



Shape Shifting in the Conflict Zone

Lindsay Palmer & Jad Melki

To cite this article: Lindsay Palmer & Jad Melki (2016): Shape Shifting in the Conflict Zone, Journalism Studies, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2016.1161494](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1161494)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1161494>



Published online: 22 Mar 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 169



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

SHAPE SHIFTING IN THE CONFLICT ZONE

The strategic performance of gender in war reporting

Lindsay Palmer and Jad Melki

The war journalist is often portrayed as a ruggedly masculine individual who survives on hard work, self-sufficiency, and heroic dedication to the truth in a stoic culture and dangerous environment. Yet, the growing number of female war journalists subtly complicates this traditional narrative. Female war reporters navigate the precariousness of the conflict zone through the strategy of shape shifting—of switching gender performances depending on the environment and the audience. This article examines the shape-shifting phenomenon in the field, relying on 72 qualitative interviews conducted with English- and Arabic-speaking female journalists who have covered various wars and conflicts in the Arab region and beyond. On one level, interviewees say that they can work in precisely the same way as their male counterparts, downplaying their femininity and accentuating their own masculine qualities. On another rather paradoxical level, women war correspondents also sometimes foreground their feminine accessibility and intuition, especially when engaging female sources and entering private spaces inaccessible to male journalists. Finally, female conflict reporters sometimes perform an exaggerated version of feminine weakness or tacitly accept sexist treatment, especially when shape shifting can save them from danger or help them circumvent obstructions.

KEYWORDS Arab journalism; gendered news; journalism and conflict; media and gender; media literacy; trauma journalism

Introduction

The war zone has traditionally been conceptualized as a space in which the masculine reigns supreme (Mohanty, Riley, and Pratt 2008; Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). Despite the numerous women who have moved through this space for centuries, playing a variety of roles (Oliver 2007; Mohanty, Riley, and Pratt 2008), the masculinization of the site where conflict unfolds continues to determine the experiences of the diverse people who navigate that precarious zone. This is no less the case for war reporters, who have long been portrayed as a particularly manly breed (Knightly 2004; Korte 2009; Hamilton 2011). Because the journalists who cover wars must brave the frontlines and the makeshift morgues, living in often-dire conditions, popular culture—as well as media scholarship—has historically struggled to understand the presence of female journalists in the war zone (Korte 2009).

Though women have been reporting on war since the modern definition of the war correspondent came into existence, the end of the twentieth century saw a constant increase in the number of female war reporters (Korte 2009), which went from a meager 4 percent in the post-World War II era to 20 percent in the mid-1980s (Fleming, Chambers,

Journalism Studies, 2016

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1161494>

© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

and Steiner 2004, 196) and continued to increase after the Cold War period (Moisy 1996) but particularly so in the post-9/11 era due to a renewed interest in international news ("State of the News Media" 2004–2014; Aalberg et al. 2013). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is more common to see a woman on television or to read about women correspondents as casualties of war, when such roles were once almost exclusively dominated by male journalists.

Yet, this increased exposure for women war reporters, especially on television, should not be misconceived as a total decline in sexism and gendered practices in the field. The rise of women war correspondents in the past century correlated with an overall increase in the number of foreign correspondents (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004). Ironically, what remained almost constant during much of that period are discriminatory practices and gendered narratives, including spouts of public disapproval, rejection of access by military personnel, and demeaning treatment by male colleagues (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004). Moreover, while women war correspondents continue to feature more prominently and increase in number, they are far from reaching parity with their male counterparts and remain a minority in this profession. If there was one matter that women war reporters did receive more than their male counterparts, it was public condemnation for taking risks in their careers, especially in relation to "neglecting" their normative domestic responsibilities (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004).

The increasingly familiar images of female war reporters tend to obscure the far more complex experiences of these women professionals who grapple with a variety of unique struggles in order to tell the world about conflict in the contemporary age. According to two reports on the safety of women journalists in the field, the threat of sexual assault haunts their every move ("Women Reporting War" 2005; Wolfe 2011). What is more, their co-workers and editors do not always take them seriously, or worse feel threatened by their presence and competence (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004). To add insult to injury, it is difficult for female reporters to even urinate or menstruate safely and comfortably (Tumber and Webster 2006), let alone to deal with pregnancy, in a social and geographical environment that does not comprehend the specific needs of female bodies—needs that historically have been used against women war correspondents as excuses to block their access to war zones and military facilities.

Many of these issues have existed historically in the routine work settings of women journalists—outside the conflict zone. Tenacious gendered practices, rampant sexual harassment, patriarchal corporate settings, and newsrooms hostile to women journalists continue to persist globally (Byerly 2011, 2013) and particularly in the Arab region (Al-Najjar 2013; Melki and Mallat 2013, 2014). The war zone provides an extreme case of such gendered and hostile work environments, where "women journalists struggle to succeed in one of the toughest, roughest and most stubbornly male-dominated areas of reporting" (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 199). The contemporary Arab region—where numerous wars, conflicts, and uprisings have taken place in a short and recent period—provides a particularly rich example of this dangerous work environment.

Despite the challenges, many female journalists want to do this work, and in order to do it successfully, they have to be capable of adapting to the situations and environments in which they find themselves. Drawing upon our findings from qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 72 female war reporters, this paper ultimately shows that female war reporters navigate the precariousness of the conflict zone through a strategy that we call "shape shifting"—a process through which female journalists draw upon a variety of gendered

performances that help them effectively orient themselves to the harsh locales and the unique obstacles they face.

Crucially, these gendered performances are not simply self-misrepresentations; instead, they are strategic modes of orientation that draw upon culturally constructed notions of gender in conflict zones. On the other hand, this paper is not precisely referring to Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender *performativity*, wherein a set of discursive bodily acts help to construct, police, and sometimes subvert binarized gender difference on a foundational level. While this study is influenced by Butler's notion of the cultural construction of gender, the goal is to better understand female war reporters' unique ways of strategizing in the field. Our findings show that these reporters engage in the manipulation of certain gendered expectations as they concretely manifest themselves in the war zone. Our findings also show that these gender performances might change, depending on the audience. For example, female war reporters might perform differently for their male colleagues than they would for potential sources; in turn, they might foreground a different aspect of their gender when encountering people who might censor or attack them. By taking on a gendered "shape" in any given moment, female journalists can more effectively and safely accomplish their goals on the ground, and simultaneously help their male teammates effectively and safely conduct their work.

Women and War Journalism

This study is situated within the existing literature on women and news and focused on women and war correspondence. Journalism scholars have discussed the plight of women in the news business more generally, highlighting the challenges they face in the newsroom and in the field (Carter, Branston, and Allan 1998; De Bruin and Ross 2004; Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004; Byerly 2011, 2013; Franks 2013). Yet, although there are numerous memoirs and biographies outlining the exploits of female war reporters, only a few scholarly studies are devoted solely to the obstacles that women war correspondents face (Prentoulis, Tumber, and Webster 2005; Melki and Mallat 2013, 2014), and few so far have looked at their uniquely gendered strategies for overcoming these obstacles.

It is also difficult to find academic histories of female war reporting. Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner's (2004) research serves as one exception, in that it thoroughly historicizes the gendered and hostile environments that US and British women war reporters have faced in the past century. Women journalists do not figure very prominently in the Anglophone histories of war reporting, at least not until the twentieth century (Knightly 2004; Hamilton 2011). Up until that point, US and British media largely excluded women from war coverage. Only a few newspapers published articles by women reporters about the 1898 Spanish–American war, and those rare reports focused almost exclusively on the human-interest angle—labeled by some as the "woman's angle," an historically less important news genre often assigned to women journalists (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 201).

A few notable female war reporters covered the World Wars (Wagner 1989; Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004; Knightly 2004). Still, the "woman's angle" continued to dominate women's reporting throughout the twentieth century, and they faced a sexualized work environment more daunting than what women had experienced in other journalism areas. In addition, women reporters of the great wars era experienced various forms of

sexual harassment and obstacles, particularly from US military officials, who systematically refused to allow them access to important events and scenes (Wagner 1989), often under the pretext of the unavailability of appropriate toilet facilities. On the other hand, the era witnessed women's incursion into photojournalism and broadcast news, as well as the beginnings of increased access to restricted military zones, including front lines, ships, and planes. This occurred in the context of the women's rights movement and the rise of women's professional associations, which paved the way for increased acceptance of women in the workplace (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004).

Scholars consider the Vietnam War a turning point for female war journalists (Haller 2006), since this conflict saw an unprecedented influx of women into the war reporting profession and the war zone (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004). This was mainly due to the shift from the regular warfare of regimental front lines to the murky and chaotic nature of guerilla warfare, where access to the war zone did not require—and could not be controlled by—military permits and press credentials. However, the increase in numbers did not necessarily cause a change in attitude towards women journalists covering war. Indeed, women war correspondents remained a new phenomenon, continued to face hostile treatment from male colleagues, and many news institutions resisted sending them to the front. Although military officials continued to use the lack of toilet facilities as an excuse to block women from certain areas, such a pretext became increasingly futile. The Vietnam War also saw an increased resistance from women to be confined to covering the human-interest stories (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 206).

Despite continued sexist treatment, women war journalists in the post-Vietnam era experienced unprecedented access and opportunities to cover the numerous conflicts, uprisings, and wars across the globe, with some exceptions. Primarily, during the 1982 Falklands War, the British military authorities allowed no women journalists into the war zone or onto the troop ships, leaving no alternatives to access the scene, thanks to the remoteness of the islands and the tight military control the British imposed on all news personnel (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004).

By the early twenty-first century, the number of women reporters covering wars incrementally increased (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004; Prentoulis, Tumber, and Webster 2005). The 2002 Afghanistan War marked a milestone for women war correspondents, but mainly in their increased exposure on television news, and not necessarily so in other less visually driven media (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004). Scholars attributed such increased exposure to a "market-oriented feminization" of the medium (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 206; Franks 2013), which called for an increase in attractive women on the screen to "spice up the drama of war reporting" (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 196), primarily to boost television ratings, a matter that failed to translate to print media. In fact, women reporters were symbolically annihilated from the prime spaces of most prominent British newspapers, and reports written by male correspondents dominated the front pages of newspapers during the early days after the September 11, 2001, terrorism attacks on New York and Washington, DC.

In addition, this increase in women war correspondents was in the context of an overall increase in the number of both men and women war journalists, due to a renewed interest in international news in the post-9/11 era, after a downward spiral of foreign affairs news coverage during the 1980s and 1990s (Moisy 1996; "State of the News Media" 2004–2014; Aalberg et al. 2013). Furthermore, this heightened exposure reignited the debate about the appropriateness of women to cover wars and put themselves in

danger, particularly if they were mothers, a debate that rarely if ever targeted the men reporters who happened to be fathers (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 212).

This gendered criticism that continues to perceive women's duties as primarily in the home and family setting will most likely increase, as more women join the ranks of war correspondents and as the number of journalist casualties keeps climbing. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2015), 1149 journalists have been killed since 1992. The frequency of killing has climbed sharply in the post-9/11 era, with the number of journalists murdered ranging between 42 and 74 per year since 2004, compared to a range of 21–37 killed per year between 1995 and 2002. These numbers exclude injured journalists and leave out media support workers, who include—both men and women—fixers, translators, and others who tend to be natives of the countries being covered and receive less pay, protection, and credit. Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner (2004, 212) conclude, "it is likely that female correspondents who do put their lives on the line to bring us the news will continue to be vilified as irresponsible towards their families for as long as women's professional role is subsumed under their domestic role."

In this context, our study examined the strategies that women war reporters adopt in order to navigate the precariousness of the conflict zone. What is more, we hoped to lend a more current international perspective to this topic by focusing on reportage in the Arab region, and by exploring the experiences of Arab female war reporters, as well as Anglo-phone journalists. Our research question is stated accordingly:

RQ1: How do women journalists from a variety of cultural backgrounds strategize when covering conflicts and wars, in order to effectively perform their work and orient themselves to the unique circumstances they face in a hyper-masculinized and dangerous environment?

Methodology

The study examined this shape-shifting phenomenon in the field, relying on 72 qualitative interviews conducted with both English- and Arabic-speaking journalists between September 1, 2012, and November 5, 2015. Using unstructured, open-ended questions, the researchers mainly interviewed the participants in person but some interviews were conducted over Skype. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to two hours and some included follow-up calls or emails, for clarifications and additions.

The interview questions were fairly unstructured and open-ended, since the study aimed for in-depth analyses of the stories the interviewees told about their experiences. Following this, the interviewees were typically asked to describe what it is like to be a female war reporter. The interviewer would then follow up by asking the interviewees whether they found their gender to be an advantage or a disadvantage in the field and to provide examples. These questions typically led to long, detailed stories from which the authors derived the patterns described in the findings.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the Middle East region, particularly in Beirut, Doha, and Istanbul. The interviewees themselves were from a variety of national and cultural backgrounds. Some were of Western origins, including Canada, Britain, and the United States. Many other interviewees were of Arab origins, especially Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, and Palestinian.

The study used a purposive sampling technique and participants were selected based on the criterion of having covered war and conflict, with special attention paid to selecting a diverse sample. Twenty-one of these women were freelance journalists, while 51 were full-time staffers. Thirty-two of them worked at television news outlets, 27 worked at print outlets, three worked at online news institutions, one worked at a radio organization, and nine worked in more than one medium (e.g. print and online). The organizations represented are: NPR, CBC, BBC, BBC Arabic, ITN, NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, AFP, Reuters, Al Jazeera Arabic, Al Jazeera English, Al Mayadeen, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, NOW Lebanon, *The Daily Star*, Al Jadeed TV, *Al Safir* newspaper, Al Arabiya TV, *Al Akhbar* newspaper, Murr TV, and the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation. Most of the freelancers worked at multiple news institutions.

Many of these women journalists had extensive experience covering Middle Eastern conflicts that go back to the 1970s, including both Iraq wars, the civil war in Lebanon, the Israel–Palestine conflict, and the various post-Arab uprisings in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries.

After the data-gathering phase, systematic data cleaning and organizing was conducted. The researchers then used inductive analysis to detect recurring language, identify common ideas and patterns of belief, and highlight salient themes (Marshall and Rossman 2016).

Findings

These interviews reveal three distinct (but sometimes overlapping) types of shape shifting. On one level, the interviewees say that they can work in precisely the same way as their male counterparts, downplaying their femininity, accentuating their own “masculine” qualities, and fighting aggressively the attempts of domineering men to limit their agency or challenge their authority. In these cases, female journalists bracket their difference and focus on the work itself, asserting that while gender differences exist, they should not be the focus. This strategy seems particularly important to female war reporters who do not want to be unfavorably compared to their male peers, or to succumb to constant encroachments of patriarchal norms and prevalent chauvinist attitudes.

On another (rather paradoxical) level, women war correspondents also sometimes embrace feminine “accessibility” and “intuition” in order to establish camaraderie, most specifically when engaging sources who do not feel comfortable talking to male journalists or allowing male journalists and their media tools into their private spaces. Finally, female conflict reporters foreground their feminine “vulnerability” or tacitly avoid challenging sexist treatment when encountering people who might censor or attack them. For example, they might wear makeup and high heels to breeze through military checkpoints, draw attention to their menstrual cycles when being accosted by potential rapists, tacitly accept a sense of extreme protectiveness towards pregnant woman when facing physical violence, or rely on a cameraman to act as a bodyguard.

We label these three shape shifts respectively: bracketing difference, establishing camaraderie, and accentuating vulnerability. In each case, female war reporters perform culturally constructed notions of gender in order to successfully do their work, a phenomenon that illuminates the need for more scholarly investigation of the interconnections between gender and the labor of war correspondence.

Bracketing Difference

The first shape-shifting strategy that the interviewees mentioned was the effort at bracketing feminine difference for the sake of the job. This strategy was defined in two related ways. First, the interviewees carefully disavowed feminine difference—a disavowal that could be maintained as long as they focused on the job itself. Second, they suggested that, despite different treatment from their male bosses, colleagues, and sources, they could still do the job as well as men could, even if occasionally they needed to aggressively reassert their authority. Often, the interviewees discussed these two approaches in the same breath, revealing the ambivalence they personally felt about their status as women in a hypermasculinized profession.

As Lebanese–American freelancer Sulome Anderson said, many female journalists do not like to focus on the specific issues that women face in the field, because they are afraid that editors will not send them on assignments. This leads, on one hand, to female journalists obfuscating the difference between the experiences of male and female conflict correspondents, where women journalists will sometimes say that they have not been (or should not be) treated any differently at all. For example, the CBC's Susan Ormiston noted, "Being a woman hasn't prevented me from doing my job in any way" (personal communication, May 8, 2013). A well-known war reporter for Canada's national television network, Ormiston strategically brackets female difference in the war zone, suggesting that it is a nonissue when it comes to doing her work.

In turn, freelance reporter Holly Pickett remarked that "safety is always an issue for everyone, and you mitigate the risks" as needed (personal communication, July 31, 2013). In this sense, Pickett suggested that safety concerns should not be invoked to keep women out of the war zone. Instead, she argued that safety issues affect people of all genders at sites of conflict, and women are not uniquely susceptible to being attacked. This is something that one anonymous camerawoman for CNN also believed. She especially disapproved of the focus on female journalists' potential for being raped; the camerawoman pointed out that many female reporters had never experienced such a thing and that male journalists face this threat as well. Confirming this view, Al-Arabiya TV's Alia Ibrahim noted that she's "never really experienced any rape threats. Even ... when I was covering an al-Qaeda faction in Syria and made a negative comment about their preparedness ... , no one came near me or threatened me, although I was right there in their midst" (personal communication, September 17, 2015).

In each of these cases, the interviewees downplayed the notion that women experience the war zone in a way that sets them apart from their male colleagues. While this at first glance might seem like a gender-blind, rather than a gendered performance, it is crucial to remember that there is nothing genderless about the war zone (Sjoberg 2014). Since the labor of war reporting has normatively been associated with men, that labor is inevitably masculinized—and for women to operate in exactly the same way as men, they must engage in practices that have already been coded as masculine. Following this, the performance of masculinity in the war zone takes on many shapes of its own (Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011).

For some women reporters, bracketing feminine difference in the war zone is tantamount to enjoying the same freedom of movement as men. Rachel Anderson, a freelance reporter who covered the Libyan conflict in 2011, said that she purposefully avoided covering up and disguising herself as a Libyan woman (personal communication, January 15,

2013). This was because, as a legibly western woman, she felt she had enough autonomy to “go out with the guys” on stories and even “live with the guys” at certain points during her time in Libya. Since she felt that there was no important difference between a western woman and a man, Anderson embraced her westernness in order to enjoy the same perks that men did. In Anderson’s view, a white American woman could operate in a more masculine manner than could a Libyan woman, pointing to the nuanced intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in the labor of war reporting.

However, to Al-Arabiya’s Alia Ibrahim, bracketing feminine difference is achieved through accentuating her non-western identity: “When I’m covering wars and conflicts, I do dress conservatively: pants and boots ...” (personal communication, September 17, 2015). This conservative attire, though, is mainly for dealing with the tough circumstances and the need to carry heavy gear and equipment. “If it’s needed, I cover my hair, but in most cases, I don’t. Even with conservative groups. They don’t normally require it. I do it as a sign of respect for their beliefs, not for blending in.” Alia disputes the idea that western women journalists have an advantage over locals. “I know the culture. I can speak the language. The only advantage western women have is better global exposure and visibility,” mainly due to the dominance of western news media worldwide. Unlike some of the English-language interviewees, Alia linked her own freedom of movement through the conflict zone to her status as a cultural insider. This status gives her a distinct advantage over the western women reporters who cannot typically achieve the same depth in their coverage, even when they enjoy the same mobility as their male colleagues.

Displaying a general level of confidence and directness has also been historically masculinized, and these are qualities that some of the interviewees said they try to display in the field as well. One anonymous Palestinian news fixer said that she finds these qualities useful in her work: “I’ve always tried to be serious and assertive. You get just those first few seconds of a first impression to assert yourself and prove yourself” (personal communication, July 27, 2013). BBC correspondent Kate Adie also believes in being assertive, arguing that female war reporters should take charge of their own careers: “You don’t not go, and you don’t have people telling you, ‘Oh we won’t send a woman.’ You merely say, ‘We will go in, and I will make sure I have as much ability to report as anyone else’” (personal communication, June 17, 2013). In this way, Adie recommends that female reporters make a concerted effort at showing confidence in their own abilities.

Consequently, Adie’s declaration also invokes the second, related element of bracketing difference for the sake of the job. Liz Sly, the Beirut bureau chief for the *Washington Post* said that over the years, she learned how to keep a professional distance from the male reporters who had sexually objectified her or infantilized her when she first began her career. This distance helped her to remember that, “yes I can do it, I’m just as good as you and I don’t need you” (personal communication, June 15, 2015). In other words, Sly did not try to claim that there are no differences between male and female experiences of war reporting; she knew from experience that women war reporters face a number of threats, even from their male colleagues. Instead, she accentuated her abilities to do her work *despite* such differences.

Following this sentiment, freelance journalist Anna Lekas Miller said that every time someone treats her like a little girl—which happens often, since she is small in stature and only 24 years old—she mentions that she has published articles in major newspapers. “I’m a professional journalist,” she told one male colleague who, on finding out her age, asked her if she had a curfew. “I’m halfway around the fucking world from my family, on my own—no,

I don't have a curfew" (personal communication, May 30, 2015). Miller declared that the invocation of her prestigious publications should serve as a reminder of her ability to operate as successfully as male war reporters. A similar but slightly different approach by a veteran Arab journalist working for a top US newspaper was to simply ignore and dismiss the sexist treatment by some threatened male colleagues. She recounted a story during her coverage of the first Iraq war: "I was flying in from Amman and asked a male colleague there to book me a hotel room in Baghdad." He refused and told her to book it herself when she arrived. "I used to book hotel rooms for him and other colleagues all the time ... It was okay for me to do that because I was a woman, but not for him." As soon as she arrived in Baghdad, that same male colleague told her: "I talk to the intellectuals, politicians and elites, and you do the vox pops and talk to the general public." She ignored him and interviewed whomever she wanted (personal communication, November 5, 2015).

Some female journalists find they have to be even more assertive in dealing with such chauvinistic treatment. In one encounter, Al-Arabiya's veteran correspondent Alia Ibrahim had to deal with an overbearing local fixer who "tried to control my movement and work" (personal communication, September 17, 2015). The fixer was assigned by her company and felt in charge of her safety. "He didn't like to take orders and instructions from me ... I'm not usually rude with people, but eventually I had to tell [him] to lay off in a very blunt way." She had a similar encounter with a cameraman, who "would not accept instructions from women: I would tell him to take that specific shot and he would shoot something else ... But then I see that same cameraman following accurately the instructions of another male reporter. It's infuriating." On several occasions, she would assertively stand in front of the lens drawing a frame with her fingers and reconfirming the exact shot she wanted. "You sometimes have to do that. It's not common ... but there are some cameramen who still think this way, and many of them are the types who work in war zones."

These strategies serve as a form of shape shifting, because in each case the female war reporter must adapt to her environment—an environment that favors competitiveness, assertiveness, and personal autonomy—in order to render herself legible as a professional conflict correspondent. Where male colleagues and editors are concerned, such legibility often depends upon either the disavowal of feminine difference, the strategic bracketing of such difference, or the forthright assertiveness of one's professional skill in order to do the job. In other words, the journalists who deploy this strategy feel that they will only be seen as professionals if they take on a de-feminized, subtly masculinized, and sometimes aggressive shape. The next section of this article examines another strategy: the establishment of camaraderie with potential news sources through the foregrounding of feminine accessibility, intuition, and the tacit ignoring of some sexist practices.

Establishing Camaraderie

Especially with their colleagues and bosses, female war reporters foreground the similarities they share with male correspondents and bracket their differences. In other cases, though, these women strategically embrace their alleged feminine "accessibility" and "intuition." Embracing these culturally accepted elements of femininity helps these journalists to take on a more trustworthy shape, so that they can succeed in getting the interviews they need for a story. Female war reporters most often deploy this strategy

when they are trying to get interviews with sources who are either (1) local women whose cultural mores do not allow them to speak with men they do not know, or (2) powerful figures who may see male journalists as a threat. They also use such strategies to access private spaces along with their male crew members, and to get out of trouble.

The majority of the English-language interviewees said that as female journalists, they could converse with some ultra-conservative local women in a way that their male colleagues could not. For example, Sulome Anderson said: “The Salafis, they have their wives in the kitchen ... She’s not allowed out of the kitchen to see another man. So I can go back there and talk to her” (personal communication, June 16, 2015). Female television journalists also said that they have an easier time convincing some local women to appear on camera. As Susan Ormiston put it:

Particularly in strict cultures like southern Afghanistan, where women are not allowed to be seen by men other than their husbands and their families, it was very difficult for my male cameraman to shoot [video of] a woman. So, having me there, I was able to either take the camera in[side the house] or convince them that we were okay because I was a woman, and I was the one doing the interview. (personal communication, May 8, 2013)

In a similar vein, CNN correspondent Hala Gorani said that this special access could lead to an equally special type of storytelling in the war zone, where “the stories of women” become central rather than marginal (personal communication, February 14, 2013). Gorani told us that she is most interested in “people who are very ordinary, [and] who in extraordinary circumstances, act heroically. And don’t fit the definition of the hero in the western world, with the gun.”

Some of the Arab news interviewees also felt this way. For example, Alia Ibrahim said she places great value on the role of women journalists in accessing private spaces and helping male journalists gain access too.

When a crew includes a woman, access becomes easier for everyone, including the men. The homes we entered and the families we had dinner with and slept in their rooms would have never allowed the men on my team to enter if not for me as a woman being with them. It somehow became appropriate to allow young single men into a house and into a family because they were accompanied by a woman. (personal communication, September 17, 2015)

Alia notes that conducting street and office interviews does not offer the same relaxed atmosphere of the home and the hospitality accorded by such private spaces, even with militant leaders and politicians.

They become much more open and honest and accommodating after you’ve spent time with their families and shared food with them. At first, they’re hesitant to allow the camera to record, but a couple of hours later you’re joking and chatting with them, and you get the best footage and stories.

These quotes highlight the culturally permissible access that diverse women might have to one another, as well as the ability of women—by their mere presence—to help men gain access to the private spaces and rich cultural contexts that are otherwise impossible for them to enter. By foregrounding their feminine qualities, the interviewees were able to learn more about the local women’s and men’s thoughts and feelings on the stories

being covered, something that male journalists could rarely do without a woman to help them.

On top of this issue, many of the interviewees said that foregrounding their femininity also helped them to establish camaraderie with a number of other potential sources in the field. For example, Channel 4 reporter Lindsey Hilsum said: "As a woman, I can talk to everybody. I talk to the men. I can talk to the soldiers. I can talk to the President, so that's no problem" (personal communication, May 30, 2013). An anonymous CNN camerawoman suggested that female journalists enjoy this access to powerful figures because, "maybe we seem like less of a threat?" (personal communication, December 31, 2012).

In these cases, there is an element of emotional accessibility that female war reporters suggest they must accentuate, if they hope to get interviews from certain men in the field. For instance, *The New York Times* news assistant in Beirut, Hwaida Saad, described how she is constantly in touch with her local sources, asking them how they are, listening to their problems, and allowing them to flatter her: "Sometimes they flirt with you. And you have to be sweet, because he's a contact. Sometimes it annoys you, and it bothers you, but you cannot say it ... because you never know, something will happen, and you might need him" (personal communication, June 19, 2015). Lebanese freelancer and news fixer Leena Saidi also mentioned the need to "be sweet," asserting that with her male sources, "If I talk nicely to him, he's going to let me interview him. So then I'll talk nicely" (personal communication, May 30, 2013).

Emotional accessibility also helps in alleviating a tough situation. Alia Ibrahim noted that even a simple smile in the right context could diffuse the most hostile encounter, but she also cautioned against using the same smile in the wrong circumstances. "You learn quickly in conflict situations when to smile and when not to. In one context, a smile instantly diffuses anger and lowers the tension." In the wrong context, Alia said, smiling can be "misread as an invitation for a sexual advance" (personal communication, September 17, 2015).

Besides maintaining the sense of emotional accessibility, female journalists often find a way of encouraging male sources to share their emotions more readily than they would with male reporters. As the BBC's Caroline Wyatt told us: "I think sometimes people are less on their guard with women journalists. Sometimes perhaps are more frank. Maybe sometimes they don't feel they have to be as macho as if they were being asked questions by a male journalist" (personal communication, May 16, 2013). Similarly, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Nour Malas said that people are more likely to open up and share their traumatic experiences with women (personal communication, June 18, 2015). This openness comes as a result of the female journalist cultivating such trust, by foregrounding her own feminine intuition and accessibility.

It is the *cultivation* of this trust that signals the strategic underpinning of female war reporters' relationships with sources in the field. Drawing upon gendered expectations that are already assigned to them by the cultures in which they operate, women war correspondents take the shape of an intimate friend or a feminine ally in order to conduct the interviews they need for their stories or to diffuse a tense situation. The next section of this paper explores how women war reporters strategically embrace another gendered expectation that is assigned to them in the war zone: the expectation of their feminine vulnerability. Because the war zone is seen as a masculine space, women are often perceived as being especially vulnerable within it. Female journalists sometimes allow this perception to play out in a way that is ultimately beneficial to their work.

Accentuating Vulnerability

Since the notion of vulnerability is so often associated with women, especially in physically dangerous places like conflict zones, female war reporters sometimes foreground their purported “weakness,” or choose not to challenge some sexist treatment, when it helps to alleviate a dangerous situation. The interviewees suggested at least two ways in which this might happen. First, women war reporters might allow the men they encounter to act in a chivalrous fashion, strategically accepting any protection or help they might offer despite the fact that they do not think of themselves as less capable than men. Second, female conflict correspondents might foreground their feminine “weakness,” or avoid challenging mildly sexist behavior in order to deal with a threatening situation in which they might be censored or attacked by the militants or officials they encounter.

Many of the interviewees remarked upon the tendency of men to treat them chivalrously in the war zone, a type of treatment that in one sense seems to contradict female reporters’ assertion that women can function in precisely the same way that male reporters do. For example, the BBC’s Caroline Wyatt told us:

When we were embedded with forces—be that American or British—they took immense care of us. They probably made more allowances for female journalists. I know that when I went out with my camerawoman on one of the last trips, we were treated incredibly well. I actually remember a man trying to help us carry our luggage and our kit, which has never happened when I’ve gone with a male cameraman. (personal communication, May 16, 2013)

But even temporarily welcoming such chivalrous behavior has its limits and is only acceptable when it does not subvert the work at hand. When Alia Ibrahim and her crew of three men and another woman had to smuggle themselves across the Turkish border into Syria, “the guys, at first, tried to be gallant and carried our stuff, but we had heavy equipment and protective gear and a six-hour walk ... Eventually, we realized everyone had to help, and I had to carry some equipment too” (personal communication, September 17, 2015).

Thus, these interactions are highly strategic, because they are based on the female reporter’s adaptation to the particular circumstances in which she finds herself. Freelancer Sulome Anderson especially highlights the calculated ways in which women war reporters draw upon the gendered assumptions of some men in conflict zones:

They have this very ridiculous virgin Madonna complex and this idea that they want to protect the innocence of a woman, and make it so that this woman doesn’t [get hurt]. It’s ridiculous, and sexist, and whatever, but it’s helpful for doing this job. (personal communication, June 16, 2015)

In this vein, female war reporters also tend to draw upon the help of men in the field when they are facing a physically threatening situation. An anonymous news reporter from a local Lebanese television station noted her reliance on cameramen for protection: “If you’re in a situation where it’s very unsafe for a woman, you may let the cameraman get out first and you stay in the car” (personal communication, December 10, 2012). Confirming the strategic and calculated—yet “instinctive”—nature of this act, she noted, “You have to use your judgement based on the kind of people that are in the crowd ... It’s an instinct; you feel and know whether or not it is safe for you to get out or to wait for his protection.”

Several interviewees referred to the dual role of the cameramen/bodyguard that many male journalists play. An anonymous reporter from the local Lebanese *Daily Star* newspaper even described the presence of a male protector as a given in potentially risky places. "It's almost an unwritten rule that you have to go with a male colleague, or photographer, or driver" to potentially risky areas in the country (personal communication, November 7, 2012).

Besides accepting assistance from certain men at the site, female war reporters also foreground feminine vulnerability in order to evade the threat of censorship or attack. For instance, an anonymous Al Jazeera field producer told us how she got through a heavily policed checkpoint when she was trying to leave Egypt and go to Libya with a bunch of suspicious television equipment:

I managed to get through the airport with two really big wheelie bags. I put on a dress, put on some makeup, and I had three flak jackets and an A1 camera. I had a BGAN [Broadband Global Area Network terminal], and I had some cables and some discs ... I just rolled them straight through the Cairo airport because you don't look like a journalist, and you're a woman. If you kind of put your nose in the air a little bit and kind of treat them all a bit like riff-raff, you just roll on through. (personal communication, April 7, 2013)

In this situation, the field producer was able to disguise herself as a non-journalist by taking the shape of a stereotypical woman: breezing through the airport in a dress and makeup, and acting as though she had never had to deal with the "riff-raff" that policed the people (and equipment) who moved through the airport. On the other hand, a veteran Arab reporter covering the Lebanon war in 1986 for a top US newspaper was violently assaulted by a militant guarding a checkpoint when she revealed her press credentials. "I had press cards from the army and from the Ministry of Information, but the moment he saw them, he pulled me out and beat me up with the butt of his rifle. At the time, his militia was in conflict with the army" (personal communication, November 5, 2015). In this case, her decision to not conceal her press identity and adopt a different shape almost cost her her life.

Another form of accentuating vulnerability that is often used in dealing with especially threatening circumstances is the tacit acceptance of sexist behavior by the militants or officials they might encounter. One interviewer highlighted how not challenging the "extremely protective" treatment she was accorded by men when she was pregnant helped her get herself and her crew out of trouble. Alia Ibrahim was six-months pregnant when she and two male journalists embarked on covering a conflict in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.

When they spotted us from a distance, they started shooting at us. Then they rushed in towards us and at first were extremely aggressive and threatening, pushing the guys around and yelling at them with a lot of anger. They were very violent with my male crew members, but when they noticed that I was pregnant they suddenly became very mellow and accommodating. In this circumstance, the guys used me and my pregnancy for protection. (personal communication, September 17, 2015)

Alia emphasized that she had often worked while pregnant, and it never obstructed her job—nor had she ever felt the need to flaunt her pregnancy. "It's annoying to see people so protective and maybe it's sexist, but in this circumstance, I wasn't going to challenge it. I got out safely along with my crew." The same correspondent recounted how numerous politicians and the general public would be extremely protective and caring when noticing

her pregnancy and would often try to convince her to go home. “What are you doing here? Go home, you should be resting,” was a reoccurring comment. A former Lebanese prime minister once spotted her among other journalists covering the conflict in Lebanon. She was eight-months pregnant. “He grabbed me and pulled me aside, and asked: ‘just what do you need? Just name it. Tell me what can I do to get you to go home?’” She ended up getting an exclusive interview, which ended with him pleading with her “now, please go home.”

The maternity “shape” is quite potent and visible as a symbol of feminine vulnerability. It is easy for some female journalists to strategically adopt with little or no effort. But it could backfire. The ultimate maternal shape that generates extreme protectiveness also produces extreme liability to the male-dominated news institution and culture. Women war correspondents in the United States and Britain who happen to have children have long faced such extreme reactions and continue to do so today. The public debate that surrounded Yvonne Ridley’s kidnapping in Afghanistan in 2001 offers a stark example (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 198). Although the tension between taking risks in covering war and meeting parental duties applies to both men and women war correspondents, the latter tend to be unique in attracting public condemnation, a matter linked to a gendered narrative that continues to situate women in the domestic sphere (198).

Consistently, an anonymous Arab journalist recounted the treatment of her supervisor back at headquarters when she was covering the conflict in Syria. She was resisting his pleas to get out of the country because of a death threat she received on Facebook.

I’ve never seen him so angry. He wanted me to get out of Syria immediately, and I was telling him I don’t feel threatened ... At that point, my boss just lost it. He was extreme in his protectiveness. He reminded me that I am a mother. He kept saying: “you have kids. I can’t put this on my conscience. You need to get out now.” He was screaming ... and kept repeating, “if something happens to you, we [the institution] can’t put this on our conscience.”

She eventually had to leave and halt the operation in Syria, despite describing her short experience there as “equivalent in satisfaction to a whole year of journalism work ... despite all the difficulties, the exhaustion, the death threat, and the risks” (personal communication, September 17, 2015).

Still, a number of the interviewees told us that—at least, in the field—it pays for women war reporters to foreground feminine vulnerability so that men will see them as less of a threat. For instance, Liz Sly said that as a woman she can “blend in better”—and she can also avoid being asked for identification, because it is considered rude to make such requests of women in certain cultures (personal communication, June 15, 2015). An anonymous CBS reporter working in Syria told us that she wore the traditional garb while operating there, and pretended to be asleep in the backseat of the car when her driver had to take her through checkpoints (personal communication, December 13, 2012). Longtime war reporter Judith Matloff echoed that remark, saying that men at checkpoints are generally less likely to become aggressive with women who try to pass through these zones than they would with men (personal communication, June 5, 2013). Besides making this comment in the interview for this study, Matloff also wrote an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* where she spoke in more detail about foregrounding the

vulnerable—and more specifically, the “embodied”—element of femininity, in order to stave off the threat of rape. She wrote: “Soil yourself with vomit, feces, or urine. Say that you are HIV positive, menstruating, or pregnant” (Matloff 2011). In Matloff’s view the strategic performance of the physical abjection already associated with women might just help to save a female reporter from sexual assault.

Conclusion

Each of the aforementioned cases in some way invokes a particular type of shape shifting, where a woman war reporter takes on a culturally assigned “shape” in order to adapt to a certain situation. As Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn (2011) argue, women have historically been expected to perform some very specific roles in the war zone; our findings show that this is certainly the case with female war reporters. Yet, as Oliver (2007, 1) has observed, women soldiers have found unique ways to adapt to the masculinized spaces of war. Our research shows that female war reporters have found their own unique ways to adapt. Sometimes the reporter will allow herself to be treated as a fragile being, in need of assistance, or as an accessible companion with a woman’s “intuition”; at other times she will downplay her differences and even embrace the aggressive, competitive performances that are more often expected of male reporters. Though, as many of the interviewees have told us, the issues of menstruation, pregnancy, and rape in the field are real challenges for them, these women also know how to use these challenges in their own favor. The authors of this study respect the distinct challenges that women face in war zones, while also highlighting the subversive ways in which they turn these challenges into advantages. In doing so, this study hopes to illuminate not only the obstacles for these women, but also the resourcefulness of these journalists who risk their lives to tell the story of war in the contemporary era.

In addition, it is important to emphasize that these subversive strategies of shape shifting are reactions to a male-dominant context. Though there has been a slow increase in the number of female journalists in the war zone over the past few decades (Korte 2009), the profession of war reporting would greatly benefit from the presence of many more female reporters. The increase in the number of female war journalists could help alleviate some of the situations this study has highlighted, and could make the profession of war reporting into a slightly more equitable field. One of the interviewees illuminated this perfectly in a story she told us. In this anecdote her Arab television crew covering the Syria conflict included two women and three men. This interview underscored how the presence of a second woman significantly altered the relationship between the five journalists and helped in ameliorating the dire situation.

We stayed at an old house that had no bathroom inside. The hygiene level was pretty bad. Bathrooms were outside. No water to shower. It would’ve been miserable to have your [menstrual] period then. We joked about it. We made many jokes about the hygiene and baths and put rules about how to use them. It was great to have another woman on the team. It made things much easier and changed the whole dynamic of the conversation. Many of the jokes about hygiene and bathrooms would’ve been awkward if I was the only woman there. I was able to share ideas with her that she related to, but also the conversation with the men on the team was different. The jokes about toilets and showers and hygiene felt more acceptable. They were more appropriate because there were two

women, and not me alone with three men. (personal communication, September 17, 2015)

Further research on this matter can highlight what other advantages the increase in women war journalists could bring. According to Alia, these advantages are quite obvious because “women add a missing perspective to the coverage.” She illustrates this added perspective through her experience covering the 2006 Lebanon–Israel war with former *New York Times* reporter Anthony Shadid—who died covering the Syrian conflict in 2012: “As journalists, we were trained to see the same things, and to a large extent we did see all the things we were trained to see, but we saw them in very different colors.” Nevertheless, not all women journalists agree that there is an essential difference between the genders when it comes to war reporting, and this debate is far from settled (Fleming, Chambers, and Steiner 2004, 213). Future studies that compare the output of men and women war journalists, or examine the difference in overall framing of wars where women make up a significant percentage of the press corps, could help confirm and elucidate such “different colors” of war journalism and how such diversity in coverage and framing may enrich the journalism field.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

REFERENCES

- Aalberg, Toril, Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, Stuart Soroka, James Curran, Kaori Hayashi, Shanto Iyengar, Paul K. Jones, *et al.* 2013. International TV News, Foreign Affairs Interest and Public Knowledge. *Journalism Studies*, 14(3): 387–406.
- Al-Najjar, Abeer. 2013. “Jordan: Toward Gender Balance in the Newsroom.” In *Palgrave International Handbook on Women and Journalism*, edited by Carolyn Byerly, 419–431. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Aoláin, Fionnuala, Dina Haynes, and Naomi Cahn. 2011. *On the Frontlines: Gender, War, and the Post-Conflict Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Byerly, Carolyn, ed. 2011. *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media*. Washington: IWMF. <http://www.iwmf.org/our-research/global-report>.
- Byerly, Carolyn, ed. 2013. *Palgrave International Handbook on Women and Journalism*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Carter, Cynthia, Gill Branston, and Stuart Allan, eds. 1998. *News, Gender, and Power*. New York: Routledge.
- Committee to Protect Journalists. 2015. 1149 Journalists Killed since 1992. <https://cpj.org/killed>.
- De Bruin, Marjan and Ross, Karen. 2004. *Gender and Newsroom Cultures: Identities at Work*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P.
- Fleming, Carole, Deborah Chambers, and Linda Steiner. 2004. *Women and Journalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Franks, Suzanne. 2013. *Women and Journalism*. London: I.B. Taurus.
- Haller, Natalia. 2006. *Female War Correspondents in Vietnam: A Turning Point for Women in American Journalism*. Thesis, Humboldt State University.

- Hamilton, John Maxwell. 2011. *Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.
- Knightly, Phillip. 2004. *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Korte, Barbara. 2009. *Represented Reporters: Images of War Correspondents in Memoirs and Fiction*. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- Marshall, Catherine, and Gretchen B. Rossman. 2016. *Designing Qualitative Research*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Matloff, Judith. 2011. "Safety Tips for Female Correspondents: How to Minimize the Risk of Sexual Assault While on the Job." *The Columbia Journalism Review*, February 22. http://www.cjr.org/campaign_desk/safety_tips_for_female_corresp.php
- Melki, Jad, and Sarah Mallat. 2013. "Lebanon: Women Struggle for Gender Equality and Harassment-Free Newsrooms." In *Palgrave International Handbook on Women and Journalism*, edited by Carolyn Byerly, 432–450. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Melki, Jad, and Sarah Mallat. 2014. "Block Her Entry, Keep Her Down and Push Her Out: Gender discrimination and women journalists in the Arab world." *Journalism Studies*, September 30. DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2014.962919.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Robin Riley, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, eds. 2008. *Feminism and War: Confronting US Imperialism*. London: Zed Books.
- Moisy, Claude. 1996. "Foreign News Flow in the Information Age." Discussion Paper D-23, The Joan Shorenstein Center, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Oliver, Kelly. 2007. *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Prentoulis, Marina, Howard Tumber, and Frank Webster. 2005. "Finding Space: Women Reporters at War." *Feminist Media Studies* 5 (3): 374–377.
- Sjoberg, Laura. 2014. *Gender, War, and Conflict*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.
- State of the News Media. 2004–2014. Pew Research Center. <http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/previous-state-of-the-news-media-reports-2/>.
- Tumber, Howard, and Frank Webster. 2006. *Journalists Under Fire: Information War and Journalistic Practices*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Wagner, Lilya. 1989. *Women War Correspondents of WWII*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Wolfe, Lauren. 2011. "The Silencing Crime: Sexual Violence and Journalists." *The Committee to Protect Journalists*. June 7. Accessed November 11, 2015.: <https://cpj.org/reports/2011/06/silencing-crime-sexual-violence-journalists.php>.
- "Women Reporting War: Conditions Often Unsafe, Unsavory, Unsettling." 2005. *Media Report to Women*, 33 (2): 3–4.

Lindsay Palmer, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. E-mail: lindsay.palmer@wisc.edu

Jad Melki (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Department of Communication Arts, Lebanese American University, Lebanon. E-mail: jmelki@lau.edu.lb