

CLOSE TO HOME

Candid, evocative and above all, daring, this brand-new anthology chronicles the uncharted challenges of female Arab correspondents reporting from the front line

It's not often that you hear from the perspective of Arab and Middle Eastern female journalists on their changing homelands. But that's the exact premise of this new, first-of-its-kind collection of essays, *Our Women on the Ground: Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World*.

Edited by Lebanese-British writer Zahra Hankir, 19 female journalists from the region candidly reflect on the realities of reporting in the Middle East and beyond, featuring a foreword by CNN's Chief International Correspondent, Christiane Amanpour; a British-Iranian herself.

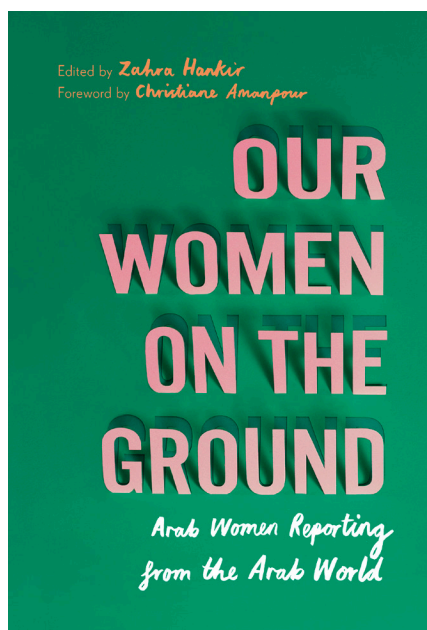
"This project is very much an act of celebration," London-based Zahra tells *Bazaar*. "For years, I'd been closely following the work of female Arab reporters who were writing or reporting bravely on the transformation of their countries. As an Arab female reporter myself, I understood that these women were up against incredibly steep and unique challenges when doing their jobs."

Divided into five sections – Remembrances, Crossfire, Resilience, Exile and Transition – while touching on universal themes of dual or competing identities, grief, motherhood, grit and love, the anthology chapters are at once illuminating yet quietly devastating in equal measure. Highlights include Bloomberg's Riyadh bureau chief Donna Abu-Nasr's *An Orange Bra in Riyadh*, who, despite covering conflict in the Middle East for more than two decades, recalls becoming choked with emotion after observing women selling underwear in a Saudi mall in 2012 for the first time.

Meanwhile, former *New York Times* reporter Nada Bakri's *Love and Loss in a Time of Revolution* is a deeply moving account of when the political turns painfully personal. "I looked for women who were telling unexpected stories and who often had to take great risks to do so," Zahra explains.

Assembling contributors was no easy feat, however. "It was more difficult to get the women who were in the field to commit, simply because they were hard to reach and only checked their email intermittently, so I had to do a lot of chasing." Even so, she's glad her perseverance paid off. "I feel the diversity comes through, not only in terms of the women themselves, but also through the stories they tell and their various styles of writing."

Given that each chapter offers readers a nuanced and fascinating understanding of the region, it's unsurprising that Zahra hopes the anthology will challenge long-held perceptions of the Middle East. "The Arab world and its people are so often seen as homogenous, when, as the essays in the book reflect, the geographic area is incredibly layered, and each country, conflict and experience carries unique truths," she says. "I hoped to advocate for



the many stories this vast region contains."

Equally important is Zahra's motivation to encourage a more inclusive narrative of the Arab world, with the aim to amplify the voices of its regional female reporters. "The global media landscape has historically been dominated by westerners," she muses, maintaining that local journalists doing "incredible work in their homelands" haven't traditionally received the same acclaim. "Many of them worked on stories pertaining to women and women's rights that weren't popular, even in their home countries. I wanted to bring attention to these underreported stories and to the women who tell them."

Despite these challenges, that's not to say that being female is without its advantages, since these journalists can report in areas that outsiders simply cannot. For example, we see Zaina Erhaim gain unprecedented, invite-only access to a segregated women's community in Syria, as well as a private gynaecological clinic. Meanwhile, in the chapter

Fight or Flight, Heba Shibani recalls working tirelessly to seek out hidden stories about women that were worthy of national attention, to promote as a presenter of a TV show focusing on women's issues in Libya. It's clear to see that the role of female reporters' work in reshaping preconceptions of the Middle East shouldn't be underestimated. As Zahra maintains, "This is, after all, one of the reasons I decided to assemble this collection of stories in the first place."

Glaringly evident is the fearlessness demonstrated not only by the reporters, but the women within each region, doing away with orientalist stereotypes that Arab women are oppressed. Zahra has long been aware of strong female Arab figures, citing her mother (an English teacher who also translated three chapters in *Our Women on the Ground*) as her biggest inspiration. "I remain in awe of her strength and resilience. Despite much tragedy in her life, she has fought every step of the way to find her own voice and to use every tool she has to help those in need. For years, she has taught English to the underprivileged, in particular to refugees. She has a deep understanding of how conflict can destabilise and rewrite lives, but she has still retained hope."

Ultimately, however, Zahra is resolutely committed to elevating the voices of these reporters. "I was – and remain – in awe of their tenacity, resilience and commitment to the essential art of newsgathering and dissemination," she explains. Our role in all of this? Reading their stories and passing them on; doing our own bit for the future of the female experience.

Our Women on the Ground: Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World by Zahra Hankir, published by Harvill Secker ■



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