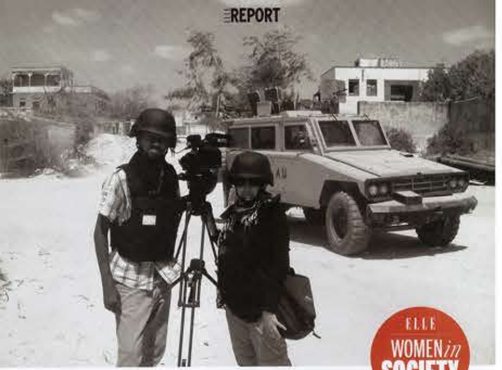

ELLE WOMEN in SOCIETY

WOMEN ON THE FRONT LINE

As war continues in *Somalia* and extremist attacks plague *Kenya and Nigeria*, *Holly Meadows* gets to know the women reporting from the *male-dominated conflict zones in Africa*

'ULTIMATELY I'D LIKE TO SEE MORE AFRICANS FROM AFRICA ... TELLING OUR OWN STORIES, BECAUSE IT'S OUR HOME. NO ONE CAN TELL OUR STORIES BETTER THAN WE CAN'

One of the first memories of being in the field that Al Jazeera English reporter Haru Mutasa has is the venture she endured from her subjects. 'I remember being ignored by the people who I was meant to be interviewing. They thought that because I was so young and was often the only woman on the team, I couldn't be anyone they needed to greet.'

Mutasa started out as a journalist in 2005, freshly graduated from Rhodes University, and was recruited by Al Jazeera when she was based in Nairobi, Kenya. Now based in South Africa, Mutasa has covered many African conflicts, including the post-election violence in Kenya in 2007, and the 2008 battle of N'Djamena, when French soldiers left her behind in an evacuated hotel at the rebels closed in on the presidential palace.

Being firm, compassionate, respectful and patient are some of the qualities Mutasa knew it would get her far. With time and experience she began to be taken seriously and earn the respect of her colleagues. Her proudest piece of work was covering the Ivory Coast civil war in 2011: all the borders and airports were closed but Mutasa and her colleagues, cameraman Jerome Gaulmes and producer Gladys Ngongo, snuck in across the border with Ghana and spent an entire month there. Mutasa found that being an African woman helped her escape life-threatening situations. 'We had to go through many rebel-manned check points and at one a woman came up to the car and wanted us not to go any further because the road was not safe. She admitted that the only reason she warned us was because we are women and when she saw us she "saw her daughter".'

Haru Mutasa

Mutasa and her team saw things in Ivory Coast that no one should ever have to see, risked their lives on several occasions and negotiated with heavily armed young men high on drugs. But they managed to survive and tell an important story, and it's this that keeps Mutasa going. The feeling of being part of the only team in the world to cover a conflict firsthand is one of the reasons she hasn't thrown in the towel on risky reporting.

Today, she notes, while the people she works with might take her seriously, society at large still seems to question the credibility of a female reporter. 'Women get much more slack from viewers, male and female. You can do a great report on conflict in South Sudan and all someone will comment on online is why your hair was messy,' she says. She believes we still have a long way to go before women will be the norm in her industry. But it's not only gender inequality that's an issue. 'Ultimately I'd like to see more Africans from Africa ... telling our own stories, because it's our home. No one can tell our stories better than we can.'

British-born journalist Jessica Hatcher also seeks to address imbalances in the industry, but in a different way: her reporting often tries to lift the lid on the people and narratives that wouldn't usually make the news. She also enjoys engaging readers who don't have a prior interest in this part of the world and telling stories about everyday lives, such as the female national running team in Mogadishu, a year after the Somalia capital was liberated from Islamist militants.

Jessica Hatcher (below left) at the Amisom Union military base in Mogadishu, Somalia, February 2012. (Photograph: Phil Moore)

Hatcher (below) climbing Mount Nyiragongo, an active volcano located in Eastern DRC, weeks before it reopened to tourists following closure due to a rebel insurgency, September 2014. (Photograph: Phil Moore)

Jessica Hatcher writes notes on top of Mount Nyiragongo, 2014. (Photograph: Phil Moore)

'I LOVE FINDING THESE "SUPERWOMAN NARRATIVES", SOME OF WHICH YOU'D THINK COULD ONLY EXIST IN FICTION'

Hatcher's first year as a journalist was fairly calamitous. Reporting celebrity gossip for the *London Evening Standard* she once interviewed Jared Leto thinking he was Daniel (Harry Potter) Radcliffe. One day a fellow journalist suggested Hatcher steer one of the editors at the *Daily Mail* and advised her to wear a knee-length skirt, pouts and minimal make-up, and never to look a senior male editor in the eye. 'I fear she was only half joking. I did not make it into the *Daily Mail* office,' says Hatcher. 'I left London soon afterwards.'

Although she has never noticed any kind of gender-based discrimination by an editor, she is aware of the gender bias in the industry – 70 percent of front-page articles in UK newspapers in 2012 were written by men, according to *The Guardian*. Faced with this, I feel like the most constructive thing I can do is put my head down and get on with my job,' she says. That, and turning the notion of incongruity between being a woman and a conflict-zone journalist on its head.

Hatcher started working in East Africa by chance, after getting an assignment to write about piracy poaching in Kenya for the *Telegraph* magazine. It then took her a few years of experimenting with different forms to realise that she wanted to focus on writing narrative, character-driven accounts. She has covered the 2012-13 rebellion in the Democratic Republic of Congo for *Time* and documented the legacy of a long war in Guinea-Bissau that has left it vulnerable to the transatlantic drugs trade. But it's her work with women that she's the most proud of, in countries where women are doing remarkable things in difficult circumstances.

For example, she goes a voice to women in eastern Congo who had been sexually abused by female members of an armed group. The women had never told their stories to anyone before, and aid workers didn't want to know about it, because their aid programmes were geared to treating victims of male-perpetrated sexual violence. 'As one cynic told me, for fundraisers, a place where women rape is a hard sell. For women to be perpetrators would have contradicted their [aid programme] rhetoric.'

Then there was her story of a group of elderly Catholic nuns living in Malakal in South Sudan, whose home was literally on the front line in the war between rebel and government forces. And her report of a Somali activist in her late 60s, Fatima Jibrell, who has spent two decades fighting the charcoal trade that has decimated Somalia's trees. 'I love finding these "superwoman narratives", some of which you'd think could only exist in fiction,' she says.

You might say that West Africa Correspondent for Al Jazeera English television, Yemisi Ndegu, is something of a superwoman herself. Ndegu balances life as a full-time reporter based in Abuja, Nigeria, with being a mother to her eight-month-old daughter Safari Dahlia. Safari lives on a busy round-schedule, sleep, meals and activities are all timed so that Ndegu can be with her as much as possible. Being a mother has made her more efficient in prepping her work, because time is so much more precious when you have a little one to consider. 'It's possible to be a mother and still cover conflict and war,' she says. 'And still love your baby and be there for your family.'

In 2010 she received the United Nations Correspondents' Association Award for Journalism for her coverage of war and conflict in Congo, particularly its effects on girls and women. She has reported on the conflict in northern Uganda and extensively covered the conflict in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta.

Perhaps her most notable body of work is her coverage for Al Jazeera of the Islamist Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east of Nigeria. In 2009 she was the first international journalist to enter Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, which has been at the heart of

Yemisi Ndegu

Robyn Kriel (below) interviewing a security expert overlooking the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, using a satellite phone in Gaza, DRC, with her cameraman, Medback Dube, reporting from Mogadishu

crisis and violence. It's where Boko Haram's leader Mohammed Yusuf was killed by Nigerian security forces, an incident that sparked six years of conflict. Ndegu has been covering the crisis every day since then, reporting on some 15 000 deaths and 1.2-million people displaced. In April 2014, she broke the story when more than 200 schoolgirls were kidnapped from Chibok, constantly doing follow-up reports until she went on maternity leave last year.

Ndegu believes that her ability to embed herself with the Nigerian military fighting Boko Haram, and gain access to and interview young girls who escaped death, is largely due to the fact that she's a woman. 'Women get greater access [to] report conflict and war. And access is at the core of what journalists do. In my experience, government officials, the military, militants and insurgents, victims of conflict and war – you name it, the full spectrum of people you meet in conflict situations – are more open to giving access to women and talking to women. They trust women more.'

Consequently, in her opinion, women sometimes do a better job than men. 'We have a broader spectrum of voices when a woman is reporting on the front line,' she says. Her hope is that in the future the news business will change to make it easier for women to enjoy reporting war, but at the same time be able to have a full family life. 'We need more flexible working hours, job-sharing, and childcare facilities in the workplace,' she says.

Born and raised in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, Robyn Kriel is the East Africa Bureau Chief for eNCA, based in Nairobi. She might not have a child, but she has found that a group of friends and a supportive family have helped her balance her work-personal life. Her mother was a journalist during the civil war in Zimbabwe and has remained an empathetic presence, as have her family and friends, who forgive her when she drops out of plans at the last minute or doesn't answer a call for days because she's in the middle of a breakingnews story. In the three years she has lived in Kenya she has covered the Mpeketoni massacre, the attack on the Westgate Mall and the recent Garissa University College attack, where about 150 students were killed. She has also spent a month in Mehmand Province, Afghanistan, embedded with US Marines in incredibly challenging situations – where she could not take a shower for weeks and where the only toilets were plastic bags.

Back in 2007, Kriel was covering a women's protest march in Zimbabwe when riot police saw her filming and rushed at her cameraman, bearing her to the ground. 'Then they threw me into the back of their police vans and I landed on my knees. I was so scared I actually wet my pants a little bit. ... There were a number of women beaten that day. I did an interview with a woman the next day who had been horrifically beaten on her breasts – she had huge purple bruises. I felt very violated and was angry for a long time after that.'

Yet being a woman in the field has benefited her, because she has been able to report on the plight of women who would not have felt comfortable talking to a man. 'People often think that a war zone is a place where only men go, but it's not true. There are women who are caught in the conflict, and in many cases women are fighting alongside the men.'

On occasion, her gender hampers her ability to report: if men on the front line haven't seen a woman in a long time, they are sometimes too shy to talk. Once in Afghanistan a young US Marine told Kriel that 'he smelled [her] from across the camp' – then ran away in horror because of what he'd inadvertently said.

Access to a story is a highly contested space among journalists. What irks Kriel is when female reporters are accused of using their looks or bodies to get access to stories. 'Because guess what? Even if I wear drop-dead gorgeous, Barbie dolls to play with, the first thing they did was cover their faces with a scarf.

On the whole, Sier finds the advantages of being a woman on the front line far outweigh the negatives. 'I can often – just with a smile or a polite "please" – get an interview that wouldn't be so easy to come by if I were a man.' She has also found that when tensions are running high, just the presence of a woman can reduce a potentially explosive situation. 'It's almost as if men suddenly remember to behave when there's a woman around!' Navigating conservative and patriarchal cultures as a female outsider has led to her being seen almost as a third sex, 'an androgynous entity that flits between both worlds – chatting with women in their kitchen one moment and then eating with their mujahideen husbands in the next moment, or even as a male colleague would be welcomed into the kitchen,' she says.

For Sier, who left the SABC and used her savings to buy a digital video camera, then arrived in Ramallah in time to report on Yasser Arafat's funeral, it was clear that if she wanted chances at the big stories, she would need to make it happen herself. 'I meet wonderfully capable young women who hold themselves back because they lack confidence. I think as women we need to take more chances,' she says. The biggest stereotype she's overcome? The idea that a war zone is not the place for a woman, and that women can't handle the stress and demands of the job.

But, gender aside, Sier's most cherished hope for the future is that one day women like her will be able to call themselves 'peace correspondents' instead of 'war correspondents'. □

Middle East Bureau Chief for Al Jazeera English, Paula Slier, on the front line

ELLE

GO ONLINE for a Q&A with renowned photojournalist Lynsey Addario and Alisaha Fazzino

of the Egyptian revolution. At that time it was particularly dangerous for women reporters and Sier couldn't walk around unless accompanied by a man. Later in 2011, she reported from Libya, covering the civil war and the ousting of then President Muammar Gaddafi. She was there for almost two months and was listed as a finalist in the TEFI award (the 'Emmys' of Russia) for a live report she delivered while under gunfire in the capital, Tripoli. She has also reported from Algeria for several clients including CNN and Reuters Africa. One particularly moving story she covered was about a group of 52 children who'd been found living in the mountains with their mothers after their fathers had been killed by the Algerian army. The children had never seen a toothbrush before or slept on a mattress. When the girls were given Barbie dolls to play with, the first thing they did was cover their faces with a scarf.

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