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Gaza's only female photojournalist, Eman Mohammed, shows the devastation of war on private lives

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At the age of 19, [Eman Mohammed](#) became the only female photojournalist based in Gaza, breaking longstanding cultural taboos around the role of women in society. Three weeks into her career, the Gaza War began. Now 26, Mohammed continues to document harrowing and intimate stories of war and its aftermath in Gaza and beyond. Here, Mohammed tells the TED Blog her extraordinary story of battling professional bias and sexual harassment from male colleagues — while simultaneously documenting the battle raging around her.

How did you end up on the battlefield as a photographer? What was your inspiration?

My inspiration is my mother. My father's Jordanian with Palestinian roots, and my mother is a Palestinian — Gazan. When they separated when I was 3, my mom went back to Gaza and raised me there. In those years, I saw how the community mistreated her because she was divorced and raising her kids alone, an unknown thing. In that culture, if you get divorced, mothers aren't supposed to raise their kids. You leave the kids with their dad. It's a punishment. And if you don't, you can't remarry, by law. My mom didn't want to remarry because she didn't want to give away her kids.

It's always the woman's fault?

Always. Even when the husband is clearly in the wrong, divorced women are despised — or neglected, or the black sheep in the community — one way or another. You have zero chance of remarrying if you keep the kids. This is because, in a lot of cases, women don't work. They can't afford to survive. They can't afford to raise kids alone. Nowadays, people are questioning this custom.

My mother struggled, but we still managed to travel. If she couldn't afford much, she went to the poorest countries on Earth, and she dragged us all over the place with her, which was really fun. We visited cities in Romania, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia. Travel changes everything. When you get exposed to different cultures and places, you just gain a lot of information and a way of thinking that schools don't teach you. It was life-changing: we got to learn English, we got to learn about a lot of things that normal people in Gaza would not care about.

Meanwhile, my mother sent me to a church school, because it was one of the top schools in the city, then I went to the Islamic University of Gaza, which is owned and operated by Hamas. Both of them were extreme, in a way. It gave me a wider perspective on things.



Palestinian women and children waiting for their turn for a boat ride in Gaza's sea. Photo by Eman Mohammed/Getty Images for WHAT'S NEXT

You started doing photojournalism as a teen. Did you always know you wanted to be a photographer?

I knew I wanted to be a journalist, but I didn't know that there were a million fields of journalism to choose from. At university, we don't have photography as a subject. It doesn't exist. I knew from the start that it would be hard to get a job in journalism in Gaza. I took internships, starting with radio stations, then newspapers, news channels on TV. Eventually I was trained by a local agency — it was a secular agency, but my boss was Islamic Jihad. He offered me a staff position — amazing considering I was 19, and still in my second year of university — as an editor in English and Arabic, and a producer. I made a condition that I would carry a camera with me, so that I could take photos. But I didn't say that out loud: as a woman, you can't say "I want to be a photojournalist" without being heavily criticized for it and in most cases forbidden.

Why would you be allowed an internship but not be allowed to be a photojournalist?

It's OK to be a reporter as a woman, working in an office. TV reporters are OK, too, because they are only in the field for the final part of the report. As long as you spend

most of your time inside the office, it's fine. But to go into the field full-time with men as your colleagues is different — and you can't be a photographer and work in the office. As a field photographer, you'd be the only woman with a lot of men. Just the idea was fascinating in a very negative way for me. Why? I didn't get it, even though I'd lived all my life in Gaza. I know how conservative people can be, and how they mix tradition with religion. Religion has nothing to do with these very conservative, extremist traditions they have.



Sabha Abu Halima and her son Ahmed Abu Halima in their house, which was destroyed by fire from phosphoric bombs dropped by Israel during Gaza War. Photo: Eman Mohammed

What do you mean?

In Islam, you're allowed to work, you're allowed to be in the field. And men have to respect you because you're a woman, regardless of what you do, as long as it doesn't go against Islamic rules. You can't be, say, an escort or something like that. That goes against modesty rules. But you can be anything else, if you want to. Photography doesn't offend Islam in any way. So it was never an issue religiously speaking, but it was a huge issue culturally speaking. But people don't discern. I go against these

traditions, and then people ask, “Why do you wear your hijab?” But it’s different. This is religion, that is culture.

So I used that job to sneak myself into photography. It made perfect sense to my boss. To get around the cultural stigma, he gave me an old, broken camera, and said, “If you can fix it, you can have it.” Turns out it wasn’t really broken. The shutter was stuck. I thought I was a genius, and I fixed it, and then it worked, and I took it all over the place.

But then he started getting negative comments from his colleagues: “You hired a girl, she wears jeans, she goes to the field, and she jumps all over the place with her camera.” So he took the camera, locked it in the closet, and said, “If you stay in the office, you can have it.” What am I going to photograph in the office? I realized I didn’t have time for this game, because I was 20, and I wanted to go further with my career. I had really big dreams. I was working three jobs with one paycheck, and still, that wasn’t enough.

So I quit. I managed to go into the field as a freelancer, and this was like three weeks before the first war, in 2008. I had saved up, and I got my own gear: one camera, two used lenses. I felt confident enough to freelance with a news agency for written reports, with few photos. But no one knew me, internationally. And locally, no one would hire me.



Eight Palestinian children in the Jabalia refugee camp, in the northern Gaza strip, look through their window where laundry is hanging, watching a funeral (not shown) process past their house. Photo: Eman Mohammed

You must have had friends in the field who were men. What changed?

They were nice until I decided to go into photojournalism. It became problematic. I became the enemy, in a way. They couldn't understand why I'd leave a good office job. They thought I was humiliating myself to be acting like a man. To them, photojournalism is a man's job. But they couldn't say this in public. The fascinating thing about the culture is, men, they can't say such things in public, they can't bail on you. They have to at least treat you like a sister in the eyes of the community, even if you go against them.

Three weeks later, the war started. Air strikes were targeting the whole city, the whole Gaza Strip. We had to move around in groups, in two armored Jeeps that belonged to international wire agencies. When you move in groups, it's less likely that you get hurt.

But their attitude started to harden. Some said I was a bad person, a bad Palestinian girl who wouldn't obey the cultural rules. Others insulted me for going around with men. And some saw an opportunity: on the second day, I was sexually harassed by

one of my colleagues. That drove me to the edge. The war was a huge dose of unexpected pain. It was a shock to everyone. So to deal with that and then be sexually harassed was something that drove me to break from the group and work on my own.

In the talk you gave at TED2014, you said that you were abandoned on a strike field by your colleagues.

It was the day I was sexually harassed by a chief photographer — so I ran to my other colleagues, who took me into another Jeep. The bombing was north, close to the borders. When we arrived, there were heavy sounds of air strikes — very, very loud and scary. I'd never before heard this whistling sound. It's bombing, and it's happening on top of you.

And it was an open area — we call it unprotected, because there are no trees, no big buildings, no nothing — just some houses. When everyone was heading back to the Jeep, I looked back — I was fascinated by where we were. When I looked at the Jeep, everyone was already in, so I thought, “OK, this is no time to freeze.” It was weird, because one of my colleagues gestured at me, but he didn't say, “Come.” So I was running after them, and by the time I got to the door, it was locked. I knocked on the window, and my colleague was like, “I don't have time for your shit.” And then I was like, “You're kidding, right? I can take a joke, but just let me in.” I saw the two people in the back looking at me like they wanted to do something, but they didn't. And then they drove away.

I was in the most shocking situation in my life, but it wasn't really the time to be shocked, so I just started walking into neighborhoods really quickly. And there were people there. I walked to a nearby hospital, a place where we regularly visited to check where the injuries were coming from. There, I saw the colleagues that dumped me in that place. They were all there, and they were really happy about some amazing, powerful photos that they got on the way. I had tears in my eyes. One of them — not the ones who left me, but another man — said, “They left you, right?” They didn't seem surprised to see me. It's like they knew I would be back. And what they told others was that I would be back. The person who left me seemed relieved when he saw me.

How could you bear to go on after that kind of abuse? Why didn't you quit?

The deciding moment was when I broke my nose. I didn't want to be close to any of my colleagues. It was too emotionally overwhelming. So I decided to venture out and work alone. But I hadn't been trained to cover war. I didn't know how close, how far from an event I should be. I learned the hard way.



A Palestinian man screams in horror outside the Al Saraya police compound after it was shelled twice by Israeli war planes in December 2008. Photo: Eman Mohammed

How did you break your nose?

I arrived just after an Israeli military air strike on a police compound. The Israeli military patrol the skies and the water and military strikes occur without warning. Often times, we see air strikes that are only minutes apart and the resulting casualties include civilians going to rescue those from the first strike. It's quite horrifying to see and I am constantly concerned that my life is in danger simply by capturing these moments.

The pressure when an air strike happens is enormous. I didn't know that. My camera pretty much bounced off my face. It wasn't the same as being hit by a block or a missile, but it was painful. I could hear things crashing — and I could hear it for days after. But in that moment, all I could do, literally, with no previous thinking or anything, was just to keep shooting. I wanted to make sure that, when I later wrote the report, people could see it like they were there. It made me more determined to do what I was doing. I was so scared, I could have flipped and decided, "No, I can't do this." When you come closer to death, things change. And it only changed in the positive direction for my work.



Children taking their daily bubble bath in a Jacuzzi tub that sits atop the rubble of their house, destroyed by Israeli forces. Photo: Eman Mohammed

That was several years ago. What are you working on now?

I'm still freelancing. I was freelancing with international agencies. *The Washington Post*, *Le Monde*, and *The Guardian* are some of my main clients. I was working with the United Nations in New York, Save the Children and UNICEF. But I also started doing my own long-term projects because, after the war ended, I didn't know how to capture the aftermath exactly.

One of my projects, "What Lies Beneath the Rubble," is about the aftermath of the war, but it shows you a totally different face. People aren't just sad. Some of them are ... well, not happy, but moving on. There is one very peaceful story about a guy who used to work in Israel. He didn't think about revenge or enemies. He sees Israelis as his neighbors. Because he used to work side by side with them for years, he had his retirement dream house built when the first war happened. He lived in the north of Gaza strip, in an area called Izzbet Abed Rabo. His house was one of the first places to be targeted by the Israeli army during their field operation, and the house was blown up by dynamite. Everything was gone but a Jacuzzi tub that he got from Tel Aviv. It was in perfect condition, so he pulled it out and placed it on the top of the rubble. All his

memories and life were under the rubble but this tub. He started giving his kids a bubble bath every morning to cheer them up.

Tell us about your most recent project, iWar. What's it about?

iWar is about the long-term aftermath of war survivors and victims. It's a series of portraits and a gentle, symbolic way to show that war has happened, and it's still happening. History has not changed, sadly. It's a way of saying to the audience, "Even if you've moved on, that doesn't mean the victims did." Or they did, but they feel the pain at the very same time.

I go to the family, I spend three, four days getting to know them. Sometimes it's less — it depends. And I share stories with them, until they feel comfortable showing me their sadness. And I ask them, "Show me your sadness, as though I don't exist. Like I'm not even here." I get them deep in the details, and then I get the shot. It's energy consuming and emotionally draining, but it's very powerful.



Islam Qreqe, 14 months old, sitting on a burned motorcycle. Her father, uncle and 2-year-old brother were riding it when they were targeted, bombed and killed by a rocket fired from an Israeli aircraft drone. Four months later, Islam was born and named after her brother. (See more of Eman's powerful iWar images next week.) Photo: Eman Mohammed

I started the project in Gaza, but I plan to photograph different countries with past wars. To show the common things between people who suffer, because pain has no nation. One of the strongest images in the series is of a girl, one-and-a-half years old, sitting on a motorcycle that is really damaged. She was an unborn baby when her dad, his brother, and her 2-year-old brother were all on this motorcycle coming back from the hospital. The boy had walked into something and had gone for stitches. On their way home, an air strike targeted them on the motorcycle. The three of them were killed, but the motorcycle survived. The grandfather rode the motorcycle to the house, and kept it as a reminder. The girl was born six months later and named Islam, her brother's name, in memory of him.

Another project, "Undercover," is about empowering women. It's the same approach — portraits of women in very unusual circumstances, doing unusual things. It's not typical to see photos of women in the Middle East at all, especially in Gaza. I've taken a portrait of Gaza's only female construction worker. She started working because her dad and brother died, and she was the only breadwinner, so she had to do what they used to do, because it was the only thing she knew. These portraits can be cheerful, very empowering.

Speaking of women in unusual circumstances, are you still Gaza's only female photojournalist?

So far, yeah. Sadly. I mean, a lot of women might be encouraged to go against their families, but they can't go against family, community, society, sexual harassment, the Israeli wars on Gaza. There's only so much one person can take.

You are also now the mother of two young daughters. Given all that you have experienced, what do you hope for them? How do you feel about their future in Gaza, and what are you teaching them about being female in this culture?

Gaza's old traditions need to change, and the violations against women have to stop. That will never happen by ignoring the problems. Things will only change by talking and raising awareness, along with raising the new generation. That's exactly what I do with my daughters. There is no: "Because I say so." Everything comes with a reason, and they have the right to ask questions and do with whatever they wish or like, as long as it's not hurting them or others. My family is all Muslim, and that's our real understanding of Islam.

Their lives will not be limited to living in Gaza, but they definitely need to know more about their identity as Palestinians while we continue to live between Gaza and the

United States. We encourage them to express themselves and their dreams, and make big plans for their future. No one has to change the world: we can easily create our own. My daughters will not have to be the black sheep as Palestinian women living within a conservative community — I am the only one so far who uses photos to fight discrimination, but not the only woman who believes in changing this extreme way of thinking and living. When it comes to war and conflict, if we stop communicating, nothing will be solved. If I choose the easy life it will be meaningless. The same goes for my family and daughters.

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