



WOMAN IN A WAR ZONE

Paula Slier shares how being a female journalist in a conflict zone has many pros and cons

SOME OF THE SWEETEST ACTS

of chivalry are seen on the frontline. On one occasion I was lying under a train (don't ask – I remember also wondering how I'd landed up there), alongside pro-Russian fighters in eastern Ukraine. The Russia-Ukraine conflict was at its most intense and there were snipers everywhere. The whistling of bullets moments before they hit the train's wooden compartments above us was the only sound breaking the deadly quiet. After what seemed like hours, we crawled back a few metres and took cover inside a railway post. A clean-shaven, 20-something with a Kalashnikov hanging from his shoulder looked up momentarily from the Molotov cocktail he was making to smile at me. A minute later, he handed me a cup of tasteless black tea in a cracked mug. Again he smiled and told me that it wasn't safe to be there. As if I hadn't noticed!

I'm often asked if being a woman in a war zone makes my job easier or more difficult. The truth lies somewhere in between.

In Afghanistan, for example, the nature of its patriarchal society means I can sit with the wives of *mujahideen* fighters in their kitchens, while my cameraman is forced to wait outside. But when it's time to eat a meal on the thickly carpeted living-room floor, that's strictly the domain of men.

There's always a flurry of activity when foreigners are present. What to do with me? In the end, I'm always invited to join them and be the only woman present. It's like being a third sex – an androgynous interlocutor who flits between the male and female worlds, doing “the work of a man” in a woman's body.

IT'S LIKE BEING A THIRD SEX – AN ANDROGYNOUS INTERLOCUTOR WHO FLITS BETWEEN THE MALE AND FEMALE WORLDS, **DOING “THE WORK OF A MAN” IN A WOMAN'S BODY.**

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo'burg-born Paula Slier has had her fair share of hair-raising encounters. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track.

TWITTER:
@PaulaSlier_RT

Sometimes it can get a little surreal. When asking Mahmoud al-Zahar – Foreign Minister of Hamas – pointed questions in Gaza, he answered while staring at a point somewhere on the wall behind me. Not a flicker

of eye contact was made, nor was there any shaking of hands.

And then there are those long bouts of time between the breaking news when there's nothing to do but wait for the next bombing. In Libya my cameraman once watched an entire Russian sitcom series – 124 hours in total – twice!

In a war zone, the safest place to while away

those downtime hours is usually in your hotel. But in a place like Gaza, where all the television channels are in Arabic and women don't walk the streets alone – even to fetch a takeaway pizza – it can get downright boring. I was once reporting on a protest march that had turned violent for *Eyewitness News* and a friend, bless her, heard it and was concerned. She tried phoning and texting me to check that all was okay and when she got no response, she starting panicking. I only returned her call a few hours later. In the interim I had found the perfect relaxation spot in Gaza – a place to have my nails done while steaming in a Turkish bath. I know it might sound strange, but there are some two dozen beauty salons across the Strip and the money I was making from risking my life was keeping them afloat. They're run by Russian women married to Palestinians who moved to Gaza during Soviet times because, as one woman told me: “Anywhere had to be better than the USSR.”

At its heart, journalism is storytelling. Whether we like it or not, men and women see the world differently – a fact that influences the stories journalists tell. I am a war correspondent, but for better or worse, I'm also a woman. 🌈