

An Interview with the Only Female Photojournalist in Gaza

Af VICE Staff

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”You can go from a victim to a survivor, you can be whatever you want to be. You can even create your own history instead of just documenting it. You can become the person you want, as long as you don’t take that exact same right away from others.”

These were photographer Eman Mohammed's closing words to her speech at the United Nations Geneva Peace Talks. The 26-year-old TED Fellow is the only female Gazan photojournalist operating out of Gaza and has been since she was 19. She's fought her way through sexist and abusive colleagues, death threats and sexual harassment. All just to live the life she chooses.

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I got in touch with her for a chat.

VICE: Eman you're in the US at the moment. What exactly are you doing there?

Eman Mohammed: My husband actually lives and works here so my time is divided between here and Gaza. During the war some friends lost their house so we offered them ours. We don't really want to empty them out so we're taking our time over here.

Eman Mohammed

You've recently come back from the Geneva Peace Talks – how was that?

People were generally warm and understanding, though I was concerned with some of the Palestinian criticism though.

I invited Israeli photographer Mati Milstien to join my talk. Mati and I have been friends for many years. For Mati it's not such a problem as he's connected to this positive left-wing community where people are familiar with the idea of having Palestinian friends. But Gaza is very conservative, regardless of Hamas being in charge for the last seven years. It's more about the traditions than religion and with each war, Gaza becomes more and more closed off. So it's not the safest thing for someone to openly say that they are friends with an Israeli photographer who also served in the army.

How old were you when you started taking pictures?

I was 19. I was raised by my mum because my parents got divorced when I was two years old but the idea of a working divorced woman with two kids is not acceptable in Gaza. She was heavily criticised but she did it anyway.

So I knew that if I didn't get a good job from the start I could never get a job at all. But there are hardly any women journalists in Gaza and I wanted to do something so I could be experienced by the time I graduated university. By the second year of uni, I knew I wanted to be a photojournalist and ended up with a good staff position at Ma'an News Agency. They offered me a broken camera and told me if I could fix it, I could have it. It was an exhausted Nikon d70, but it was great.

What were the main obstacles that you faced as a female photojournalist in Gaza?

After working for a year and a half, I started attracting the wrong attention. People would say to my boss: "How could you hire a girl, she's wearing jeans and look how she holds her camera". People criticised everything I did – even how I moved.

In the end, my boss he took my camera away and told me I could still be an English / Arabic editor and producer. We had a huge argument and eventually he said my only choice was to either be fired or resign. I didn't want to get fired from my first job so I resigned. I had saved enough for my first gear, one camera and two lenses by that time. Three weeks later the first war started.

How was that?

I had never covered a war before, barely even an invasion. A lot of my colleagues were angry with me as well, angry that I had quit my job. They thought I had thrown away a great opportunity to work behind a desk, because that's where women belong.

Do you think they felt threatened?

I think they just thought I was a spoilt brat who thought she could take their jobs just because I spoke English. Others saw me as a girl just trying to play around. Then three colleagues drove me to where the bombs were dropping and left me there.

Exactly before that, I had found myself in a Jeep with a different photographer who thought I would love to have a quickie in the car. So I was sexually harassed and abandoned in the same day. There have been other girls, young girls, who have tried to get into the field of photojournalism and were sexually assaulted by the same guy that harassed me. I'm not the only woman left in the profession because I'm so good at it – it's just really hard to survive in that field.

Did you ever confront the guys that abandoned you?

I tried but they refused to talk to me. Now, I laugh it off but I hate the fact that I see these people after the war and they show no guilt or shame. I could have been killed but no one is going to hold them responsible for that and that's the worst thing about Gaza; there is no law.

Sebastian Meyer who co-founded Iraq's first photographers agency Metrography with Kamaran Najm, told me that women photographers in Iraq confuse a lot of men. That it's disarming and therefore they get more intimate photos. Do you agree?

Yeah, definitely. Men stop pretending. They forget these old traditions where they don't look at women or can't shake hands with them and they become normal. And it's so beautiful when you see people for who they really are.

I've seen it with Hamas members also. I visited the Head of Police in his office and he was giggling and making jokes.

Is it true you were also shooting in the second war, while being nine months pregnant?

I can't stay at home during war, I feel like I'm suffocating. A lot of women die in the kitchens too, and my husband was very supportive.

For some reason pregnant women seem to deny the fact that they look like whales – I really thought no one would notice! But I had gained 30 kilos and it was pretty obvious – there was this huge ball rolling down the street, carrying two cameras.

It earned me a lot of criticism from all kinds of people but I've spent long enough in my house and inhaled enough white phosphorous to almost have a miscarriage – you can never protect yourself enough from war. It was challenging but it felt right. A day after the war ended, I gave birth.

How old are your daughters?

Three and one and a half. Actually the youngest is the reason we left Gaza this year. The Israelis bombed our neighbourhood, while she was sleeping and she started bleeding from her mouth and nose. Hospitals wouldn't admit her, so I knew we had to get out.

I've seen the destruction in Shujayea and Beit Hanoun – its terrifying. It's getting worse with each war.

And now people paying a lot of money to try escape with these ships only to be killed at sea. They're really desperate and I don't blame them. They don't have an option. I had the option to leave and knew that if I didn't, my daughter would die.

I come from a very educated city, where there are a lot of girls that want to be photographers – not only photojournalists. But none of them are encouraged to do so. If only someone could start a small centre that takes 10 kids every three months to teach them photography, videography, film making – anything that allows them to express themselves. Children need structure and support,

something to rely on. That then starts an acceptance process, not only within the community but their families too.

Thanks Eman!

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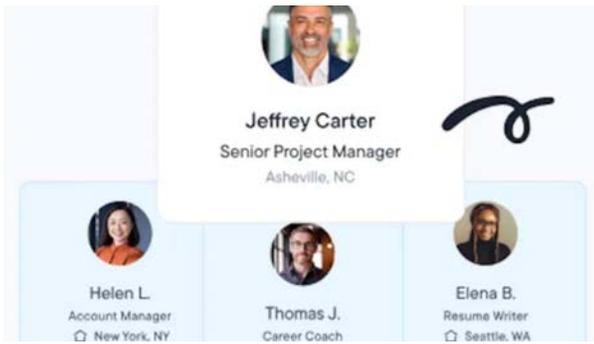
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