



A Woman's Place? Photojournalist Lynsey Addario in Libya Teaching Note

Case Summary

Female journalists, like women in many professions, have made tremendous strides toward parity with their male colleagues over the last century. But settings in which risks to women appear to differ from those faced by men—like conflict zones—still raise questions about whether different rules should apply to them. There is little question that sexual violence is a common tool of war and that women are disproportionately targeted. So how should female journalists who cover these areas prepare themselves, and what precautions should they take to limit their risks in the field? How should their colleagues and home institutions support them? Perhaps most controversially, does framing this discussion as one related to gender hurt women more than it helps them? If so, what is the alternative? Until very recently a culture of silence surrounded the issue of sexual violence against female journalists, strenuously upheld by the reporters themselves. Is this the only alternative to focusing on this as a gender issue, or might there be a third way?

This case explores those questions through the experiences of Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Lynsey Addario, who was captured with three male colleagues while covering the Libyan Revolution in early 2011. The case begins with a brief history of women's growing role in covering war over the last century. As the nature of war changed and women were increasingly assigned to cover it, their exposure to sexual aggression—ranging from harassment to violent assault—has likewise grown. The case documents a widespread hesitation among women journalists to report sexual violence due to both cultural stigma and fear of losing assignments.

A violent assault on high profile CBS foreign correspondent Lara Logan in Tahrir Square in February 2011 reawakens the debate about the safety of female journalists in conflict zones. On

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one end of the spectrum, seasoned journalists argue that women are not at particularly greater risk than their male colleagues and should behave no differently. Opponents, again including veteran reporters, respond that women in the field pose a danger not only to themselves but to their colleagues as well.

Meanwhile, Lynsey Addario has built a celebrated career as a photojournalist covering conflict and human rights issues ranging from Afghanistan to the Congo. No stranger to sexually aggressive encounters, she knows what to do: she wears culturally appropriate clothing and body armor, and draws on a range of non-aggressive behaviors to appease potentially hostile men she encounters. But when she finds herself on assignment for the *New York Times* in Libya in 2011, the fighting is heavier and the situation more chaotic than she had anticipated.

After two weeks covering the conflict between rebel forces and government troops, Addario and three *NYT* colleagues, at times at odds over when to remain and when to retreat from the front line, agree to pull back from the heaviest fighting to the city of Adjdabyia. But the city is also under siege. Addario's instincts tell her it is time to go; some of her colleagues push to remain a bit longer. When they finally decide to retreat to Benghazi, the four journalists and their driver come under heavy fire at a government checkpoint and they are captured. Addario quickly finds herself bound, with a gun to her head and soldiers' hands groping her body.

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to start discussions about covering conflict zones in general and the threat of sexual violence in particular; whether and how gender should affect a reporter's preparation for assignments and behavior in the field; how journalism culture might better support reporters who are the victims of sexual aggression; and whether it is fruitful to frame this debate as a gendered matter.

The conflict at the heart of this case is between the hard-to-deny fact that women in some contexts are disproportionately targeted for sexual harassment and sexual violence, and the increasingly common belief in many cultural contexts that male and female journalists should receive the same treatment—from colleagues, employers, and (although this is often beyond their control) those they encounter in the field. Does “equal” treatment always mean “the same”? Are there situations in which women—or men, for that matter—should receive special treatment or special protection because of biological vulnerabilities that have nothing to do with job performance? Or is this always tantamount to unfairly limiting professional opportunities?

Begin by asking if there are some stories female or male journalists should not be assigned to cover because of their gender. Examples might include those, like the cases Addario cites, in which gender could limit one's access to places and sources, but also situations in which safety and propriety are concerns. Female reporters fought for the opportunity to cover men's locker rooms;

should men be allowed to cover women's locker rooms? What about other gendered environments, like abortion clinics? If gender is a factor in covering war, how is it different from these other cases?

One clear difference is that in conflict zones gender becomes an issue not because of access, but because of very real safety concerns. But, as the case documents, even this is a point of contention among veteran journalists. Ask if students agree that female journalists are at greater risk than men in these situations. Lindsey Hilsum argues that, "for the most part," they are not. Students should dissect this. On the one hand, men, too, have been sexually abused when in captivity. But on the other, using sexual violence against women in particular is a common tool of war and humiliation, and the fact of the matter is that men are rarely targeted to the same extent as women.

Addario argues vehemently that, regardless of whether the threats to women are different in conflict zones, the choice to take on these assignments is hers, and hers alone. Ask students whether they believe it is the responsibility of news organizations to try to protect female journalists by limiting their assignments, or whether this is entirely a matter of personal choice on the part of the journalist. Once a woman reporter gets the assignment, what safety and support measures are the responsibility of the news organization and the individual journalist, respectively? Do special guidelines apply to women or men in these situations and, if so, what might these be? Examples might include training and counseling provided by news outlets, or reporters' choosing to adopt local dress or behaviors designed to emphasize or de-emphasize gender-specific characteristics, physical or otherwise. You might ask students to focus on the "appeasement techniques" Addario describes using and ask if these are good suggestions or potentially problematic. Aside from dress and deportment, once in the field should female journalists make different decisions about approaching or avoiding especially volatile areas, or should the same rules apply to men and women?

Among the troubling moments in the case is one in which Addario actively silences her own intuition because she is self-conscious about being seen as a "scared girl." Call students' attention to this and ask them to discuss it. It raises the sticky issue of how male and female reporters alike may judge and treat female journalists differently than men and how women's determination to avoid dismissive or condescending judgments might interfere with their instincts, their performance, and even their safety. Do students agree this is a problem, and what might be a solution?

This leads to the question of whether female journalists' male colleagues in the field do or should feel they have different obligations to protect them simply because they are, arguably, more vulnerable to sexual violence. Is Harry Benson correct that putting women in some situations "compromises her co-workers as well, since they have to try to protect her as best they can?" If this is a danger, how might it be avoided?

Another challenging theme that runs throughout the case is the culture of silence that surrounds sexual harassment of female journalists. Addario and her female colleagues quoted in the case are clear about why they never complain to higher-ups about minor violations: they are quite certain they will lose assignments if they seem fearful or complaining. They are acutely aware of the debate at the heart of this case over whether some contexts should be off-limits to female journalists, so they are likely wary of fueling naysayers' arguments in that debate. Should female journalists speak out more about these incidents? Should their employers be doing more to support their coming forward and, if so, what? How might they better support victims who do come forward, and can all this be done without compromising the inroads female journalists have made toward professional parity? Is framing the debate as a gendered matter more damaging to female journalists than it is helpful?

Class Plan

Use this case in a class on reporting in conflict zones; journalism and trauma; international journalism; and race/gender.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1. Should Addario have done anything differently in Libya and, if so, what?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions: The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Do you agree that female journalists are at greater risk in conflict zones than their male colleagues? Why or why not?

b) Are there contexts female journalists should not be assigned to cover? What about male journalists? Is covering conflict zones any different and, if so, how?

c) When preparing to head into conflict zones, what precautions should journalists take, regardless of gender? Should male and female journalists take any gender-specific precautions and, if so, what might those be?

d) Once in conflict zones, what precautions should journalists take? Are there special precautions women should take over and above those of their male colleagues? If so, what are they?

e) Do you agree with Benson's quote that a female journalist in a conflict zone endangers her colleagues more than a male journalist would in the same situation? If so, how might this be avoided?

f) Is it the responsibility of the news organization to protect female journalists covering conflict zones, or should women reporters be expected to cope for themselves? What precautions are the responsibility of individual journalists, and in what ways should news organizations support them?

g) Addario describes a moment when she silenced her own intuition because "I don't want to be the girl who is saying, 'Come on, I'm scared. We have to go.'" What are your thoughts on this? How can female journalists avoid this kind of Catch-22?

h) Are there places you would refuse to report from? Why?

i) Consider Addario's techniques for managing especially difficult situations when reporting in hostile environments. Discuss their pros and cons, and brainstorm alternatives.

j) Throughout the case, female journalists say they rarely report sexual harassment in the field out of fear their employers will limit their assignments if they seem to be complaining or afraid. Is this a problem? Should news organizations more actively support female journalists under these conditions and, if so, how?

k) Is it helpful to discuss sexual violence against journalists in gendered terms? Why or why not?

Suggested Readings

Joan Connell. "Brutalized, then Betrayed: Lara Logan suffered Sexual Battery in Cairo, then Gender Bigotry Back Home," *Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma*. February 16, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: This article for the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is helpful not only because it discusses how colleagues and employers can support journalists who are sexually assaulted, but also because it explores the often dismissive and even disrespectful treatment by the media and the public of victims who do come forward .

<http://dartcenter.org/content/ordeal-in-tahrir-square-0>

"On Assignment: Covering Conflicts Safely," Committee To Protect Journalists, Special Report. February 27, 2003.

SYNOPSIS: This is a helpful resource for instructors preparing to discuss this case and for students as well. It provides practical information about body armor and health insurance, as well as extensive advice for journalists covering conflict zones. In June 2011 a section was added on preventing sexual assault, which includes suggested precautions as well as links to additional resources. While the site acknowledges that women are the most likely targets of these attacks, it emphasizes that men are potential victims as well, and includes recommendations for how news institutions can better support journalists in dangerous climates.

<http://cpj.org/reports/2003/02/journalist-safety-guide.php>

Lauren Wolfe. Q&A: NYT's Lynsey Addario on Libya Sexual Assault. April 4, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: In this interview, Lynsey Addario and her colleague Stephen Farrell describe the sexual assault they endured in Libya. Addario makes the point that it is important to call attention to the abuses specifically directed at women, but argues that what she went through was no worse than the violence aimed at her male colleagues. This raises an interesting question for discussion, especially since Farrell, too, was abused sexually on that occasion, but his assault received much less press attention.

<http://cpj.org/blog/2011/04/qa-nyts-lynsey-addario-on-libya-sexual-assault.php>

Harriet Sherwood. "Egypt Protests: Plea to Keep Women Reporters out of Cairo Withdrawn," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: This short article in the *Guardian* provides an excellent overview of the current debate about sending women into conflict areas. After several brutal sexual assaults of female reporters in Tahrir Square in 2011, Reporters without Borders issued a warning to news organizations not to send female reporters to Egypt until the situation calmed. They revised the statement in the wake of voluble criticism, especially from female journalists who argued it undermined years of struggle for equal treatment. The article presents arguments for and against limiting women's assignments, and also illustrates a difficult question at the core of the case: whether discussing sexual harassment as a gender-specific problem may hurt female journalists more than it helps them.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/25/egypt-protests-reporters-women-safety>

Lauren Wolfe. "The Silencing Crime: Sexual Violence and Journalists," Special Report. The Committee to Protect Journalists. June 7, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: This special report, discussed in the case and commissioned by the Committee to Protect Journalists in the wake of the Lara Logan assault, provides excellent background for instructors preparing to teach this case. Based on interviews with 27 local journalists and 25 international journalists, the report identifies three main types of abuse: "targeted sexual violation of specific journalists, often in reprisal for their work; mob-related sexual violence against journalists covering public events; and sexual abuse of journalists in detention or captivity." It further notes that although many journalists were eager to discuss their experiences for this report, in many cases cultural and professional stigmas had prevented their doing so previously.

<http://cpj.org/reports/2011/06/silencing-crime-sexual-violence-journalists.php>