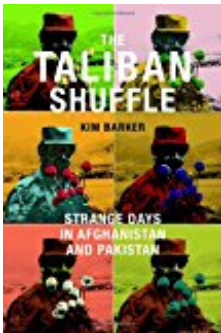


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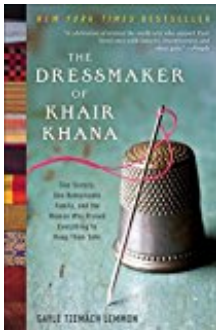
Jenny McPhee

The Bombshell

Women Writing War



Anne Sebba's *Battling for News: Women Reporters from the Risorgimento to Tiananmen Square* (1994) is a compendium of vignettes profiling dozens of female journalists over the past 150 years. An excellent addition to herstory, Sebba's book covers all nature of journalist, notably the long tradition of the female war correspondent, beginning with Jessie White, who commenced her life-long career in 1860 embedded within the ranks of Garibaldi's Red Shirts, and ending with BBC journalist Katie Adie's coverage of the 1986 U.S. bombing of Tripoli and the 1989 student revolt in Tiananmen Square. In story after story of intrepid women risking all in pursuit of the news, Sebba describes the systematic prejudice they encountered and their heroic battles to overcome myriad barriers in order to do their job.



In 1898, novelist Arnold Bennett wrote in *Journalism for Women: A Practical Guide*: "Is there any sexual reason why a woman should be a less accomplished journalist than a man? I can find none..." Yet as Sebba shows in the years since Bennett's statement, the issue of a woman's suitability for the profession has been constantly debated: During a war, are women a distraction to the soldiers and therefore dangerous? Are women emotionally biased, less objective, more partisan? Are they oriented more towards people rather than facts and

statistics?

In the recent Sunday Times article "Listen, Sisters, We've Already Won This War," writer and BBC producer Daisy Goodwin announced that women in journalism had achieved total parity with men, that feminism was something women could now "take for granted." The statistics belie her claim. A new study by Women in Journalism found that nearly 75% of UK journalists are men even though women make up 49% of journalism students. The just published "[Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media](#)" (PDF link) by the International Women's

Media Foundation in Washington, D.C. reports a similar statistic—"Women represent a third (33%) of the full-time journalism workforce in the 522 companies surveyed," the numbers further diminishing with media managerial jobs, CEOs, and governing board positions.

On March 8, the international press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders published a paper, "News Media: A Men's Preserve that Is Dangerous for Women" assessing the situation globally: "More and more women have been joining the ranks of journalists in the past 20 years but they still tend to occupy the lowliest jobs within the profession, with executive and editorial positions usually continuing to be the preserve of men. This clearly has an effect on the vision of the world reflected by the media. It is still a largely male world, one from which women are excluded, a world of men made by men."

This statement is reinforced by depressing statistics concerning the lack of opportunity for women journalists worldwide and their persistent verbal and physical abuse on the job. "Women are needed in newsrooms for proper coverage of the hidden half of humanity," the paper urges, "because they have the ability to deal with aspects to which men do not have access. Several studies show that the media provide little coverage of women..."

Two books published in March by American journalists -- Kim Barker's *The Taliban Shuffle* and Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* -- address female invisibility in compelling, though very different, accounts of what it is like to be women in a war zone, specifically Afghanistan.

Barker's book unfolds during the years 2003-2009 and is a darkly funny, informative, and revelatory account of her trajectory while a correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* from clueless cub war reporter to adrenaline-junkie South Asia bureau chief to overseasoned, burned-out hack. Her book lies somewhere in between Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* and John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook The World* with Barker playing a 21st century version of wise-cracking, cynical, ace reporter Hildy Johnson from Howard Hawks's screwball comedy *His Girl Friday*. Her lively, instructive chronicle of the key events and figures of "the forgotten war" in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not restricted to the "objective" school of book-length reportage. Along with a penetrating, stinging analysis of the political and military situation, she paints a vivid portrait of what it's like to be groped by mobs of men while covering a story, how to deflect heavy flirtation from senior statesmen while maintaining them as sources, and the perils of trying to have any meaningful personal relationship while covering unremitting disasters. She does not shirk from examining her motives for being a legitimized voyeur in a ravaged foreign land: "It was a place to escape, to run away from marriages and mistakes, a place to forget your age, your responsibilities, your past, a country in which to reinvent yourself."

In a *New York Times* op-ed written in response to the hideous attack on Lara Logan while she was covering the uprising in Egypt and the subsequent blame-the-victim international media frenzy, Barker expressed her fear that the incident might result in fewer women journalists being sent to report on dangerous situations. Women reporters, she writes, "do a pretty good job of covering what it's like to live in a war, not just die in one. Without female correspondents in war zones, the experiences of women there may be only a rumor."

Gayle Lemmon, a former ABC News journalist, was in Kabul interviewing and researching her book during the same years as Barker. “Most stories about war and its aftermath,” Lemmon writes in the introduction, “inevitably focus on men: the soldiers, the returning veterans, the statesmen. I wanted to know what war was like for those who had been left behind: the women who managed to keep going even as their world fell apart. War reshapes women’s lives... Charged with their family’s survival, they invent ways to provide for their children and communities. But their stories are rarely told. We’re far more accustomed to -- and comfortable with -- seeing women portrayed as victims of war who deserve our sympathy rather than as resilient survivors who demand our respect.”

In Kabul, Lemmon found Kamila Sadiqi, a woman who started a dressmaking business while living under the Taliban. Lemmon’s narrative, which reads like a novel, is recounted from Kamila’s perspective. One of nine children and seven sisters, she was raised by parents who believed in education and careers for all their children. Kamila finished her teaching school degree as the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, their Draconian laws against women equivalent to house arrest. Kamila’s father and brothers had to flee Kabul, leaving behind a house full of women forbidden to work. Money and food were scarce. Determined and resourceful, Kamila learned to sew and began a home-based dressmaking business that would eventually employ over 100 neighborhood women. Lemmon describes the both harrowing and mundane experiences of Kamila, her family, and an entire community of women, offering an exceptional perspective on life under the Taliban. By 2005, Kamila had moved on from dressmaking to construction. Invited to Washington, D.C., by Condoleezza Rice to address Congress, “she spoke about how business and education transformed women’s lives, and how this change had led to another extraordinary development: women in Afghanistan taking part in the political process.”

But progress, when it comes to feminism, is sloth-like: one step forward, several steps backward. Another foreign correspondent in Kabul, Heidi Kingstone, who contributed to *A Woman’s Place: Perspectives on Afghanistan’s Evolving Legal Framework*, recently wrote: “After almost a decade of international engagement and billions of dollars spent on gender mainstreaming, the situation for Afghan women remains on aggregate as desperate as it was... women’s rights have been enshrined in the constitution, international and Afghan legal wizards have worked to reform the system to bring gender equality and write laws that protect girls and women [yet] the laws are rarely implemented, and there is little political desire to do so... A UN Development Fund for Women report found that 87 % of Afghan women reported being beaten on a regular basis. Girls have acid thrown in their faces for going to school.”

Kingstone, Lemmon, Barker, Sebba, and so many women writers throughout the world make the silence surrounding women, especially in war zones, a little less deafening.