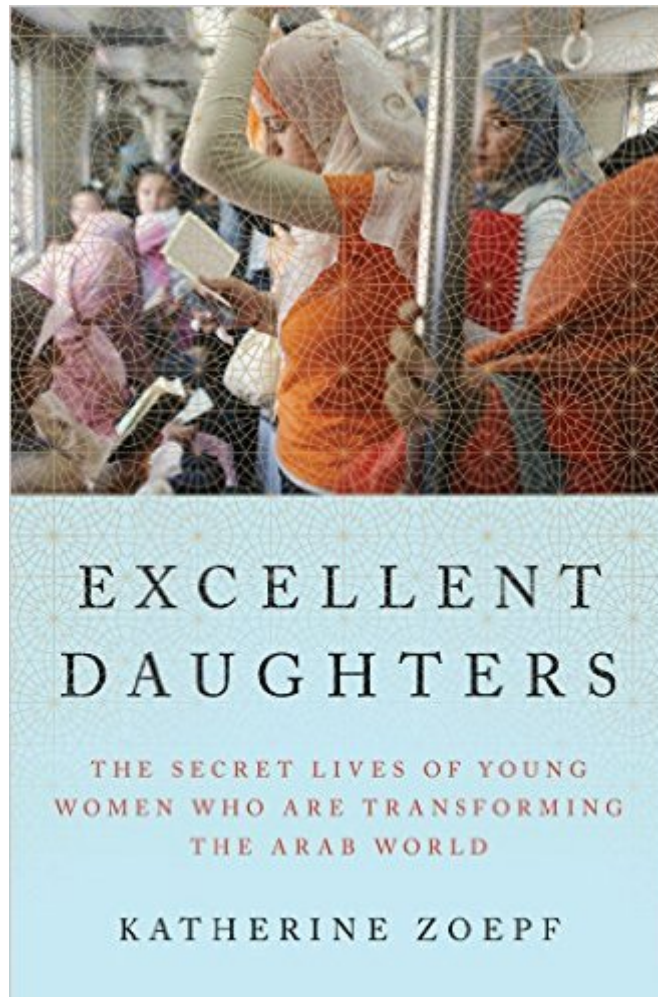


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# Excellent Daughters: The Secret Lives Of Young Women Who Are Transforming The Arab World



## Synopsis

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. A 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is divided into 8 chapters, each identified by a date and place (August 2004, Damascus; November 2006, Damascus; January 2007, Beirut; April 2007, Damascus; December 2007, Riyadh; October 2008, Abu Dhabi; April 2010, Dammam; September 2011, Cairo). The stories within each chapter about the Middle East and specifically, how politics and culture in these places impact the lives of women, revolve around the experiences of the author at the identified time and place. The premise of the collection is that author was able to enter into sensitive areas of society due to her outsider role – both as an American and as a woman – and able to gain an unusual insight into the real lives of women in these societies. Overall, I found this an interesting read but more of an academic/historical/cultural review than I had thought it would be. I have to agree with the more critical reviewer on this page – “this really isn’t a book of stories about women in these parts of the world (I similarly had the impression that this would be a more disciplined and updated version of the Saudi Princess books, providing a cultural translation for women who haven’t lived in this society). It is a book based on a thorough academic study of Islam and the role of women, overlaid with the author’s personal experiences and with stories of individual women living in these areas provided as anecdotal evidence. There was far more history than I felt was necessary to achieve the goal of telling the stories of the women and the descriptions of the personal experiences and feelings of the author were also more numerous than seemed necessary. To be clear, these were all very interesting and may be a necessary function of this type of journalism but it felt at times more like the author’s memoir than was advertised.

Katherine Zoepf, a journalist, has had the wonderful opportunity to live and travel throughout the Arab world. She has seen many changes in the area of women’s rights over the past few years. She shares her observations in this book. The region has had to adapt to social changes involving young unmarried women, something totally foreign to their culture. In their society a woman remains at home with her parents until she marries and moves into her husband’s home. However now there are numerous unmarried women who are going to university and have entered the workforce, whether through economic necessity or their own wishes for an independent life. They are delaying marriage and sometimes rejecting the institution completely. Her early reporting from Syria reflected an innocence no longer found there due to the civil war. It was interesting to read of the logistics of living a life under the veil. For example, women have curtained off sections of a restaurant so they

may uncover their mouths to eat. Little details we would never think of having to deal with. Women express their resentment of how the western world seems more interested in their hijab and restrictions on their lives rather than what they think, what they believe, what they feel. The outer garb is of more interest than their inner beings. How sad, yet how true! While some governments throughout the Middle East have tried to outlaw "honor killings", due to the tribal nature of the societies this barbaric act still exists. The honor of a family rests on the reputation of their women. If the honor is blemished the women must die in order to restore honor. Many young girls are held in prisons to protect them from their families.

While Ms. Zoepf's anecdotal accounts of Muslim women coping with their plight in different Middle Eastern countries seems to be authentic and confirms reports from other authors, I was distracted by her seemingly uncritical treatment of Islamic ideology. At the core, the book is about the excesses of Sharia Law, but that term is hardly mentioned. If the grand mufti of Syria and his wife concur that stoning of adulterers or honor murder are not Islamic, then that must be true. Throughout the book Ms. Zoepf admits that some of her Muslim contacts have expressed concern over some of the things she reported in newspaper articles. That is because Muslims have a different definition of slander. To them slander is "anything that conveys a Muslim's shortcomings to another," and it is considered unlawful. "All of a Muslim is inviolable to his fellow Muslim: his reputation, his property, his blood. . . It is sufficiently wicked for someone to belittle his fellow Muslim." Truthful reporting is no defense. Ms. Zoepf takes the statements of her contacts at face value, discounting the possibility that they may be lying about what Islam mandates, as opposed to "tradition" or "culture." There is truly a clash of civilizations going on, and people in the West are becoming more aware of the draconian aspects of Islam and Sharia Law. Rather than working to reform Islam, most Muslims are resigned to lie about Islam "saying that honor killing is a pre-Islamic tradition or that it was brought on by the Napoleonic Code. Here is the full text of Sharia Law that discusses "Permissible Lying": "Lying is sometimes permissible for a given interest. When it is possible to achieve such an aim by lying but not by telling the truth, it is permissible to lie if attaining the goal is permissible. .

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