introduction by Hankir, the book contains nineteen chapters, each written by a different journalist and ranging from ten to seventeen pages. The chapters have been sorted into five sections, each with a one-word title to describe the focus: Remembrances, Crossfire, Resilience, Exile, and Transition.

Our Women on the Ground should be considered and analyzed not only by academics in gender and Middle Eastern studies, but also by those who study contemporary and literary journalism. Scholars of literary journalism will find that this book presents the voices of these reporters through heartfelt stories of personal experience and courage in the field.

Our Women on the Ground also can be a great tool for research or to analyze in



class, because it presents the words of experience and personal growth of literary journalists, news anchors, and photojournalists. The book offers a rare chance to discover the work of multiple Arab women journalists, an opportunity to hear their stories and struggles that may ultimately inspire a new generation. At the same time, these may motivate students and other readers to learn more about the Arab world and dispel misconceptions often depicted about it in media as continuously suffering afflictions and challenges, with rare glimpses of positive news or female representation.

It should be noted, however, that this book's most powerful essays can prove to be a challenge for some students because the journalists of *Our Women on the Ground* are not shy about sharing the struggles that come with their choice of profession. Photojournalist Eman Helal, for example, talks about being sexually harassed by a colleague when she was sent abroad to report on a story and her subsequent decision not to file a complaint, because doing so could dissuade her newspaper from sending other women abroad (114). In her essay, Helal also admits that another reason she did not file a complaint was because she was afraid the newsroom would not believe her. Journalist Lina Attalah discusses this issue in her chapter as well. When talking about her profession, she is not keen on recounting "the many stories of sexism, patriarchy, and oppression" she felt in the workplace for fear that those stories might "render [her] a heroic survivor" (49).

Our Women on the Ground strongly argues the importance of these journalists by telling the full story as they pave the way for others and claim their place in journalism. In a way, a parallelism can be established between these Arab women and the first women journalists in the Western world, as both groups had to stake their claim in media, often facing multiple challenges while fighting to overcome stereotypes and condescension, both inside and outside the workplace. It should be noted that while the Arab world is vast and diverse, encompassing twenty-two separate nations, in many of these countries there are still fewer opportunities and freedoms available to women, such as advanced education and job prospects. In this sense, it is quite common for Arab women to be ignored by Arab media and by Western media coming from the Arab world. The media's focus is on Arab men, while women for the most part are silenced and relegated to household chores and maternal roles with no room for other ambitions or expectations.

Our Women on the Ground argues that not only are these nineteen women journalists pioneers in the workplace, but they are also able to tell a different side of the story largely ignored in most media. While a substantial number of women in the Arab world would not be open or even allowed to be interviewed by men, much less Western men, that is not the case when they are interviewed by Arab women. In her introduction, Hankir is quick to point out that these women can use their gender to their advantage in a region where it is often seen as a disadvantage (xv). Indeed, an example of this perspective is Jane Arraf's chapter, in which she describes a tense moment where a mother is worried about her two daughters, Yasmine and Sabreen, who insist on going to school despite the troubling army exercises being conducted by U.S. soldiers outside. The mother does not feel comfortable sharing the situation with the soldiers, but she is comfortable doing so with Arraf, who immediately

tries to find a way to ensure their safety by talking with the platoon commander. Her description of the worried mother seeing her daughters leaving the house while clutching the plastic bags of schoolbooks is one of the many remarkable stories in this book (65–67).

At times, *Our Women on the Ground* can be heartbreaking to read but, overall, the book is uplifting. Students will be able to relate to the writers' frank discussions of their work and experience in the context of being female journalists. It is to be hoped that the book will be successful enough to warrant further study and a bigger investment in important stories such as the ones shared in *Our Women on the Ground*.