

Opressed. 'Submissive.' 'Stereotype-breaking.' It's not uncommon to see these stereotypes utilised in the average article on women in the Middle East – even among some of the most liberal publications in the West. At times, I've also been expected to adopt an orientalist gaze during my career as a freelance journalist based in London, something I've long fought against.

So imagine how I recoiled in horror when an article I wrote earlier this year entitled 'Photography capturing the changing face of Saudi Arabian women' was published with the headline, 'Yes... Saudi women dress like this'.

It's with great joy then that a new book celebrating Arab and Middle Eastern women journalists re-shaping not only how we perceive the region, but also the women within it, has been released. *Our Women On The Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World* has been a long time coming.

The book chronicles the region's conflicts of the past few decades, from the 2003 US invasion of Iraq to the 2011 Arab Spring uprising and the rise of ISIS – narrated from the perspective of 19 Arab women journalists risking their lives to report from the frontlines. Set in the Middle East and beyond, we see *sahafiyat* ("female journalists") report on various issues, from the unfolding migrant crisis amidst the rise of right-wing populism in Europe to the tension between reform and conservatism in contemporary Saudi Arabia. I suspect the anthology's greatest strength is that there's not a subjugated Arab woman in sight.

It's something I've long known. As a teen, I spent nearly every summer in Beirut among women – my mum, grandma and great-aunt included – who'd survived the Lebanese civil war, the Israeli invasion and the bombardment, grief and exile from their homelands. They were, and remain, resolute, in the face of setbacks and the threat of political uprisings. It's heartening to see the women I know first-hand reflected in their multi-faceted glory, beyond the limited tropes that have come to encapsulate our identities over the past few decades, particularly post 9/11.

OWOTG's opening chapter, 'The Woman Question', penned by DC-based

journalist Hannah Allam, a Baghdad bureau chief during the Iraq war, pays tribute to Iraqi women she encountered under occupation. During the height of sectarian violence in 2006, more than 500 women were widowed every week, and set their grief aside to become sole providers for their families. It's a rare glimpse of an oft-overlooked resilience. As Allam poignantly writes: "Every time Iraq began to unravel, it was the women who worked the hardest to stitch it back together."

Equally deserving of recognition in overcoming adversity are the authors themselves, who've risked verbal, physical and sexual assault, harassment and even their lives over the course of their career.

The chapter 'Just Stop', by Egyptian photojournalist Eman Helal, is testament to this. We see the challenges she faces in doing her job. The irony isn't lost when she's held back from covering hard news and forced to retreat in the so-called 'safety' of the newsroom despite male colleagues having made sexual advances. Or when Helal's family take her to the countryside as protests in Tahrir Square unfold. "Watching the demonstrations...on television from the comfort of a couch rather than being there with my camera made me feel helpless and useless," she pens; an experience she recounts as the 'worst days of my adult life', even though her

Resilient, not Repressed

A newly released book champions a more authentic view on the women in the Arab world

job sometimes saw her return home with bloodied clothes and a black eye.

Libyan news producer Heba Shibani in 'Fight or Flight', recalls the hate mail and harassment from armed thugs as she reported on human rights abuses post-Gaddafi. It influenced Shibani's move to Malta with her family, where she lived for the past three years, mirroring many Libyan journalists who've since fled abroad.

I'd wager that not a lot of Western correspondents face similar challenges in navigating traditional family expectations, fleeing their homelands, or staying single for their careers. Helal writes: "It's as if I don't have the right to marry and build a family as my male colleagues do, just because I 'choose' a career."

It's clear, if anything, that these women deserve identical – if not, more – attention as their oft-lauded Western counterparts. Why hasn't mainstream media celebrated their work more? Why did it take *OWOTG* to immortalise their efforts? The authors echo my irritation – Moroccan freelance journalist Aida Alami rightly expressed gratitude online that the book does justice to her journalism without her having to justify that she's as deserving as her Western colleagues.

Arab and Middle Eastern women reporting on the region also have unrivalled access to spaces that are off-limits to their Western counterparts, be it salons or religious shrines. They possess an intimate understanding of the region that becomes instrumental to their reporting, like in the case of AP News journalist Zeina Karam, one of the first foreign reporters to enter Syria in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, who'd visited the country since childhood. It's absurd then that the profession continues to be dominated by white Western males.

I hope *OWOTG* sets a precedent for more Arab and Middle Eastern women journalists to re-define not just Western perceptions but Arab women's global image, on their own terms. In the spirit of the Iraqi women Hannah Allam pays tribute to in her chapter, we're going to need all the resilience we can all muster. ■

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ILLUSTRATION
WORDS SALMA HAIDRANI
AISTÉ STANGIKAITĒ

