

Female photojournalist in Gaza shares her story

Award-winning multimedia journalist Eman Mohammed reveals the challenges of being the first female photojournalist in Gaza



EMAN MOHAMMED

By Madeline Castillo

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In 2006, at the age of 19, Eman Mohammed challenged local patriarchal traditions and entered the workforce as the first female photojournalist in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. While others may have quit and tucked in their tails at the open hostility faced by a woman entering a male-dominated field, Eman would not take “no” for an answer.

“They made clear that a woman must not do a man's job,” she explains in her TED Talk entitled *The courage to tell a hidden story*.

Eman has battled her way through abusive coworkers, sexual harassment and threats to her life. Her colleagues went as far as to abandon her in an open air strike zone. But Eman was unperturbed.

The award-winning photojournalist and senior TED fellow currently resides in Washington D.C., though she was born and raised in Saudi Arabia beneath a rigid interpretation of sharia law that severely limits the rights of women. Since she began her career, Eman's work has focused on the documentation of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, including wars and military invasions, as well as the formation of armed militant groups



GAZA STRIP, PALESTINE

along the strip of Gaza. Though overtime, she has shifted her focus.

“To men, women's stories were seen as inconsequential,” Mohammed explains. “Because of my gender, I had access to worlds where my colleagues were forbidden. At times of such doubled war including both social restrictions on women and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, women's dark and bright stories were fading away.”

The mega screen behind Eman displays photo after photo of war-torn homes and sad, smeared dusty faces. And then suddenly there's a photo, still surrounded by homes turned to rubble and dust, but instead of the usual sadness painting the expressions of the subjects, they seem to be more carefree than anything.

“Because of my gender, I had access to worlds where my colleagues were forbidden,” Eman said. Behind her on the projection screen, amidst the death and destruction, children play in a bright white bathtub, splashing around with a blue bucket.

“Beyond the obvious pain and struggle, there were healthy doses of laughter and accomplishments. My work is not meant to hide the scars of war, but to show the full frame of unseen stories of Gazans.”

Though her presence as a photojournalist was unwelcome in the strict confines of her native Saudi Arabia, Mohammed's courage and resilience have made her a notable figure in the United States. Her award-winning work has been published in *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Geo International*, and *VICE*, to name a few.

“I admire her for standing up for herself and not being intimidated by the Palestinian men,” exclaims Lauren Castillo, graduate from Gies College of Business at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. “It makes me wonder if I could have done that.”

After having watched Eman's TED Talk, Mary Castillo, a homemaker from Wheaton, IL adds, “It makes me feel lucky to live in the United States, where women can pretty much pursue any career. I respect her for her courage. But did it open up the door for more female journalists? Did it forge the path?”

“I have a lot more questions than I have answers,” Lauren chimes in.

In the end, maybe it did open the door to more female photojournalists in the Gaza Strip, and maybe it didn't. At the very least, Eman's story and her photography of those without a voice were finally given one, and it sparked the curiosity of two women halfway around the world. The conversation, it seems, is just getting started.