

Reporting FROM THE front line



South African-born international war correspondent Paula Slier reports from some of the world's most dangerous war zones. One of the few female journalists given access to Hamas smuggling tunnels in 2008, she's currently the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today TV (RT), and heads up her own media production company.

Ever since I can remember, I've loved writing and was good at it. I was always writing for school and university publications. At Wits I landed a few gigs on TV. There was no journalism programme at that time, and I majored in philosophy and international relations. At that stage I was thinking of becoming a lawyer – I've always been interested in humanitarian law.

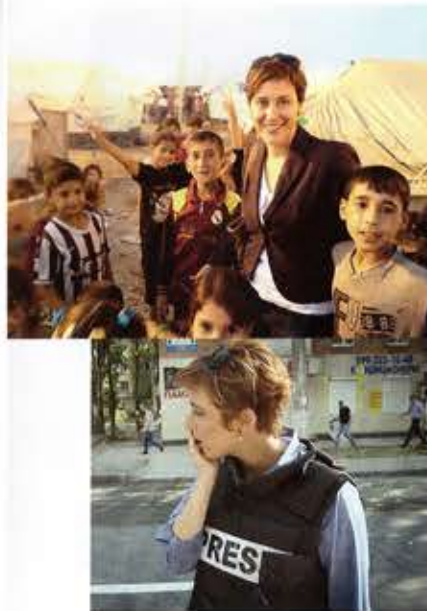
After obtaining my degree, I freelanced for a while for SABC's Good Morning South Africa, the long-running breakfast show. One day they called me in and said: "You work so hard even though we don't pay you. Imagine how hard you'll work if we do!" That was one of my breaks. I worked for several years for the SABC as a senior journalist and newsreader. I also anchored live events – which I absolutely loved.

I learned the ins and outs of television by nagging the experienced cameramen at the SABC to teach me what they could – broadcasting is not a profession learnt through textbooks and lectures. Still, years later, I decided to go back to Wits to formally study journalism, as a way of filling in the gaps of my on-the-ground experience. It was also a way to reflect on the profession and ask the kind of philosophical questions you don't really have time to ponder in the field.

I was hungry for international experience, so even though I loved my time at the SABC, I felt the Middle East was the right place to go to cut my teeth on frontline reporting. I had only just resigned from the

SABC when reports came through that the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, was dying. It was 2004 and I took a huge risk; I used all my savings to buy a digital broadcast camera and a ticket for Tel Aviv. I got one of the SABC cameramen to give me a quick lesson – he taught me how to switch my camera on and off and to use the autofocus button – and I was on my way! I managed to line up some freelance projects during the nine-hour flight over, and it paid off – I was in the right place at the right time and I still work as a stringer for *Eyewitness News*, a gig I picked up on that story.

I was still waiting for my big break when Russia Today posted an announcement that they were look-



The more I travel and the more suffering I see, the more I appreciate the old saying, 'home is where the heart is'.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHATTING TO IRAQI KURDISH CHILDREN IN REFUGEE CAMPS; INTERVIEWING VICTIMS AT A BOMB-SITE IN EGYPT; IN EAST UKRAINE – THERE ARE THINGS EVEN TOUGH REPORTERS CAN'T BEAR TO LOOK AT...

ing for a Middle East correspondent to report for an English-speaking audience. I knew nothing about Russia. In the job interview I told them I had a grandmother from Russia – I thought this might help. They of course replied: "Everyone has a grandmother from Russia." Almost immediately, tensions between Israel and Lebanon escalated to full-scale war, and next thing I knew, I was on the battlefield dodging missiles and forging a career as a war correspondent.

Nothing quite beats the thrill of reporting live on television and sometimes having to wing it when everything goes wrong. A few years ago I was in the middle of a live report on the Israel-Gaza border when a Qassam rocket exploded a few hundred metres behind me. It was a little frightening, to be honest, but on air I didn't even blink.

I love the volatile, exciting, always-changing, dangerous nature of the business. I can be eating dinner one moment and the very next be on my way to report on a story thousands of miles away. Often the first thing I do when landing in a new country is send my clothes for laundry because I didn't have time to wash them before I left. Last year I reported in Ukraine for several months and within days of coming home I got called out again, to Iraq, Syria and Turkey – to follow Iraqi Kurdish resistance fighters combating ISIS.

Before every assignment in a conflict zone, I have to mentally prepare myself. Because I do this so often, it's now almost become

my natural state – I hardly ever let my guard down any more. Last year there was one particularly dangerous moment in Ilovaysk, East Ukraine; we were following resistance fighters and our convoy was ambushed by the Ukrainian military. We had to take cover in the grass, lying in the field, with the sound of bullets whizzing right overhead. I was afraid to move. It felt like a movie.

I cannot imagine living a different lifestyle. As incredibly perilous as it is, I also feel I'm part of something bigger; I'm taking part in history-defining moments all across the globe. I feel incredibly privileged – one day I will be able to say to my grandchildren: "I was there!" Inevitably, over time, the profession

changes you. I have learned to cope by sometimes closing off my emotions, especially when I'm in a conflict zone, so they don't become an impediment to my job. I do get afraid and I am very moved by some of the horror stories I am told and often witness.

Probably the most heartbreaking story from all the areas I covered last year was the reports of sexual slavery happening in ISIS-occupied territories. Women of the minority Yazidi faith (a religion that dates back to the 11th century) are being sold as slaves for prices that range from one to four hundred dollars. They are forced to wear their prices on their clothes at local markets. Girls as young as three or four years old are being raped and kept in barracks for ISIS fighters on the front line. It is horrific and the world is not doing nearly enough. I feel driven to tell these kinds of stories – if I can move at least one person, then I'm doing my job.

I never planned on becoming a businesswoman, and even though it brings along several extra responsibilities, it is a role I have learnt to cherish, especially when managing a team I like and can trust. It came about as an opportunity RT presented me with. When I became their Middle East Bureau Chief, I needed an organisation – a crew I could trust for all my operations in the area. I started small, managing only a couple of people – usually a producer and camera operator, but as we kept expanding our focus further into the Middle East, so our business grew bigger. It's hard to define my identity at the moment; I wear two hats – that of RT's Middle East Bureau Chief/war correspondent, and that of Newshound's CEO and Founder – alternating between them every moment of my life.



ABOVE & INSET: REPORTING FROM THE TURKEY-SYRIA BORDER, IN FRONT OF (AT THE TIME) BESIEGED KOBANI

Being a woman has never held me back. If anything, it's the opposite...

I try to come home at least once a year, but I'm aiming for more. I love coming back to Joburg – just sitting at a Mugg & Bean with my parents or my best friend Samantha is priceless. The more I travel and the more suffering I see, the more I appreciate the old saying, 'home is where the heart is'.

Being a woman has never held me back. If anything, it's the opposite – I get to sit with jihadist fighters in Afghanistan and sip coffee, and then I go to the kitchen where their wives and daughters sit huddled and chat with them. I am not sure a male colleague can do that. The reactions I get in certain countries are just priceless. I remember when I was embedded with the US army in Afghanistan. We were on patrol and had paused for some air outside a school when a group of children came running towards us. Of course they gasped when I took off my helmet – the sight of a female journalist in a male-dominated region is not just uncommon, it's unimaginable. One of the children actually worked up the courage to come and ask me: "Ma'am, does your husband know you've left the house?"

I have to put up with the 'political warriors' and trolls of the Internet. The latest figures point to 72.5 percent of online harassment targeting women – many of whom are journalists. I have received the most horrific death threats on social media – especially from those wishing to dismiss my Ukrainian reports. But I've also been awarded for my work, including being named a finalist in the TEFI (an annual award given in the Russian TV industry) broadcasting awards for my reporting in Libya. I hope I inspire other women to take a gamble on life and not be afraid.

What keeps me going is a genuine love for my profession. Ever since I started forging my path towards this career, I have become convinced that this is my destiny, what I was meant to do, how I am supposed to leave my mark on this world. Each of us has her path – and this I believe is mine. People often tell me I'm brave, but I don't think I necessarily am. I get to go to war zones, and then leave. The real brave people are those who never can; people who were born there and have nowhere else to go. ♣