Women War Correspondents in 2013

Glenda Cooper

As Israeli airstrikes once again hit Gaza City in November 2012, Phoebe Greenwood, a freelance journalist based in Jaffa, Tel Aviv, then heavily pregnant and working for *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, noticed something unusual as she sat writing her latest report in the lobby of the Al Deira Hotel (Barnett 2012). The hotel, a kind of unofficial newsroom for foreign correspondents, was full – but there was nothing strange there. Greenwood had been working with photographers Heidi Levine and Ewan Mohammed Darkhali. What struck Greenwood was the fact that the journalists surround- ing her – from *The Sydney Morning Herald* to Sky Italia – were all women.

Not that Greenwood should have been surprised. After all, during the Libyan revolution of 2011 the first three reporters into Green Square, Tripoli were all women: Alex Crawford of Sky, Sara Sidner of CNN and Zeina Khodr of Al Jazeera English – yet their gender was something that some of the three involved felt was given undue focus. As Khodr put it:

I was really shocked by the focus in Western media on female reporters – there’s been nothing like that in the Muslim press. Surely we can both cover wars? – In fact some women are more brave; some men, some crews were definitely staying away from the front line.

So is it patronizing, irrelevant or sexist to mention the gender of war correspondents? Or can the fact that women appear more prominently at the forefront of media coverage of conflicts and revolutions be worthy of dis- cussion? Of course, women war reporters are nothing new: from Kathleen ‘Kit’ Blake Coleman covering the Spanish-American War in 1898, Margaret Bourke-White, Clare Hollingworth and Martha Gellhorn in the Second World War, to Kate Adie covering the Tripoli bombings and the late Marie Colvin who covered conflicts as diverse as Chechnya, Sri Lanka and Syria.

Many of the early correspondents had great difficulty in being taken to the front line; we have, says BBC correspondent Hilary Andersson, come a long way since Gellhorn had to hide in the bathroom of a hospital ship to avoid missing the D-Day landings (Andersson 2003). And while women correspondents may still be in a minority, their number is increasing – according to the Freedom Forum during the first war in Chechnya nearly half the accredited reporters were women (*Journalists in Danger: Recent Russian Wars*, Freedom Forum, 1998, p. 307, cited in Seaton 2005). ‘I think this high number of female correspondents in a conflict zone is a result of gender equality finally filtering down – making it totally normal for women to report from the front line~~’,~~ suggested Greenwood (Barnett 2012). And as jobs in journalism go, it can be a good one for women: the academics Marina Prentoulis, Howard Tumber and Frank Webster of City University have argued that women front line correspondents are actually less subjected to gender prejudices than other parts of the profession, because they face the same psychological and physical hazards as men. According to one female national newspaper journalist to whom Prentoulis, Tumber and Webster spoke for their paper *Finding Space*: *Women Reporters at War*, the reality was that:

Everyone is reduced to an equal and there isn’t tension between males or females … no one would have ever said for example, ‘we can’t take you because you’re a woman’ … you were just another reporter. (Prentoulis, Tumber and Webster 2005: 376)

Take for example, *Guardian* journalist Audrey Gillan. She was embed- ded in the second Gulf War with the Household Cavalry’s Regiment D Squadron (a unit within 16 Air Assault Brigade, which does front line reconnaissance). The unit had initially said that it ‘wished not to have women’ (Gillan 2003: 8), but it changed its mind, and its soldiers completely accepted Gillan within the unit during their tour of Iraq; she also overcame her preconceptions about the soldiers, also known as ‘squaddies’. Adapting to another culture was key:

As they saw that I was prepared to muck in – and as part of a crew of five on a small vehicle, I had little choice but to take my turn at making the tea, heating up the boil-in-the-bags or laying down people’s ‘doss bags’, I was shouted at and ordered around – I simply became ‘one of the boys’. Learning to swear like a trooper probably helped too. (Gillan 2003: 8)

Andersson described the 2003 Iraq war as a ‘good war’ for women (Andersson 2003: 20), with Christiane Amanpour for CNN, Emma Hurd for Sky, Andersson, Kylie Morris and Caroline Wyatt for the BBC and Cordelia Kreutzmar for GMTV all being given high-profile roles by their employers. She described the number of women war reporters as a ‘vogue’ and wrote at the time:

There is a well-entrenched belief at a high level of media management that audiences want to see and hear women on their screens. If press coverage of media deployments is anything to go by, women reporting wars also has an added ‘wow’ value. (2003: 20)

‘Wow’ value? Perhaps in the Iraq war, but when it came to the Libyan revolution executives were quick to say there was no deliberate attempt to foreground women reporters; Jon Williams, world news editor at the BBC says: ‘This wasn’t about male or female – it was about showcasing our best people’. In fact, in some cases perhaps it was more luck than deliberate action. Khodr, senior correspondent at Al Jazeera English, says she ended up in Tripoli purely because she was on the rota that week. And Crawford says she was sent back to Libya because of her previous experience in Zawiyah earlier in 2011, but believes that there were so many female report- ers at the forefront of the reporting in other media organizations because:

I think they [news desks] did not realize how big a story it was going to be … other organizations sent their big guns miles after the event. When I was leaving Libya and going to Tunisia, Ben Brown and John Simpson were going in – they are reporters you would expect in the starting line-up, but this time in the second line-up.

In Libya, the three women first into Green Square were all television correspondents as well: Hilsum, Channel 4 News’s international editor notes that the domination of the TV image has promoted the idea that Libya was reported by women:

The number of female correspondents reporting wars and other emergencies has been increasing over the years, but I don’t really know why so much fuss [was made] about Libya. Maybe because Alex Crawford was so prominent, and the fact that she was doing live rolling TV news meant that people could see her in a dangerous place. No one watched live on TV as Marie Colvin’s eye was shot in Sri Lanka. TV somehow makes it more powerfully obvious that the reporters are female.

Although women may have an increasingly high profile in war report- ing, the truth is that the main difficulty for many women is getting the job in the first place. We have come some way since before 1970 when only 6 per cent of foreign correspondents were women (McAfee 2011). Crawford herself, a Royal Television Society award winner, took six years to win a foreign correspondent’s role:

I got turned down continually – it became a running joke in the newsroom how many times I got turned down; one friend said to me ‘by now most people would have given up – they don’t want you’ but I kept on going and finally got it.

Those women who succeed in becoming foreign correspondents are a very specialized group, according to Anthony Feinstein and Mark Sinyor in a report for the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard. According to analysis of more than two hundred war reporters, they say that while two- thirds were male, those war correspondents who were female had several unusual attributes – they were less likely to be married (both compared to their male counterparts, and compared to journalists in general) and more likely to be better educated than male war correspondents.

Most intriguing was the gender parity the researchers found when it came to psychological problems or alcohol consumption, where the findings went against the grain of the normal gender divide: the women were no more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, and they were just as likely to drink as the men (21 per cent of women versus 24 per cent of men exceeded standards of healthy drinking):

The emerging profile of the female war journalist – more likely to be single and better educated than their male colleagues, no more vulnerable to PTSD, depression or overall psychological distress, and keeping up with the men when it comes to drinking – suggests they are a highly select group. It is not by chance that these women have gravitated to the frontlines of war. (Feinstein and Sinyor 2009)

Yet those who do succeed in the job still face frequent prurient discussion over their role in a way that their male counterparts do not: the key defini- tion here often being whether or not they are a mother. As Andersson points out in her piece for the *British Journalism Review*, when Yvonne Ridley, then a reporter for the *Daily Express*, was arrested and detained in Afghanistan in 2001, her nine-year-old daughter Daisy’s face was plastered all over the British papers. A national debate began about whether Ridley should have gone into a war zone when she had a young child; adjectives applied to her included ‘daft’ and ‘glory hunting’. Andersson comments:

Were the papers full of the plaintive faces of the children of any of the male journalists arrested, killed or injured in Iraq … ? No. That’s because society still says that men are allowed to take risks because they can handle the situation, whereas women should be accepting their responsibilities at home. (Andersson 2003: 23)

Yet ten years on from Ridley, despite the admiration for the work in Libya of Crawford and others in the media, there has been a continuing debate about their marital/maternal status; this particularly affects those reporters who are mothers (such as Crawford) and who continue to put themselves in danger. In a 2011 Q&A session at the Edinburgh Television Festival discuss- ing her reporting of Libya, Crawford says of questions over whether she should do this job as a mother of four:

It’s frankly really insulting and very, very sexist … I’m working alongside today the chief correspondent who’s a man who’s got three children and there will be no one who says what do you think you’re doing, how awful, what are you doing to your children? No one, it won’t even be raised as an issue and yet the stories that I do, [get] quite a lot of comment and a lot of criticism. (Crawford 2011)

Women who choose to work as war reporters still have to justify them- selves. Christina Lamb, the award-winning *Sunday Times* journalist and author, who interviewed General Pinochet the day after she was released from hospital, where she had given birth to her son, and who was on the bus when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, has said that she thinks mother- hood has made her a better reporter. But she still talks of being ‘a mother with a terrible secret in her wardrobe – a flak jacket’ and that guilt is part of her life (Lamb 2005: 9). In a piece for the *Daily Mail*, Janine di Giovanni who has reported from Bosnia, Chechnya, Somalia, Rwanda, Iraq and Afghanistan, describes her decision to step back from war reporting in emotive terms:

I knew having a child would mean I would miss lots of stories and would never again be the first one inside a city under siege or [to] get the first interview with a dictator. But I would have pages and pages of diaries filled with memories of [her son] Luka’s first tooth and witness the first moment he walked. And no scoop is more satisfying than that. (di Giovanni 2011)

Even Crawford said, during her Edinburgh Q&A, that her children would prefer her to be a ‘dinner lady’ rather than a war correspondent, . And Greenwood comments bluntly, saying that those of her colleagues who have children struggle because those children worry about their mothers while they are working in a conflict zone:

It is really tough for dads too but there is just something different about poten- tially losing your mother on the front line of reporting. I know that being a mother and having that parental responsibility informs some of my journalist friends’ decisions about where they place themselves during the conflict. Some will take fewer risks. (Barnett 2012)

But this debate was thrown into particularly sharp relief following the assault on CBS correspondent Lara Logan while covering the Egyptian revolution in Tahrir Square early in 2011.

Logan (a mother of two) came in for criticism that she had somehow ‘deserved’ to be assaulted. The academic Nir Rosen resigned from New York University after he tweeted that she had probably ‘just been groped’ (Hill 2011), and NPR had to remove countless offensive messages from their message boards (Memmot 2011) questioning whether Logan should have been reporting from Cairo in the first place.

As a result there were concerns that news organizations would be more reluctant to expose female journalists to possible danger, particularly of sexual assault, by reporting on the Arab Spring. A 2005 study for the International News Safety Institute found that, of the twenty-nine respon- dents who took part, more than half reported sexual harassment on the job (INSI 2005). The problem might be even bigger, since, in a piece for the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2007, Judith Matloff argued that women often failed to report assault in case it stopped them from getting future assign- ments or hindered gender equality:

The general reluctance to call attention to the problem creates a vicious cycle, whereby editors, who are still typically men, are unaware of the dangers because women don’t bring them up. Survivors of attacks often suffer in lonely silence, robbed of the usual camaraderie that occurs when people are shot or kidnapped. It was an open secret in our Moscow press corps in the 1990s that a young freelancer had been gang-raped by policemen. But given the sexual nature of her injury, no one but the woman’s intimates dared extend sympa- thies. (Matloff 2007)

Few women go on the record. Jenny Nordberg, a Swedish correspondent usually based in New York, was assaulted by a group of men while covering Benazir Bhutto’s return to politics in October 2007. Nordberg did not tell anyone about the attack, however, until she took part in a Committee to Protect Journalists report in 2011:

‘I did not tell the editors for fear of losing assignments’, she said. ‘And I just did not want them to think of me as a girl. Especially when I am trying to be equal to, and better than, the boys. I may have told a female editor though had I had one’. (Wolfe 2012 cited in Ness 2012: 11)

Logan herself, however has since spoken out about her experience in Tahrir Square. In a foreword to a book on safety for women journalists printed by the International News Safety Institute (INSI) in 2012, the cor- respondent wrote as follows:

I want the world to know that I am not ashamed of what happened to me. I want everyone to know I was not simply attacked – I was sexually assaulted. This was, from the very first moment, about me as a woman. But ultimately, I was just a tool. This was about something bigger than all of us – it was about what we do as journalists. That ancient tactic of terrifying people into submis- sion or silence. (Cited in Storm 2012)

As Logan makes clear, danger must not be seen as a problem peculiar to female war reporters. Interviewed after Logan’s assault, Jon Williams, international editor for the BBC, said that it would be naïve to see gender as irrelevant when deploying journalists to hostile environments but that ‘changing [the] gender of the person doesn’t eliminate the risk; it just makes it different … The threat is there and real, how it manifests itself may be differ- ent for men and women but it doesn’t eliminate the threat’ (Connolly 2011).

The death of Marie Colvin in 2012 did not spark the usual controversy over whether female correspondents should be in war zones. This was for several reasons. First, the death toll of journalists in Syria (she was killed at the same time as French photojournalist Remi Ochlik, a week after Anthony Shahid of *The New York Times* died, and after five other journalists had been killed in the previous three months) meant that while Colvin’s was perhaps the most high-profile death (arguably because she was a woman), the death of a journalist was sadly not unexpected. Second, as a childless, divorced woman, while there were various references to Colvin’s private life and tur- moils, the emotional frame of the mother-as-war-correspondent was absent, unlike the spotlight put on Ridley and Crawford referenced earlier. Added to that Colvin’s quite extraordinary career and achievements – and her previous loss of an eye in Sri Lanka – meant that she was well-established as a journal- ist who had reported from, and narrowly survived, some of the world’s most dangerous places. There was an old-fashioned Hemingway-esque legend about her obituaries: the wisecracking broad with the La Perla lingerie under the flak jacket. As a *Vanity Fair* profile after her death recalled, when reporting on an East Timor massacre in the city of Dili in 1999, she and two (female) Dutch journalists were the only ones who remained. ‘Who’s there? … Where have all the men gone?’ her editor in London asked. ‘They just don’t make men like they used to’, she replied (Brenner 2012).

Colvin’s gender may have meant she commanded front pages when she died; but for many journalists the suggestion is that, counter to what is often discussed, war reporting can be seen as safer for women than men. Prentoulis et al. point out that one male newspaper journalist they talked to stressed the advantages of being a woman, advantages that entail some potential tension with male reporters: ‘I’ve been in situations, [where] there’s only one place on the helicopter to go somewhere, and the chopper pilot thinks oh well, give it to the bird, the girl’ (Prentoulis, Tumber and Webster 2005: 375).

This point is echoed by Lyse Doucet, chief international correspondent for the BBC who sees – the threat of sexual assault aside – less danger in general for women war reporters than their male counterparts, if not signifi- cant advantages:

In most places I’ve worked, Western women have been regarded almost as a third gender. We aren’t treated like the women of the place. We aren’t treated like the men. But in traditional societies, where hospitality trumps ideology, we are almost always accorded the special privileges afforded to guests. In con- servative societies, that also includes a belief that women need to be protected. (Cited in Storm 2012)

For Andersson, reporting from places like the Middle East, Asia and Africa, where fewer women hold prominent positions, the advantage can be that women are seen as harmless and less likely to be spies or aggressors than male journalists. And Alex Crawford agreed that women can be seen as less aggressive:

Men find it easier dealing with women and are more likely to take against other men. It doesn’t matter what you look like or your age; if you have half an ounce of charm and sociability, you can use that – not in a Machiavellian way but just in getting on with people, making friends … and other females are obviously much more ready to talk to me than a strange foreign bloke.

In fact, Hilsum pointed out that there was a danger that one gender could be discriminated against as a result of difficulty in war reporting:

Often only women can talk to other women for cultural reasons … It means women can get 100% of the story and men only part of it. But, as I’ve said before, I don’t think this means men shouldn’t be allowed to report wars. I think they have a contribution to make, even if they can’t get the whole story.

Is the type of war reporting that we now see different though, because of the numbers of women journalists? Writing in *No Woman’s Land*, the 2012 INSI report, Caroline Wyatt, the BBC’s defence correspondent, mused on the time she spent reporting from Afghanistan in 2001:

Perhaps we brought a different perspective to the war: a little less focus on the bombs and the bullets, and more on what the end of the Taliban’s rule in the north would mean for the families we met, and for their future. (Cited in Storm 2012)

The war correspondent Janine di Giovanni, writing in the *Daily Mail*, believes that in war situations the stories women cover mean that they are ‘not equal to men’:

We are often given the softer side of war to report, ‘the female angle’ so to speak, feeding into the stereotype that women are more ‘caring’ war reporters than men. (Di Giovanni 2011)

Interestingly di Giovanni’s point is not new: Kit Blake Coleman talked of her disdain for editors trying to make her focus more on the human interest stories – dismissing this as ‘guff’ (Coleman cited in Ness 2012: 9). Yet many dispute that they cover ‘guff’ today. Andersson is wary of seeing women’s reporting as different: ‘Personally I believe women do add breadth to war reporting, but I don’t think the point should be exaggerated. There are also many men who report with enormous depth and many women who don’t’ (Andersson 2003: 24). Khodr says of the stories she covered in Libya: ‘We were covering battles; then we did the makeshift jail where people burned alive. It’s going to be a while before we turn to the feature stories’, while Hilsum interviewed far fewer women than usual: ‘Women in Libya have largely been behind closed doors. They only came out on the streets in the last few days’.

Talking of the work she did in Gaza City, Greenwood references the adrenaline surge that many war correspondents have commonly reported: ‘Why would you want to be anywhere else other than in the eye of the storm? There is nothing better than reporting on the critical moments of our era’ (Barnett 2012).

Jon Williams of the BBC points out that while Orla Guerin covered

the plight of families in Misrata and the nurse in a Tripoli hospital, IanPannell had done similar stories. Williams goes on to talk of a ‘humanity and a personalization of the conflict’ in both Guerin and Pannell’s report- ing, something that is backed up by the academic research. Prentoulis et al. argue that the shift towards human interest stories, encapsulated in the phrase ‘the feminization of news’, may be symptomatic of a broader cultural shift, moving towards a ‘journalism of attachment’. They say:

The latter, favoring more ‘human’ stories of civilian victims and some degree of emotional involvement, may be allowing women reporters more space for approaching war stories in their own way and, at the same time, allowing male correspondents to respond to the intensity of the war, without the ‘macho’ bravado often associated with the war correspondent. (Prentoulis, Tumber and Webster 2005: 377)

Hilsum agrees that there is less distinction between male and female reporting in war these days:

I think you’d be hard-pressed to find a consistent distinction between men’s and women’s reporting of wars and revolutions. But I would say that when a man does the weepy, human side he is regarded as empathetic and sensitive, but a woman may be perceived as ‘not coping’ if she shows emotion. So women broadcasters have to be very careful not to play into people’s stereotypes.

And that perhaps is why images of female reporters have dominated the media agenda in recent times, in Libya, Syria and Gaza; not that there were women correspondents (there have been for decades) or that there were so many of them (unlikely to be statistically greater than normal). But in a world where we are used to a subjective, so-called ‘feminized’ approach to news, seeing Khodr and Crawford in their flak jackets and helmets having to shout their commentary over the sounds of bullets being fired, or hearing of Colvin’s death in the middle of a bloody conflict just hours after she had appeared on television, we appear to be coming full circle. Just as men can report Williams’ ‘personalization of the conflict’ without it being a shock, Crawford, Colvin, Greenwood et al. made clear that women can report in the traditional ‘macho’ way – and do it just as effectively.

# Acknowledgements

Some material from this chapter first appeared in G. Cooper (2011) Why Were Women Correspondents the Face of Coverage of the Libyan Revolution?’, in R.L. Keeble and J. Mair (eds), *Mirage in the Desert? Reporting the Arab Spring* (London: Abramis). Unless otherwise referenced, the inter- views carried out appear in that chapter.

# Bibliography

Andersson, H. 2003. ‘The Wow Factor’, in *British Journalism Review* 14(2): 20–24.

Barnett, E. 2012. *The Unique Advantage of Female War Reporters in Muslim Countries* (homepage of *The Daily Telegraph*). Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/> women/womens-life/9692810/The-unique-advantage-of-female-war-reporters- in-Muslim-countries.html (accessed 14 February 2013).

Brenner, M. 2012. *Marie Colvin’s Private War*, *Vanity Fair*, August. New York.

Connolly, K. 2011. *Lara Logan Attack Turns Spotlight on Female Reporters* (homepage of BBC). Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12510289> (accessed 14 February 2013).

Cooper, G. 2011. ‘Why Were Women Correspondents the Face of Coverage of the Libyan Revolution’, in R.L. Keeble and J. Mair (eds), *Mirage in the Desert? Reporting the Arab Spring*. London: Abramis.

Crawford, A. 2011. *Alex Crawford live Q&A at the MediaGuardian Edinburgh International Television Festival* (homepage of BskyB). Available at <http://news.sky.com/> home/world-news/article/16058071 (last updated 27 August 2011; accessed 14

February 2013).

Di Giovanni, J. 2011. *Motherhood and Warfare: The Rise of Women Reporters on the Front Line* (homepage of *The Daily Mail*). Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/> femail/article-2031387/Motherhood-warfare-The-rise-women-reporters-line. html (accessed 14 February 2013).

Feinstein, A. and M. Sinyor. 2009. *Women War Correspondents: They Are Different in So Many Ways* (homepage of Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard). Available at <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101967/Women-> War-Correspondents-They-Are-Different-in-So-Many-Ways.aspx (accessed 14

February 2013).

Gillan, A. 2003. ‘If You Cop It, Can We Have Your Radio?’, *The Guardian*, 28 April.

London.

Hill, K. 2011. *Nir Rosen’s Tweets About Lara Logan Demonstrate the Problem of Twitter’s Immediacy* (homepage of Forbes.com). Available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/> kashmirhill/2011/02/16/nir-rosens-tweets-about-lara-logan-demonstrate-the- problem-of-twitters-immediacy/ (accessed 14 February 2013).

INSI. 2005. *Women Reporting War* (homepage of INSI). Available at [http://www.](http://www/) newssafety.org/images/stories/pdf/programme/wrw/wrw\_finalreport.pdf (accessed 14 February 2013).

Lamb, C. 2005. ‘My Double Life: Kalashnikovs and Cupcakes’, *The Sunday Times*, 23 January. London.

Matloff, J. 2007. *Foreign Correspondents and Sexual Abuse: The Case for Restraint* (home- page of Columbia Journalism Review). Available at <http://www.cjr.org/on_the_> job/unspoken.php?page=all (accessed 14 February 2013).

McAfee, A. 2011. ‘The Trouble I’ve Seen’, *The Guardian*, 16 April. London. Memmott, M. 2011. *Why Have So Many Posts on the Attack on Lara Logan Been*

*Removed?* (homepage of NPR). Available at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/>thetwo-way/2011/02/16/133804167/why-have-many-comments-about-the-attack- on-lara-logan-been-removed (last updated 16 February 2011; accessed 14

February 2013).

Ness, A. 2012. *Women War Correspondents and the Battles They Overcame to Succeed*, All Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) Paper 742. Washington University in St Louis. Available at <http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/etd/742/> (accessed 8 August 2015).

Prentoulis, M., H. Tumber and F. Webster. 2005. ‘Finding Space: Women Reporters at War’, *Feminist Media Studies* 5(3): 374–377.

Seaton, J. 2005. *Carnage and the Media: The Making and Breaking of News about Violence.*

London: Allen Lane.

Storm, H. 2012. *On the Frontline with Female Reporters* (homepage of The Media Online). Available at <http://themediaonline.co.za/2012/08/on-the-frontline-> with-female-reporters/ (accessed 14 February 2013).

Wolfe, L. 2012. *The Silencing Crime: Sexual Violence and Journalists*. CPJ - Committee to Protect Journalists - Reports. Committee to Protect Journalists, 7 June 2011. Web. 18 April 2012. Available at <http://cpj.org/reports/2011/06/silencing-crime-> sexual-violencejournalists.php (accessed 8 August 2015).

**Glenda Cooper** is a PhD researcher at the Centre for Law, Justice and Journalism, City University, London, looking at the changing coverage of humanitarian crises. Before that she worked as a journalist at a national level for more than a decade, including at the BBC, the *Independent, Washington Post, Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph.*