

FULL INTERVIEW

1. Do you think much about safety when on assignment in dangerous situations?

Yes, naturally. But to be honest, I think more about safety once the assignment's over and I'm back home and have had time to process what I've seen. I think it's a psychological reaction to coping. If I was to fully feel and absorb experiences while in them, I suspect the reality and consequences of the situation would make it more difficult for me to work – and if not, I'd at least feel very frightened. There's always a little jittery feeling in the pit of my stomach before I go on assignments to dangerous areas and I remember being in some very frightening situations. I also don't like to talk too much about where I'm going or what I plan to do there with people close to me because naturally it's those who're closest to me who worry the most. I often feel torn by what I put my family through as they do worry a lot. I remember reporting in the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatilla in Lebanon and following a little boy up and down the little alleyways. I just had to hope that he really was helping us find our way and not leading us into some kind of trap, because there is no way I would ever have been able to get my way out of there on my own. If I look back, there were times that I was quite careless about my safety – taking taxis alone at night along deserted roads, trusting people I knew nothing about, but there has to be a certain element of trust when you cover a story or else you can't operate as a journalist. One has to trust that the people who've invited you into their home for an interview really are going to do that. So yes I think about safety but not too much because my logic mind would scream at me why the hell am I flying in an apache helicopter with the American army over mountains in Afghanistan and looking at a soldier hanging out the window with a massive machine gun pointed above my head!

2. What have been the most enriching -- but dangerous -- stories you have worked on? (The hairiest situations you have been in?)

I was held up at gunpoint in the Palestinian city of Tulkaram. It all happened so quickly and was so surreal, almost like in slow motion. Our Arabic translator was yelling at the guys and showing them all kinds of ID we had but it was frightening mostly because I didn't understand what was being said.

I was also attacked while reporting in the Palestinian city of Ramallah. It taught me an

important lesson – not to sit in the front of a taxi, much better to sit in the back. The hotel where my crew and I stayed in Kabul, Afghanistan, was blown up – eleven people were killed. Fortunately we had left the hotel fifteen minutes before the suicide car exploded. But what was particularly hair-raising was that the bomb went off at 9am on the dot, and we always met our driver in front of the hotel at 9am and headed out. By the grace of God, that morning we had an early interview and left the hotel earlier than normal.

It was incredibly enriching to be embedded with US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was dangerous going out on patrols – the main concern was IEDs – explosive mines in the roads - and I'd always say a silent prayer before we left, and when we returned to base. It's the uncertainty of where you're driving and what you could be driving over that makes it so scary.

One of my most memorable moments was reporting on the Israel-Gaza border while Qassam rockets were falling all around. They were being fired from Gaza by Hamas militants into Israel. I was in the middle of doing a live television report when everyone in front of me started running. I couldn't see what had happened behind me so I just kept talking. Afterwards I found out a Qassam had fallen just a few hundred metres from where I'd been reporting.

One of the best stories I've done was a report entitled "dead man walking" in which I followed around for several nights a leader of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade who was on Israel's 'most wanted' list. The interview had taken weeks to organize and we interviewed him on the roof of an abandoned building in Jenin, also in the Palestinian Authority. I remember him saying if the Israelis knew he was there, they'd bomb the building and he, as well as I, would be killed instantly. I remember looking up to the skies for the remotest sound of an airplane engine!

3. Have you had abuse directed at you specifically because you're a woman?

It's a positive and negative experience working as a woman on the frontline and also in the Arab world. When it comes to the Arab world, many men I've encountered actually don't know how to react to a western woman doing everything her male counterparts do. I remember in Zabul, southern Afghanistan, going on foot patrol with US soldiers, some of whom were women. The local children were running after us and when we came into a

school, one of the soldiers took her helmet off. The children gasped in surprise and one of them asked, "Does your husband know you're here?"

In many places I report from women are covered up or kept at home and so I'm fighting prejudices that sometimes make it difficult to work. I've had times when men will not talk to me and address my male cameraman as though I'm not there. But then the opposite is also true because seeing women in such positions is such a rarity, I can often – just with a smile or a polite 'please' - get an interview that I doubt would be so easy to come by if I was a man. I remember going down a tunnel in which goods were smuggled from Egypt to Gaza - my translator was amazed that the tunnel diggers had given me permission to follow them underground and kept saying if I was a man, they'd never have agreed to it – and when I was climbing back up, and had these thirty-odd faces, with long beards looking down at me in bewilderment, I understood what he meant.

The one difficulty is the sexual innuendos – for me this was most pronounced in Egypt where men will stare, whistle and touch you if they can while pretending to just be walking past. Depending on where I am I might wear a long skirt and a headscarf out of respect, but sometimes it's just most practical to wear jeans. I'm not there to insult their culture, but I also feel I want to be true to mine.

4. Do you feel more vulnerable as a woman? Do you realize you could be attacked like Lara Logan, or raped? How do you process that fact?

Yes I definitely feel more vulnerable as a woman. I feel assured working with men in my crew – I've never worked with a woman cameraman in a war zone so I'm not sure how I'd feel about it, but I certainly feel being on the frontline with men in my crew provides me with some safety – men are less likely to make lewd remarks or sexual advances if I'm with a man. Naturally I'm always aware I can be attacked but to be honest, as long as I'm with my crew, the fear is more from hostile elements – Taliban, suicide bombers, unruly mobs – than it is from a fear of being attacked for being a woman.

When I was covering the anti-Mubarak demonstrations in Cairo there was an incident when the crowd suddenly became unruly and started screaming at us. The cameraman and soundman, both who were Egyptian, pushed me in the car, and ordered the driver to drive away as fast as possible. The demonstrators were banging on the car and yelling at us. If

possible, I always try and work with a local producer – we call them “fixers” - and sometimes even local cameramen as they understand the culture and speak the local language.

A more direct answer to your question is that I try not to think about it. It relates to what I said earlier – it would just immobilize me. For a while I used to carry a spray gun with me – it was after = I was attacked in the West Bank - but it was too difficult going through security checks at borders and government buildings that I eventually just forgot about it.

5. Do you think men are just as likely to get sexually assaulted in war zones?

No, I think men face different challenges. There’s definitely a male energy – I like working in crews where the cameraman and soundman are men rather than women. I think we complement each other. When I was embedded with the American army in Afghanistan and Iraq the cameramen got to crack chauvinistic jokes with the soldiers, but then they talked with me about their girlfriends and wives back home – it’s like together we provided the mix of normality.

The men I work with also instinctively tend to keep an eye out for me - I don’t know if it’s luck, but I’ve always felt that the men I’ve worked with in the field have looked out for me. I’ve never been in a situation where a male member of my crew was sexually assaulted – sometimes when we’re filming a man/men might get angry and start shoving and pushing the cameraman – something he/they would be slower to do to me because I’m a woman – so the reality for men is the risk of violent attacks rather than sexual ones. But I think it’s worth saying that sometimes I’ve found just my presence makes a difference. It’s almost like many men feel they need to behave differently because there’s a woman present.

6. Do you think being a woman gives you an edge in any way when covering stories in difficult situations?

Yes – see above.

I'd like to also add that I've been asked before if a woman reports differently to a man. My view is yes – and no. I cover stories different to the next journalist because I am a different person to the next person – not necessarily because I'm a different gender. But I've had many male cameramen tell me they like having a woman in the crew because when the whole crew is only men, the energy is much more macho and a woman evens out the "mood" so to speak. It's true for women as well – I've worked in news departments where there were only women and the old cliché about women being catty and bitchy is more true when there're only women around – at least in my experience.

Where being a woman might hinder reporting is on the physical stamina level – often when we went out on army patrols for example, I was exhausted by the time we came back to base whereas the cameramen weren't – but that could also – if I'm honest - be put down to me being unfit! :) I also think there is such a thing as the 'male locker room' where male journalists have an edge on me because it's easier for them to fit into the male camaraderie of the army gym as one example – which often gives them access to contacts and story ideas.

But then again, that needs to be balanced, with the instinctive flirtation that often takes place between men and women, and I often think just through that interaction alone I get stories.

7. How do you deal with safety issues and look after your personal safety? (Dress a certain way, carry protection in case you are raped so you can try to bargain?)

As mentioned above, I try not to put myself in unnecessary situations such as travelling in a taxi alone, trusting too many sources I am not familiar with, finding local people who are recommended to me (through other journalists for example) to work with. Naturally the way I dress is an issue – I covered my head with a scarf all the time I was in Afghanistan – that was not only about respecting the local culture, but also because I didn't want to bring too much unnecessary attention to myself. It's mostly common sense at the end of the day – not dressing provocatively, not going to unnecessarily dangerous places such as crowded market places in Kabul which is where suicide bombings often take place. I'll never forget the advice of my former SABC news editor, Jimi Matthews : "No story is worth putting your life on the line for!"

8. What drives you? How do you find the courage to undertake dangerous situations, and to press on after a tough experience?

I'm driven by noble – and not so noble – reasons to be honest.

The noble reasons are a love of people. I genuinely find people fascinating and I really believe each of us has a story to tell. Years ago my mother, Alicia, asked me if I wasn't afraid one day I'd run out of stories to tell and again back to the advice of Jimi Matthews – he taught me that there's no such thing as a new story – every story has already been told – the challenge is to find an old story and tell it differently.

I've covered three earthquakes so far (Algeria, Iran and India) and I am so humbled that people in these situations will share their pain and heartbreak with me. I am in touch with a family in Algeria who lost their daughter in the earthquake there in Boumerdes – the mother told me she lost one daughter but found another (in me). Sometimes you just connect with people – my life has been touched and shaped by the experiences I've had, and those experiences are about the people I've met and who've shared their stories with me. I'm often asked if I'm not scared to go to the places where these people live? Yes, of course I am, but there are people like you and me living in these war zones, being raped, watching family members being killed in front of them. What makes them so different from us? Nothing aside from the misfortune of being born into a different part of the world. So if a young single woman in Gaza – who was half my age – can have her legs blown off and be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life – it seems almost superficial to ask me if I'm afraid to enter her world for a short while. What a privilege to be there, and what a responsibility to tell her story. She trusted me with it – and it's a trust I take seriously.

Now, the not-so-noble are the thrill of adrenalin – nothing can quite beat live television from a war zone. I remember arriving in Kabul for the parliamentary elections. We went straight from the airport – hitching rides and half running through the streets because there were no taxis and half the roads were closed off, to get to our live position on time. And then I'm live on television, trying to memorize important facts I want to mention, answer the questions, be wary of my surroundings, and look calm – with my hair combed – all at the same time. I'm not married and I often think I'm going to have to have one hellava wedding to beat that :)

I also think there's a little bit of madness in all war correspondents. I'm not sure if it's fair to call it "madness" but I'm sure psychologists would have a lot to say about people who are drawn to conflict situations. I wonder about this sometimes. It's like we need the rush of being on the edge to feel completely alive. A cameraman I once worked with said it was easier for him to be sent to the frontline than to cope with the bureaucracy of a bank. I know it might sound ludicrous but I think I might agree with him :)