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On the Job

Mother's at War

Babies or Battle Zones?
More journalists these days are choosing both, and facing the consequences
BY JUDITH MATLOFF

Like most mothers, Jennifer Griffin had a checklist when picking a preschool for her daughter in Jerusalem. The Fox News correspondent wanted a disciplined environment. She preferred English-speaking teachers. Most important, she sought a safe location beyond the reach of suicide bombers. Griffin looked at one school that was popular with expatriates, but wasn't pleased that the playground faced the street. She ruled out another where a bomber's head had rolled into the yard. Eventually, she settled on a school whose classrooms seemed securely set back from the road. But then a young man blew himself up nearby. "After that, I lobbied to have an armed guard placed at the entrance," she says. "The parents chip in and pay for him."

Mothers who cover wars go to agonizing lengths to balance child-rearing and work. It's tough enough for any woman to juggle career and babies, but add snipers and kidnappers into the mix and a tricky situation suddenly becomes one of life and death. Female war correspondents readily admit that it goes against all maternal instincts to place the most precious thing in their lives in danger. They find it wrenching to leave their children for weeks while they cover the front lines. But as women swell the ranks of senior correspondents, a growing cadre — nearly all in their forties — are choosing not to relinquish high-profile careers just because they have kids.

War reporting, with its masculine cachet, shatters the ultimate glass ceiling for female correspondents. You prove yourself as tough as the guys. Writing stories that could save lives can be the most compelling experience of a career. Yet the primal tie to a child can present an excruciating pull in the opposite direction. I know this dilemma well. For twenty years I bounced around the world in often nasty places, never questioning if an editor called me at 3 a.m. and said, "Get to Rwanda." I spent so many months away from home when I covered forty-seven countries in Africa that the man who is now my husband would have to fly to Angola or Ethiopia for a rendezvous. However, this daredevil lifestyle ended after our son, Anton, was born. When he was just ten days old, I found myself rejecting a prestigious job that would have taken me to Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. I gazed down at Anton, as he slurped tranquilly at my breast, and thought, "I can't abandon this defenseless tiny person. I waited so long to have him. How could I do anything that might leave him motherless?"

In the days of Martha Gellhorn or the Vietnam War, the tiny sorority of female war reporters was generally childless. Those trailblazers often sought to out-macho the men, and giving birth wasn't compatible with their lifestyle. Even a decade ago in Bosnia, Sheila MacVicar (now of CBS News) stood out as the rare mother in the war pack. But that's changed, with more husbands willing to stay at home and an erosion of prejudice against women on battlefields. For this piece, I canvased nearly a dozen mothers who have covered war for British and American media in places like Burundi, Chechnya, and

Iraq. “What happens with all of us is that we were doing this for several years and then we had babies and it’s hard to give it up,” says Barbara Demick, whose son was an infant when she covered the second Palestinian intifada for the Los Angeles Times. “Just because you’re a mother doesn’t mean you lose your interests.”

Some of these mothers raise families in conflict areas such as Israel. Others spend long months on the road to cover distant wars, and experience the anxieties of separation or possible death. It isn’t as if these women don’t have other attractive options, such as Paris or Washington. Some feel guilty about their unconventional choice. “Every time I pack my bags for a trip and every time I drive to the airport to fly away from Sylvia [five years old] I feel completely miserable,” says Robyn Dixon, the Johannesburg correspondent of the Los Angeles Times. “And every time I step over the threshold of a plane into the hull I feel that shiver of fate, and pray that everything will be okay.”

One of the most unbearable incidents occurred last summer, when Sylvia sobbed hysterically at the door, “Don’t go! Don’t go!” as Dixon left for Iraq. “I was crying too, and I had to just walk away, my heart tearing apart,” she says. At the same time, Dixon and others describe a sense of mission that comes with covering war. A few women have grown hooked on the adrenaline rush of danger. Others hunger for the front- page stories that Baghdad promises. They worry they would be bored with a more ordinary life. Nearly all say they take reasonable precautions.

The war correspondent-mother faces issues her male colleagues can avoid. For starters, those who breastfeed often must wean their babies earlier than they like. Ask anyone who’s pumped milk to imagine doing it in a jeep, or without clean water at hand. One correspondent for a major American newspaper learned the hard way on assignment in Chechnya, when she contracted a painful case of mastitis after her breasts grew engorged. Another suffered leaking breasts in a Palestinian town, when roadblocks kept her from getting home in time to nurse. “It was agony,” she recalls. “I was tempted to pick up the first baby I saw and plant it on my breasts.”

Aside from nursing, other work adjustments must be made, as the most famous female war correspondent of our generation recounts. CNN’s Christiane Amanpour says she has a greater awareness of danger since the birth of her son, John, four years ago. She still goes to hot spots, though. After September 11, she spent about three months covering the Afghan war and has since done stints in Iraq, Israel, and the Palestinian territories. But she has changed the way she works. “I take more care with personal safety since I feel I have a whole new responsibility with a young child who depends on me,” she says.

Most of the women would agree that, after peril, their biggest concern is separation. Assignments in Afghanistan or Iraq, for example, typically last at least three weeks, if not several months. It can take a month just to get into Chechnya, and becoming trapped there for weeks is a distinct possibility. Israel, in a way, seems to offer the best setup for mothers who cover wars. They can breakfast with the kids, go to Gaza to cover news, and get home in time for dinner. Even then, careful planning is needed. Fox News’s Jennifer Griffin and her husband, Greg Myre of The New York Times, try not to be in a dangerous place, like Nablus, on the same day. “The juxtaposition can be a little surreal,” Griffin says. “Sometimes I will be in the West Bank sitting across from some masked gunman. I will say, ‘Hold on just a second, I have to make sure that my husband will pick up my daughter from preschool at one o’clock.’”

Logistics were equally complicated for Catherine Bond, forty-three, when she headed CNN's Nairobi bureau. Her son was tiny as she covered Africa's toughest spots: Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, both Congos, Ethiopia, Eritrea. Bond's husband, an aid worker, frequently traveled to Sudan, so they tried to ensure that both were not away simultaneously for more than one night. Bond and her cameraman perfected the art of keeping trips to no more than ten days, and once she took her toddler and nanny along to Uganda. Bond installed the pair in a comfortable hotel suite while she went out to report.
The common wisdom in war correspondent circles is that given stability and a loving home — a good nanny is essential — the kids will turn out all right. Preschoolers can remain clueless about their environment and don't ponder why mommy leaves the house with a flak jacket. Still, some say it's challenging to remain involved with their children while on the road. Satellite telephones allow daily chats, but sometimes children who resent the separation refuse to take calls. Decompressing after a trip can be tough, too, as parents readjust from survival mode to the prosaic. After the intensity of life and death, changing diapers can seem tedious. Cynde Strand, supervising editor on CNN's international desk, who was formerly based in Johannesburg, says she can easily shift gears by playing with her five-year-old, Luke. But dealing with the local Moms and Tots group after one particularly hairy assignment was another matter. "All the moms were talking about how well their kids were doing on the merry-go-round of activities," she recalls. "I started talking about the massacre site I had just filmed a few days ago in Ivory Coast and how I had to put cigarette butts up my nose to keep the stench from making me vomit. Hmmm."
Griffin tries hard to cocoon her daughters. But despite her best efforts, the real world intrudes. The elder daughter asked why her best friend suddenly left the country (the war). And a bomb exploded at the Moment Café down the street from their house. "I had to stay calm enough so that she didn't feel fear," Griffin recalls. Paradoxically, Griffin maintains that raising children is precisely what keeps her sane after a hard day filming violence. "The birthing process affirms life," she says. "I've found my sanity in the young innocent faces of my children." Another upside is the impact on writing. Several mothers said they were better reporters now, with sharpened insight into human suffering. They say some of their best work has been about mothers wandering the streets calling for their dead children, or toddlers who witnessed their parents' executions. "I have taken many incredible pictures of women and children in war and in hunger that made an impact on world opinion," says CNN's Strand, "but I never really saw those pictures until I had a child of my own."
Those who do give up the road can feel frustrated. I did. When two hundred people were massacred in Uganda recently, Bond's first reaction was that she had to get on a plane. "Then I thought, 'You can't. You're breastfeeding and the other child has a cold.'"
Demick, too, feels ambivalent watching Iraq from the sidelines. Now based in Seoul, she was torn between yearning to go to Baghdad and feeling that she should stay home with Nicholas, now four. As a single parent, she was aware that the boy would be orphaned if she were killed, so she held back from volunteering. But what happens if war breaks out with North Korea? Demick pauses, briefly. "I've thought quite a bit about that," she says. "You have to make a choice." A friend or the nanny would whisk Nicholas to Australia, or to Manhattan where Demick's mother lives. His passport is always handy. But Demick would remain behind, to cover the story.