



The reported sexual assault on Lara Logan by a frenzied mob in Cairo highlighted the danger for female journalists covering the world's hot news spots. What drives them – and how do they cope? By Glynis Homing

Women under fire



Logan on assignment in Baghdad in 2006

When Durban-born CBS foreign-affairs correspondent Lara Logan, 46, was stripped and beaten by protesters while reporting in Cairo during celebrations of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's resignation in February, the world was shocked. So were fellow female reporters, who feel their gender at times makes their jobs more dangerous. "I definitely feel more vulnerable as a woman," says Paula Slier, 38, another former South African journalist, who was in Cairo as Middle East bureau chief for *Rossia Today* and head of her own Newshound production company at the time of Logan's attack.

Slier recalls an incident during the anti-Mubarak demonstrations earlier that month. The crowd around us suddenly became unruly and started screaming at us. The cameraman and sound man, both Egyptian, pushed me into the car and ordered the driver to drive away as fast as possible. The demonstrators were banging on the car, yelling. But like most female journalists whose work puts them in the line of fire, Slier says she tries not to think about this. "It would just immobilise me," she says. "I think more about safety once an assignment is over and I'm back home, and I had time to process what I've seen.

If I were to feel and absorb experiences fully while I'm in them, I suspect the reality and consequences of the situation would make it more difficult for me to work – and if not, I'd at least feel very frightened." Slier always has a "jittery feeling" in her stomach before dangerous missions. (See "Dangerous assignments.") "But I don't like to talk too much about it with people close to me because they worry most. I often feel torn by what I put my family through." Logan's family members are reportedly relieved that she has recovered physically and has received post-traumatic-stress therapy, and are reconciled to her returning to danger.

"She wouldn't want what happened to stop other women journalists doing what they want and need to do," says someone close to them. The family of Robyn Kriel, 27, a Johannesburg *eNews* reporter who was embedded with US marines in Afghanistan last year, understands the dangers more than most. Her mother, Margaret Kriel, was a journalist in Zimbabwe, where Robyn cut her teeth covering protests and the volatile build-up to the country's 2008 presidential election. "Mom was imprisoned for four days because of me," says Kriel. "I was reporting undercover for CNN when a tactical force raided our house. But I'm 1,53cm tall and look like a schoolgirl without makeup, so they let me go and went out and arrested her. I'd far rather face trouble myself!" She has done so many times since (see "Dangerous assignments") but, like her colleagues, keeps going back for more.

DRIVING FORCE Few of these women know just what drives them. Mandy Wiener, 28, Johannesburg *EyesWitness News* reporter and author of the recently published *Killing Kabbler: An Underworld Exposé* (Pan Macmillan), has covered everything from gang hits to riots. "You can get hooked on the sheer adrenaline rush of getting a scoop – the rush of live broadcasts and short deadlines and foreign environments and interesting people," she says. "And there's a sense of immortality you get as a journalist – you think you're invincible, protected by your vocation. That's part of why I was so shocked by what happened to Lara. It shows how vulnerable we are." "I probably do what I do because the people I report on are a hell of a lot braver than I am," says Kriel. "In 2007, when the police broke up a protest I was filming [a civil rights group] and beat the living daylight out of us, I thought I was going to die.

But for me it was a one-off, while those amazing women keep doing their protests, risking everything to make their voices heard. I had to do what I could." At the same time, Kriel knows that "dangerous stories are ones journalists make a name on. And I want to make my career mark early and live fully before I have kids," she says bluntly. Slier too admits to 'noble and not-so-noble' reasons. "The noble reasons include my love of people. I genuinely find them fascinating and believe each of us has a story to tell. I've covered three earthquakes so far in Algeria, Iran and India, and I'm so humbled that people in these situations will share their pain and heartbreak with me. I'm still in touch with a family in Algeria who lost their daughter – the mother told me she had lost one daughter but had found another in me." People regularly ask Slier whether she's afraid to go where she does. "But there are people like you and me living in these places, being raped, watching family members killed in front of them. What makes them so different from us? Nothing, aside from the misfortune of being born into a different part of the world! So if a young single woman in Gaza – who is half my age – can have her legs blown off and be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life, it seems almost superficial to consider whether I'm afraid to enter her world for a short while. What a privilege to be there, and what a responsibility to tell her story. She trusted me with it – and it's a trust I take seriously." Yet Slier is not immune to the 'not-so-noble' thrill of doing live television from a war zone. "I remember arriving in Kabul for the parliamentary elections. We went straight from the airport, hitching rides and running through the streets because there were no taxis and half the roads were closed off, to get to our position on time.

And then I'm on live television, trying to memorise important facts I want to mention, answer the questions, be wary of my surroundings, and look calm – with my hair combed – all at the same time. I'm not married and I often think I'm going to have to have one hell of a wedding to beat that!" **GENDER ISSUES** The issue of whether being female in the firing line is more of a disadvantage or advantage is just as complex. "With the Arab world, many men I've encountered actually don't know how to react to a western woman doing everything her male counterparts do," Slier says. "In many places women are covered up or kept at home, so I'm fighting prejudices that sometimes make it difficult to work. There have been times when men would not talk to me and would address my cameraman as though I was not there." At the same time, because seeing women in such positions is so rare, Slier can often – just with a smile or a polite "please" – get an interview she doubts would be as easy to come by if she were a man. "I remember going down a tunnel in which goods were smuggled from Egypt to Gaza. My translator was amazed that the tunnel diggers had allowed it, and kept saying that if I were a man they'd never have agreed to it." Particularly challenging, she says, is sexual innuendo. This was most pronounced in Egypt, where men will stare, whistle and touch you if they can while pretending to be just walking past. Depending on where I am I might wear a long skirt and headscarf out of respect, but sometimes it's just practical to wear jeans. I'm not there to insult their culture but I also feel I want to be true to mine." While Slier, Kriel and Wiener realise they're more vulnerable than their male colleagues to rape and sexual assault, they point out that men, too, are at risk of these if caught and tortured, when humiliation is the prime objective. ▶

There's a sense of immortality you get as a journalist – you think you're invincible, protected by your vocation!

Report

Report

And statistics show men are far more likely to be killed. Reporters Without Borders and the Committee To Protect Journalists (CPJ) report that since 1992, 886 journalists have been killed around the world and three in South Africa, all men. There's no record of rapes or sexual assault because to date none has been kept. Yet the *Columbia Journalism Review* has noted that 'female reporters are targets in lawless places where guns are common and punishment rare'. They experience more sexual harassment and rape than male colleagues, more unwanted advances and 'fewer come-ons', especially in places where 'western women are viewed as promiscuous'. Journalist Annu Joseph of India has suggested (in a Gender Links Opinion And Commentary Service report) the reason the CPJ and other organisations don't compile this data is that most women journalists don't report incidents for fear of being overlooked for assignments that carry a degree of danger. Logan's decision to break the silence may lead to change, Joseph says. Already a senior CPJ editor has posted a blog on 'Documenting sexual violence against journalists'. And the International News Safety Institute has put out a Safety Advisory For Female Journalists.

PLAYING SAFE At present there is little in the self-protection line. "The only protection you have is a flask jacket and your pen," says Kriel. "I'm now thinking about carrying Mace." Wiener tried the jacket and Mace but gave up on both – the jacket was restrictive, the Mace a problem with airport and other security. Neither they nor Slier were given specific safety training, or expected it. "It's an on-the-job learning experience," says Wiener, "but the media pack takes care of its cubs." Slier adds, "I'll never forget the advice of my former SABC news editor, Jim Matthews: "No story is worth putting your life on the line for!" Women journalists have broken into previously male-dominated areas but are still more vulnerable than men because of the kind of society we live in, says Mazy Papayya, deputy chairperson of the South African National Editors' Forum.

Today the most dangerous assignments locally are service-delivery protests where emotions often run high, and projects in rural areas. "I think, in general, the fact that freedom of expression is enshrined in our constitution makes our jobs much easier, but we've had women reporters chased from a scene and told they have no place there, so more work needs to be done," she says.

Papayya says most newswomen have a code of practice governing reporters' safety, 'whether or not it's formal. In general, editors are savvy and well aware of the dangers out there, and journalists know what to expect. But unpredictability is the nature of this job. You can plan as much as you want – as I am sure Lara Logan and her team did. 'Things can still go wrong'." X

Dangerous assignments



ROBYN KRIEL won't forget the tension of going on foot patrol with marines in Taliban territory in Afghanistan

"What happened to Lara Logan was horrendous," she added later. "But I don't think it should be a reason to pull seasoned female correspondents away from an important story."

last year, walking carefully in the footsteps of the soldiers ahead of her to avoid 'improvised explosive devices', the infamous IEDs from *The Hurt Locker*. "I'm very short, and their strides were long..." A few days after she left, award-winning photographer Jaco Slier stepped on one and lost both legs.



Veteran US political and foreign-affairs writer **SUSAN MLILIGAN** was ambushed in Kosovo

by Serb paramilitary in 1999. "They dragged us out of our car, held guns to our heads and threatened to kill us," she wrote recently for *US News & World Report*. "We were two men and two women, and eventually we convinced them we were not undercover guerrilla fighters. Had our group been all male, I'm not sure the episode would have ended without anyone being harmed."



PAULA SLIER was doing a live television report on the Israeli-Gaza border while Hamas militants fired Qassam rockets from Gaza into Israel. "Suddenly everyone in front of me started running. I couldn't see what had happened behind me so I kept talking. Afterwards I found out a Qassam had fallen just a few hundred metres from me."



Journalists **LAURA LING** and **EUNA LEE**, who work for *US Current TV*, were detained in North Korea in 2009



LEILA FADEL, Cairo bureau chief for *The Washington Post*, was detained by military police in Egypt in February. "I suddenly found myself blindfolded and handcuffed and in jail," she said in an audio post.

while trying to film refugees along the Chinese border. They were sentenced to 12 years in a labour prison for entering North Korea illegally and committing unspecified hostile acts. They were released only after a special visit by former US President Bill Clinton two months later.