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InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Review: *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East* by Isobel Coleman

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6202b7j7>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 7(2)

ISSN

1548-3320

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Publication Date

2011-05-31

DOI

10.5070/D472000703

Peer reviewed

Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East by Isobel Coleman. New York: Random House, 2010. 275 pp. ISBN 978-1-4000-6695-7.

When the director of the Council on Foreign Relations first approached Isobel Coleman about developing a program on women and foreign policy, her first instinct was to refuse. Thinking that women's issues were passé, the idea of feminism brought to Coleman's mind "cranky, privileged women trying to get into all-male golf clubs" (p. xvii). She soon came to realize, however, that "women's struggle for justice in much of the world is about ... the most pressing foreign policy concerns: alleviating poverty, promoting economic development, improving global health, building civil society, strengthening weak and failing states, assisting democratization, [and] tempering extremism" (p. xvii). In almost ten years as the director of the Council on Foreign Relations' Women and Foreign Policy program, Coleman traveled extensively throughout the Middle East; interviewed experts, government officials, and local leaders; and researched numerous non-governmental organizations and local development projects. Based on this research, in *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East*, Coleman weaves together the stories of Islamic feminists who are fighting a "gender jihad" throughout the Muslim world, using the tenets of Islam to promote justice and equality.

As Coleman describes, the manifestations of Islamic feminism are as wide and diverse as the countries and cultures in which they take place. There is a broad spectrum of Islamic feminists, from secular feminists who see Islam only as a tool to promote women's rights within a conservative religious environment to religious women who find their strength and purpose in understanding the fundamental gender equality in Islam, and from those who advocate a full separation of mosque and state to those who see Islam and Sharia law as the only path towards equality and justice.

In order to illustrate these many manifestations of Islamic feminism, Coleman focuses on women and men who are fighting for gender equality in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. While Coleman does describe terrible instances of injustice, oppression, and violence towards women, she focuses mainly on the powerful and hopeful stories of Islamic feminists who are making a real difference for women in their countries. For example, Coleman tells the story of Dr. Riffat Hassan, a woman born and raised in Pakistan who went on to earn a PhD in religious studies in the United Kingdom before becoming a professor in the United States. While teaching at Oklahoma State University, Hassan was appointed the faculty advisor for the Muslim Student Association. When the mostly Arab, male students resisted having a woman advisor, Hassan was inspired to study the Quran and hadith (the narrations of Mohammed's life

and teachings that are meant to clarify the Quran) on her own, becoming one of the first women to use Islamic texts to point out the discrepancies between the treatment of women in the Quran and the treatment of women under supposedly Islamic cultural and legal systems.

Another inspiring account of women using the Quran to fight for women's rights is that of Sakena Yacoobi, founder and director of the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL). Yacoobi and the AIL worked surreptitiously throughout the years of Taliban rule to operate schools for girls. After the fall of the Taliban, the AIL expanded throughout Afghanistan and now teaches classes on human rights and democracy to rural Afghan women. These classes focus on teaching women about the Quran and how to use the words of the Quran to negotiate better conditions within their homes. The story of the AIL also points to a theme that runs throughout Coleman's work, that many Islamic feminists are making progress by playing by conservative rules (wearing the hijab, maintaining gender segregation, etc.) in order to avoid backlash from conservative religious and political leaders.

The other stories in this book range from that of Dr. Haifa Jamal al-Lail, dean of Saudi Arabia's first women's university, to Mukhtar Mai of Pakistan, who fought through a corrupt legal system after being gang-raped, despite pressure from her family to remain quiet. There are also stories of female politicians risking violent physical attack in order to run for office, like Safia Siddiqi of Afghanistan and Salama al-Khafaji of Iraq, and journalists like Sabria Jawar, the first woman bureau chief of a major newspaper in Saudi Arabia. Notably, Coleman also includes the support of key male leaders in these stories, such as the Ayatollah al-Sistani of Iraq, who during the election of 2005 issued a fatwa calling for women to vote, even against the objections of their husbands.

Through these accounts, Coleman breaks down the stereotypes of Muslim women as helpless victims, oppressed by a violently misogynistic religion. She tells story after story of strong women who are leading the fight, not just for women's rights but also for broader goals of economic and social development, showing Muslim women as change agents, not just passive victims hidden behind veils. Through these stories Coleman also points to the important distinction between religious law and cultural tradition that so often gets conflated, more often than not to the detriment of women. Importantly, this book also breaks down stereotypes of Islam by outlining the ways in which Islam revolutionized women's rights in the seventh century, and the ways in which Islamic texts are being used to revolutionize women's rights today. By providing historical context of Islamic feminism in different countries, Coleman also gives the reader a broader sense of the more recent social and political history of this key region of the world.

As an American woman writing a book about Islamic feminism, Coleman has to walk a fine line between ethnocentrism and absolute cultural relativism,

which for the most part she does quite well. She allows the stories of women in these diverse Muslim countries to speak to the realities of Islamic feminism, and allows these women's voices to provide the critique of the treatment of women under ostensibly Islamic laws and customs. Occasionally, however, it is possible to detect her bias towards a secular approach to politics in general, and feminism more specifically. In the final chapter Coleman states, "I suspect that over the long term, Islamic feminism, like other reform movements that preceded it, will end up unapologetically secular. Only then will never-ending debates over religious interpretation be removed from politics" (p. 275). For most of the book, however, she acknowledges the important role that Islam is playing in securing women's rights around the world.

Over the past decade, the Middle East has become an increasingly important area of the world to understand, not only due to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Many countries in the region have also been developing at breakneck speeds, and a central component of this development is often education. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other countries have looked to partner with universities in the United States and Europe to expand higher education opportunities and modernize their primary and secondary education systems. It is imperative that those working in the field of education in the United States come to a better understanding of the complicated interplay of religion and culture in this region. *Paradise Beneath Her Feet* is an inspirational and informative book that provides a nuanced look at the complicated role of women in Muslim societies. It is a must-read for anyone looking to better understand the history, religion, and culture of the Middle East.

Reviewer

Elizabeth Niehaus is a doctoral candidate in College Student Personnel at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she also serves as the Graduate Coordinator for Grants and Assessment with the College of Education Office of International Initiatives. Her research interests are in the areas of service-learning, leadership, and international education. She also recently co-taught a graduate-level study abroad course to Qatar to study higher education in the Middle East.