



# Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East

*Isobel Coleman*

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

Over the centuries and throughout the world, women have struggled for equality and basic rights. Their challenge in the Middle East has been intensified by the rise of a political Islam that too often condemns women's empowerment as Western cultural imperialism or, worse, anti-Islamic. In **Paradise Beneath Her Feet**, Isobel Coleman shows how Muslim women and men are fighting back with progressive interpretations of Islam to support women's rights in a growing movement of Islamic feminism.

In this timely book, Coleman journeys through the strategic crescent of the greater Middle East—Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—to reveal how activists are working within the tenets of Islam to create economic, political, and educational opportunities for women. Coleman argues that these efforts are critical to bridging the conflict between those championing reform and those seeking to oppress women in the name of religious tradition. Success will bring greater stability and prosperity to the Middle East and stands to transform the region.

Coleman highlights a number of Muslim men and women who are among the most influential Islamic feminist thinkers, and brilliantly illuminates the on-the-ground experiences of women who are driving change: Sakena Yacobi, an Afghan educator, runs more than forty women's centers across Afghanistan, providing hundreds of thousands of women with literacy and health classes and teaching them about their rights within Islam. Madawi al-Hassoon, a successful businesswoman, is challenging conservative conventions to break new ground for Saudi professional women. Salama al-Khafaji, a devout dentist-turned-politician, relies on moderate interpretations of Islam to promote opportunities for women in Iraq's religiously charged environment. These quiet revolutionaries are using Islamic feminism to change the terms of religious debate, to fight for women's rights within Islam instead of against it.

There is no mistaking that women and women's issues are very much on the front lines of a war that is taking place between advocates of innovation, tolerance, and plurality and those who use violence to reject modernity in Muslim communities around the world. Ultimately, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet* offers a message of hope: Change is happening—and more often than not, it is being led by women.

## **Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East Details**

Date : Published April 27th 2010 by Random House (first published January 1st 2010)

ISBN : 9781400066957

Author : Isobel Coleman

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Feminism, Religion, Islam, Politics, Womens

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## From Reader Review Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East for online ebook

### Letitia says

This is a really good, if elementary, introduction to feminism in the Muslim world, and the concept of so-called Islamic Feminism. I became interested in the topic when I went to Kuwait for a contract, and had to become an expert in gender and politics in the Gulf overnight. It was exciting and fascinating and Islamic Feminism became a topic of intense interest to me. This book, while adding more specifics, does not actually add much to my knowledge, which I gleaned from other more intense reads. However, it would be useful as an introduction to someone who has no idea what is going on with women's rights and women's political empowerment in the Middle East and wants a crash course. It breaks down the movements country by country, covers the recent history, and offers personal bios from leaders of Islamic Feminism.

The first section of the book is Gender Studies 101, so if you are aware that we should invest in things like girls' education and maybe women can actually contribute something to society, I would advise skipping the first quarter. It is super basic if you ever read anything about international development ever. After that I really enjoyed the culturally contextualized look at how conservative, religious women are claiming their own rights with their own voices. Western Feminism, with its emphasis on individual liberties, reproductive control, and challenging cultural norms of modesty, is anathema to the Muslim world and the women in it. So the women of Islam are carving a place for feminists out of their own Quranic and cultural reality. In my opinion, this is what is driving Middle Eastern democracy forward. It will be the women of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Pakistan, who actually move their political discourse and social norms toward democratic norms and concepts of personal liberty, albeit that personal liberty will always be couched in the overarching value of family and the communal good (something missing from Western, specifically American feminism).

If you discover you want to go deeper with this topic, I highly recommend Islamic Feminism in Kuwait by Alessandra Gonzalez, which gets into the details and takes a more academic approach. I really enjoyed her book, and think it is easily the next obvious read after Paradise Beneath Her Feet.

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### Sara says

It is highly unusual that I like a book I am reading for one of my classes, but this book was pretty amazing. Coleman is a truly great storyteller and made this book flow so well that I had difficulty putting it down. I recommend it to everyone. Especially people who are interested in the feminist movements within the Middle East. However, I was disappointed that she didn't include Egypt, my home country, in the book. With everything that is going on there now it would make for an interesting piece of survey and study. Hopefully when the dust settles Coleman will be willing to write a book just about the female situation in Egypt.

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### Phoenix says

#### CounterCurrents

There is a fragile breeze of change in the ME. Isobel Coleman, a member of the US based Council on Foreign Relations, takes a fascinating look at nascent feminism in the Muslim world, not only in the ME, but

also in India and Indonesia. Citing studies that show that empowering women to take a role in small business (through microfinance) entails less risk and greater payback for raising the local standard of living. On the other hand she cautions us that these women are still products of their political culture.

The chapters, organized on a country by country basis, the book profiles a number of individuals, mostly women, and each chapter provides a small but useful historic context. Well illustrated with interviews and examples, she lays out an argument that the current macro trend is towards a more fundamentalist Islam where links to westernized feminism is taken as a negative. Strategically then women can make more progress if they can use Islam's rich history of *ijtihad* (religious debate), to beat the fundamentalists at their own game by undertaking a pro-woman position by learning for themselves the text of the Quran and hadiths. Unfortunately, notes the author, to be successful and maintain credibility this can also mean taking a negative approach to the values of the West.

The coverage of India and Indonesia/Malaysia takes place in the first two chapters and IMV the prospects there are most hopeful. In Iran she captures the pushbacks of her three assigned female minders and finds that behind the veil, many women (and Iranians in general) are dissatisfied with the religious dictats of the regime. The interview with Massoumeh Ebtekar the former spokesperson for the US embassy hostage takers is interesting but Coleman sees her as being "stuck in Islamic feminism 1.0 - heavy on the Islamism, light on the feminism" (p101).

More to western tastes is lawyer and Nobel prize winner Shirin Ebadi currently in exile for her attempt to act as defense for 7 prominent B'hai unjustly imprisoned by the regime, Azam Taleghani, founder of one of the first Iranian women's journals or Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh who has been in and out of the notorious Evin prison, is an activist in the Campaign to Stop Stoning Forever, and against the somewhat perversely named "Family Protection Act" which made divorce, polygamy and *muta* (temporary marriage) laws much easier for men.

Pakistan and Afghanistan can be taken as a whole operating on a sliding scale. The former is a conundrum of poverty and illiteracy, but also pockets of great wealth. On one hand you have the capital Islamabad which is pushing into modernity, but on the other, as you move towards the city of Peshawar near the border of Afghanistan there is a slide towards a Taliban style mentality. Historically many of the women's groups are westernized elites with little connection to the rural poor. Even though Benezair Bhutto was elected (several times - the government swung back and forth between her party and that of Nawaz Sharif) there was little progress legislatively in favour of women as he maintained power in part by appealing to the Islamists. Under the government of General Musharraf proto feminists such as Riffat Hassan found that they were being used as window dressing by the government without real support. But we also meet Muktar Mai who was gang-raped as a punishment against charges laid against her younger by the elders of her village. Women's groups came to her support and she eventually won an \$8500 judgement against her attacker. She used the money to open a school.

In Afghanistan the situation begins even worse, yet the earlier history of 20th century had been quite promising. 87% of the women are illiterate and 1 in 8 will die in childbirth. The need here is to make education a priority. In spite of the billions spent on militarily propping up the Karzai government the most effective measure seems to be small scale accountable support (at a cost of around \$31K/village) for community councils and schools under a program known as the NSP (National Solidarity Program), where one of the requirements for eligibility lies in participation by women in the village shura councils. The US provides about 70% of the program's \$100 million dollar annual budget.

The last two chapters cover Saudi Arabia and Iraq, a contrast in long term stability and uncertain futures. The Saudi regime is highly segregated and firmly in control. The country is firmly based on a Wahabist interpretation of sharia and the *mutawa* (religious police) are there to enforce it. Women are not allowed in public without a mahram (male guardian), and the most famous restriction is on the right to drive. However

there is considerable freedom when women are alone together and higher education is available to Saudi women. Just as the war with Iraq helped women in Iran to enter the work place to replace men at the front (the same was true of American in the 1940s), the Gulf wars made it possible for women to move into the Saudi workplace. The other aspect of the Saudis is that there is a great deal of money floating around. There's an interesting scene (pp204) where Coleman gives a talk to a group of men and veiled women who sit separately on small business development. The men react negatively to the notion of high risk. But when the men leave the women throw off their hijabs and pepper her with questions about venture capital and job opportunities outside the Kingdom.

The Iraqi focus was on the eastern Sunni/Shia region of the country, not the Kurdish west. Iraq from 1990 on was a bad time for women's rights (and rights in general) as Saddam moved closer to the clerical class for support. In the interim period while US attempted pacification, all over the country religious conservatives acted out against unveiled women, even by throwing acid in their faces, a tactic more frequently associated with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and female activists, even ordinary women wearing makeup were often targeted for assassination. Today 31% of Iraqi parliamentarians are female, though half of those were elected as religious conservatives. The best we can get here is an overview - given the exit of US troops less than two months ago it's too early to tell what's going to happen.

A useful addition to the complex narratives of middle eastern societies. Recommended.

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## Josephine says

While reading Isobel Coleman's "Paradise Beneath Her Feet," I couldn't help but think about the revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests known as the Arab Spring that started in December of last year and has carried on through the bulk of 2011.

In its wake, we're seeing the rise of Islamic political parties — and you can't help but wonder how it will all play out for women, in general.

While women all over the world have, for centuries, fought for equality and basic rights, the fight still goes on today in the Middle East, where the rise of political Islam has meant the condemnation of women's empowerment as "anti-Islamic."

In her introduction, Coleman writes:

"...across the Islamic world, women's rights are one of the most contentious political and ideological issues. Attitudes towards women have helped to define and set apart the broader worldviews of conservative and progressive Muslims. Conservatives link women's piety to the purity and Islamic authenticity of their societies. They use religious justifications to enforce that piety through a limited public role for women, gender segregation, and harsh punishments for any perceived transgressions. Assertions of women's rights are often portrayed as anti-Islamic. For decades, powerful Islamists have successfully smeared women's groups as being slavish followers of an illegitimate, neo-colonialist Western agenda." (p.xvii)

One particularly stunning story Coleman used to illustrate this was the example of Saudi Arabia's dreaded religious police, the mutawa, who actually forced girls from a burning high school building to go back inside, while preventing firefighters from entering the building or rushing to the girls' aid because it was "sinful to approach them."

Some of these mutawa even went so far as to force some of the girls who escaped the burning building to go back inside because they weren't "appropriately covered."

Fifteen school children ultimately suffocated or burned to death while more than 40 were injured in this 2002 incident.

While Coleman certainly could have peppered her book with horror stories, the main focus was on the Muslim women — and a few men — who are attempting to drive change in the Middle East.

She writes about Sakena Yacoobi, an Afghan teacher, who runs more than 40 women's centres across Afghanistan, teaching women about their rights within Islam. Then, there's also Salama al-Khafaji, a devout dentist-turned-politician, who relies on moderate interpretations of Islam to promote opportunities for women.

It's clear that these Islamic feminists are quiet revolutionaries who are fighting for women's rights within Islam instead of against it.

It's a fascinating and timely read — and similar in vein to Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's "Half the Sky."

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## Luna Selene says

I had high hopes for this book, but this book seemed to have even higher hopes for itself.

First, I would use the term "Middle East" lightly with this book. I think MENASA (Middle East, Northern Africa, Southeast Asia) would be more appropriate, kind of, minus the Northern Africa bit in a large part. Even then, Somalia is not a MENASA country, so the Somalian stories are inappropriate examples, so maybe she means Muslim-majority countries? I know that sounds like nit-picking, but really, someone in foreign policy should know better than to seem ignorant of diversity throughout Africa and Asia by lumping it altogether. It does matter.

Second, the concern for women's issues seemed superficial, and I'm not making this up, because the author tells you so herself.

In 2002, Leslie Gelb, then the president of the Council on Foreign Relations where I was a senior fellow working on the Middle East, asked me to develop a program on women and foreign policy. I hesitated, protesting that I knew very little about gender issues. In fact, a program on women's issues struck me as, well, decidedly out of the mainstream. I had studiously avoided taking any women's studies courses in college and graduate school. "Women's rights" for me conjured up images of cranky, privileged women trying to get into all-male golf clubs... Geld, however, was persistent, and at his urging I read widely.

I really feel that if she had taken a single one of those courses, just one, she wouldn't have written this book how she did.

She makes lots of sweeping statements that need to be looked at closer.

For instance, she states that social welfare spending tends to increase when women are in office.

But she asks no questions of why that is, which struck me. She just leaves one to assume an innate maternal role for women, and the title itself comes from a sentiment that values women in their role as mothers, which

I find inappropriate for a book that tries to portray women as powerful.

Third, Coleman tends to concern herself more with the elite of the countries she chose. I found the voice of the "average" woman was silent because the "average" woman doesn't work for some type of government/NGO.

Yet, little change will happen without her.

Coleman's narrative was clearly that of an outsider looking in, and when you want the truth of daily life, that isn't who one usually goes for, the same way one doesn't normally ask someone with a fanny pack and camera which train to take. It isn't really about whether you are a tourist, but whether you appear like one. I felt that Coleman looked at some of the women she spoke about rather haughtily or pitifully in places and I do not believe one can get a true sense like that.

Do women read this at book clubs? I had to read it for class.

That said, there are intriguing stories in the book, and it is not unpleasant to read. While I disagree with how the book was written, I agree that the stories in them should be told.

However, if you're looking for a book on women in the middle east, look somewhere else.

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## **Julie Christine says**

"A mother is a school. Empower her and you empower a great nation." -Hafez Ibrahim, Egyptian poet (1872-1932).

This quote opens *Paradise Beneath Her Feet* and serves as a guiding theme throughout this extraordinary book. With a simple statement, an Arab poet from a previous century contradicts the outsider's view of Muslim women as victims of an authoritarian, patriarchal religion.

Isobel Coleman, a senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, takes us on a journey through the greater Middle East to demonstrate the brave and selfless activism that is occurring in the name of human rights and within the tenets of Islam. We meet the women (and not an insignificant number of men) of Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq who are advocates of girls' education and of the full participation of women in their countries' economic and social development.

Part I lays a foundation of historical context of Islamic feminism (doesn't that appear oxymoronic? Read this and have your stereotypes shattered!)and of research on the role of women's rights in the developing world. "Why Women Matter" is an armchair development studies scholar's dream. Coleman synthesizes decades of research that demonstrates over and over again one simple fact of enormous consequence: when you empower women, you change the world.

In Part II we meet the scholars, journalists, business leaders, lawmakers who by chance or by design are leading their nations, step-by-step, toward fundamental change. The enormity of the struggle for Islamic feminists is overshadowed only by the enormity of their vision and dedication. In societies where rape victims are imprisoned or murdered for the crime of adultery, where girls risk their lives every time they cross the threshold of an illegal school, where women remain trapped in a burning building because they are not dressed appropriately to be seen by male firefighters, it seems hopelessly quixotic to even dream of a

time when these women could vote, own a business, chose their own husband or even drive a car. Yet, the intellectual and social revolution underway in the Middle East shows that even two steps forward and one step back is steady and lasting progress.

The central theme of this book is that effective and sustainable reform in the Muslim world means working within Islam, not against it. Nearly all of these women are devout Muslims who believe that theirs is a religion of justice and equality. Many have become passionate scholars of the Quran in order to show their leaders and fellow citizens the true nature of Islam and to fight against the political and social corruption that has held women throughout the Muslim world in a stranglehold of oppression and despair. Even those activists who believe in a secular society realize that change must come from within the scope of a religion that dictates the region's legal, economic and political structure.

The point of Coleman's book is not to justify or explain Islam- even with her decades of research and reporting on women throughout the Muslim world, she is not a scholar of Islam or an interpreter of Muslim society. She allows the women in this book to speak for their own beliefs.

Much like *Half the Sky*, the intention of this book is to reveal to the Western world, through the stories of women who are right at this moment blogging, writing, teaching, and fighting, that women's rights are human rights and therefore of critical importance to global political and economic stability and security.

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## Joseph says

I lived in Saudi Arabia in 1984 and 1985 and recognized the two part system. In public women were treated one way and in private they were treated much more as equals. Visit any Saudi friend and in the privacy of his home you would think you were in any westerner's home. Relaxed atmosphere. Wife not only uncovered, but in the current western fashions –Jordache at the time. What happens in public and private are two very different things. Through my graduate school education, the Middle East was viewed very polarized (even in pre 9/11 era) between the Liberal theory and a professor whose brother was killed by Gaddafi; there was no non-extreme view. I recently finished Karen Elliot House's "On Saudi Arabia" and was very surprised at the progress that women and society have made in what is considered an oppressive environment. Maybe the problem in the West is how we look at women's rights in the Middle East.

Isobel Coleman author of *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women are Transforming the Middle East*, is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. That alone speaks volumes of her expertise and experience above her degrees from Oxford and Princeton.

Perhaps the most important point repeated throughout the book is something that most Westerners view symbolism over substance (my words not Coleman's). We in the West look at repression as having to wear a head covering or abaya as repression (symbolism) rather than the real picture. It turns out that even when the head scarf was banned, women still insisted on wearing them. The key factor in women's rights is education. We view Iran as repressive, but more women graduate college in Iran than men. Saudi Arabia has a large population of highly educated women. Women's groups around the Middle East work for literacy and educating women.

Women's rights groups in the Middle East also work with Islam rather than seeing it as a repressive force. Islam is a religion that does offer equal rights and one just needs to become familiar with the Koran to understand this. The problem is literacy. Illiteracy is a major stumbling block. Once the population can read and understand, questions are asked and when answered, questioned again. Women's groups have turned to working with clerics to make their point and it is working. Women gain more working with Islam than

against it (like early women's groups). Working inside the system has allowed women like Benazir Bhutto to become Prime Minister in Pakistan and Megawati Sukarnoputri to become president of Indonesia.

If the West really wants to help women's rights it needs to focus more on education and literacy than on head scarfs. Once women and those who support women's rights, read and understand the Koran they can fight for their rights that are allowed by their religion, a religion they also dearly believe in. Many educated Muslim women believe that Islam is for equal rights and can quote the Koran supporting that fact. Their system is not perfect, but then, no one's is. We in America think of equal rights, but in my home state of Texas it was illegal for a married woman to buy property, take out a loan, or start a business without her husband's approval all the way up to 1977.

A very worthwhile read whether your interest is women's rights, the Middle East or current world affairs. I will admit that after reading the section on Pakistan I ordered Benazir Bhutto's autobiography and her book on Islam .

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### **Sigrid-marianella says**

Coleman provides compelling arguments for the need of Islamic feminism.

For someone with limited previous knowledge of the Islamic region the book provides interesting insights to the history and rise of Islamic feminism and why it is needed and should be supported by Muslims and secularists alike.

The book deals primarily about the pragmatic reasons for why Islamic feminism is needed, and less systematically on the theoretical content of Islamic feminism. Each chapter illustrates the battle of determined and brave Muslim feminists (men and women), but the book becomes slightly repetitive towards the end. I read the book from cover to cover but I think it is not necessary to do so, and one can jump to the chapters concerning the countries of interest to the reader.

I actually found the first parts of the book most interesting, where Coleman lays out the arguments for the pragmatic use of Islamic feminism to achieve gender equality in deeply religious and conservative regions of the world, as well as giving a brief history of the origins of Islamic feminism.

The argument, as I understood it, can be summarised as follows:

- Religion has won over secularism in the Islamic regions of the world (whether you like it or not).
- In order to change deeply held sexist traditions, arguments must be put forward within the framework of religion to really induce change in attitudes (not only amongst men who hold the power, but also amongst religious rural women themselves).

I am convinced by Coleman's arguments for the need of Islamic feminism, but I am still left by a lingering doubt in the back of my mind. There seems to be a fine line between working slowly and pragmatically to achieve gender equality, and that of pleading for basic rights on the premises of patriarchy. Can patriarchy really be destroyed by working "within the system"? Isn't the ultimate aim to replace a patriarchal system entirely, rather than simply improving women's standing in "man's world"? Coleman mentions that critics argue there are limits to Islamic feminism (but does not elaborate on this critique nor really respond to it).

But perhaps there is little other choice today for more effective progress. Many of the rights women in these parts of the world fight for are after all to a great extent very basic human rights, and the limits on Islamic feminism may not be imminently relevant for the struggle these Muslim women face today.

The book ends with a fable of a baby elephant kept in captivity. The baby elephant tries to no avail to break free from his chains. As the elephant grows into an adult it has stopped attempting to break free. Unaware that with its larger size would easily be able to break the chains the elephant remains captive. In short, islamic feminism is a baby elephant today. Just because we can only observe babysteps of progress today, we mustn't abandon the idea that islamic feminism can one day gain sufficient force that enables it to push for widespread gender equality. As the islamic feminist movement grows stronger as part of a wider revival of progressive islam, one senses hope from Coleman that islamic feminists will become increasingly assertive and gain momentum. It is only a matter of time.

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### **Aayeshanatasha says**

This was a really great read. I helped me get a good background on the condition for women in different countries in the middle east and that progress or lack there of, in getting more equal rights for women. That being said it was a bit tough to get through because it was very heavy content, written like a scholarly paper. Not a quick read. There was also a bit of unnecessary repetition, but as there were so many different people, places and concepts mentioned, I understand her desire to further clarify everything. I'm glad I read it and it horrified me. I'm so glad to have grown up in the US and not in a country influences by Islam.

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### **Blair says**

I absolutely loved the style of this book! I read it as part of a research exercise and found I couldn't keep myself from turning the pages! As far as biographical re-tellings/research/non fiction novels go, this is a must read for anyone with in interest in how other cultures interpret and structure femininity and gender. A big eye opener! It has a great way of minimising ethnocentricity in its storytelling. It's now up there on my "most respected" list. Absolutely fascinating and thought provoking! I urge you all to give it a go. The beauty of the format is that each chapter is topic related so you can browse through to the area of which your interest lies. But if you are like me and go from p.1, you will find the intro keeps you attached to all the tales Coleman has to offer in this neat little package. Highly recommended!

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### **Kirsten Allen says**

This story details the rise of Islamic Feminism in the Middle East. Islamic Feminism seeks equality between men and women while working with the framework of Islam. The goal is to demonstrate that the discriminatory practices against women in the name of Islam are actually the result of tradition (which are obviously wrong) or the patriarchal nature of societies where Muslim women live.

Using the foundational texts of the Islamic faith, Islamic feminists (or what ever they call themselves) create an Islamic framework from which they can argue against those that seek to continue to discriminate and limit women rights using the Islamic faith.

Coleman's book gives a good overview of the rise of Islamic Feminism in the Middle East and then focuses on 5 Middle Eastern countries where changes in women rights are moving forward more slowly than other countries.

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## **Fatimahali6 says**

it is a very unbiased and informative book. It talks about the reform movement that is currently led by women, an islamic feminism, across 5 countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, KSA, and Iraq. The most valuable lesson I gained from this book is that secularism cannot be applied, or enforced, in very religious, conservative and poorly-educated societies. Secularism scored a high level of failure in the Middle East, like in Iran and Eygept, especially that it was accompanied by harsh dectatorship. The journey to secularism is very long and the first and most important step of this journey is educating people and empowering women.

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## **Justina says**

I really loved this book. It opened my eyes to the challenges women in the Middle East face with regards to their rights. Islam is often misinterpreted and combined with old traditions to deny women their rights. I learned a lot about how Islam empowers women and protects their rights. I will never make assumptions about a veiled woman again after reading this.

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## **AJ says**

This is a really interesting examination of feminism and women's rights in several Middle Eastern countries. Reading this book was a roller coaster ride for me... Delight at some of the success women have had in furthering their rights, and depression at how awful things still are in many countries.

I actually learned a lot about Islam from this book and I now understand how a woman can identify both as a Muslim and a feminist, so that was very enlightening. I also learned a lot about the history of each country the book touches on. And although I already knew that women's access to things like education, jobs, and family planning were important, I now know how and why they are important and what impact they have.

Although this book is only a few years old, parts of it are already out of date. Even though both the forward and afterward provide updates to the main text, things have changed even more since then. So this is a good way to learn what's been going on the mid to late 20th century and the start of the 21st, but of course for a truly up-to-date picture of the state of women's rights in any country, you'll want to check the news and blogs.

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## **Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says**

Isobel Coleman is senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations (an independent, non-partisan organization not affiliated with the U.S. Govt.). This book is the result of nearly a decade of travel, study, interviews, and writing about women in the Middle East.

*Paradise Beneath Her Feet* is an overview of both the history and current state of affairs with regard to women's rights in the Middle East. Each chapter is devoted to one of the major Middle Eastern nations. Issues are complex and progress is slow, but courageous and persistent women in these countries are speaking out for fair treatment and equal rights. They arm themselves with verses from the Quran which call for justice and nonviolence toward women.

The key challenge lies in disentangling cultural traditions from the actual tenets of Islam. Many of the restrictions placed on women in the name of Islam come from primitive beliefs not supported by the Quran. As these women become literate and study the Quran on their own, they are able to show that many Muslim family laws are not defensible using holy scripture.

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