Sally Sara on assignment in Afghanistan. Upon her return to Australia, she suffered post-traumatic stress disorder.

WOMEN ON THE FRONT LINE

More than 160 reporters have died in war zones in the past five years. As we prepare for Anzac Day, the latest generation of Australian women correspondents is closer to war's brutal reality than ever before, writes **Susan Horsburgh**.

STATISTICS COMPILED FROM CPJ.ORG. PHOTOGRAPH SUPPLIED BY THE ABC.

AS AN AFGHAN woman struggled through an excruciating labour, the midwives slapped her pregnant belly and berated her for being fat and taking too long. This was Kabul's main maternity hospital – presumably the gold standard for women's healthcare in Afghanistan – and they were beating a mother while she was giving birth. ABC correspondent Sally Sara remembers looking on, appalled.

"You felt like jumping in and intervening," says Sally, who spent 2011 based in Kabul, "and she had a baby girl who was in such a bad state." Such is the pressure to have a boy that Afghan mothers often don't even bother to name their newborn daughters for days.

"There is just so little value placed on women … they would say, 'I wish I'd never been born at all'," says Sally, 45. "You can think of combat, but it's a slow, awful war every day [in Afghanistan]. You don't need to fire bullets to injure women."

In decades gone by, war reporting was mostly the domain of mythical macho correspondents, all about combat and body counts – and anything else was trivialised as "the woman's angle". Modern coverage of conflict, however, tends to take in the broader human cost of war – the plight of refugees and the devastating impact on civilians. There are more women than ever reporting from combat zones and lighter, more compact camera equipment has made it easier for them to work solo.

No longer is their competence on the front line up for question. "Women were once derided for being too emotional to be effective war reporters," according to Jeannine Baker, author of *Australian Women War Reporters*, "but today many foreign correspondents see an emotional response to war and suffering as not only valid, but essential for good storytelling."

Jerusalem-based reporter Irris Makler has covered the Middle East for TV, radio and online news services for 15 years. She describes her work as exciting and addictive, but says witnessing the horrors of war, such as women who have been raped or children disfigured by landmines, takes a toll. ➤





Above and right: Yalda Hakim in Sudan. Her own family fled from Afghanistan to Australia.

"You're not a man or one of their women – you're a third gender."
– Yalda Hakim

"Our job is to convey their stories to the world, and we become aware of this reservoir of pain and suffering," says Irris. "I need to step back every so often, or I can't keep going."

Irris will never forget the exhumation of mass graves in Hila in Iraq more than 10 years ago, when ordinary Iraqi Shias came to a spot and started digging, eventually unearthing more than 2000 bodies. The skeletons were laid in piles with any identification nearby, and women dressed in black walked among the bones, trying to find their sons and husbands.

Irris spoke to one man who had been shot into the mass grave, but hadn't died. "He described how he'd escaped from underneath the bodies of his fellow villagers and hidden injured in the river," says Irris. "The combination of the digging and his personal account was harrowing."

In 2009, Irris was hit in the head with a rock during riots in Jerusalem. Her jaw was broken in three places and she suffered extensive nerve damage. The injury changed her. "It robbed me of the illusion – delusion? – that as journalists we are invulnerable."

More cautious now, she has not covered the war in Syria. "Kidnap, rape and, of course, now beheading are real risks," she says. "But I do feel guilty about that. It's the biggest story in the Middle East and very few reporters go to cover it because it is so dangerous."



"Kidnap, rape and, of course, now beheading are real risks."
– Irris Makler

To get into Syria in 2012, Ruth Pollard had to trek over a mountain in the middle of the night, past Turkish border guards, through tank and sniper fire. She says the war there, which has claimed more than 250,000 lives, should haunt governments and people the world over.

"The loss of life is staggering, the level of destruction is difficult to describe," says the 45-year-old Beirut-based reporter. "People are fleeing with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. It's impossible not to be moved by that."

Covering an active conflict situation is relentless, says Ruth. There is little sleep or down-time. "You're working what feels like 24/7, taking huge personal risk … and making decisions about what road to go down, whether the ceasefire will hold." Good planning is essential. "Sometimes it's about managing to get enough petrol, crossing borders, sneaking through checkpoints," she says, "and by the end of the day, you're 20 hours into a 24-hour [news] cycle. It's more about endurance than courage."

Reporters have to be resourceful and willing to rough it. The ABC's Ginny Stein, who covered conflict around the world for 17 years, says the best way to explain war to an Australian audience is through human stories, and the only place to find them is at the coalface.

To cover East Timor, she moved into a hotel in Dili that had been all but destroyed by Indonesian forces. "For three months, I lived on a mat with a mosquito net," she says. "I had to scavenge for food for the first few days – but that's what the whole nation was doing."

Reporting recently on the South Sudanese civil war, London-based BBC correspondent Yalda Hakim was dropped into the jungle by the ➤

PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED.



Ruth Pollard (right) at a commemoration for murdered journalists in the Philippines.

World Food Program and spent 10 days living in tents with the locals. Three cameras failed in the 47-degree heat, so they had to film with iPhones until the batteries ran out. "Every day I'd go out with the women, picking grass to feed their children," says Yalda. "These people were starving to death … and I have a platform to give these women and children a voice."

In countries like South Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan, Yalda goes into the salons to meet the local women – something her male colleagues can't do. Thanks to her gender, she can tell the stories of these seemingly invisible women, and the local men often underestimate her. "You're not a man or one of their women – you're a third gender," she says, "so they give you access or they say too much."

When she interviews women in Afghanistan, there is a special resonance. "I often think, that could have been me," says Yalda, 32, who was just six months old when her family fled Afghanistan on horseback during the Soviet-Afghan War. "I was just a toddler when I came to Australia, but the story of my family's journey has been with me my entire life.

"Geopolitics and social justice issues have been massive in my household, so it's definitely part of who I am."

Her loved ones are supportive, but she admits, "I don't have the best work-life balance." Her BBC bosses expect her to fly to trouble spots with less than two hours' notice, and a Tuscan holiday with her husband was recently cut short after only 24 hours. "The job," she says, "comes first in many ways."



"I had to scavenge for food, but that's what the whole nation was doing."
– Ginny Stein

That could change if she has children, says Yalda, but women such as British Sky News correspondent Alex Crawford, a five-time Royal Television Society journalist of the year and mother of four, prove it can be done.

In the field, Yalda simply dismisses the danger, and it's not until she is back in London editing the footage that it hits her: she was actually on that front line or filming in secret Taliban territory.

Denial may be an effective strategy on the job, but it's not always sustainable in the long term. A few months after Sally Sara returned to Australia in 2012, she had a terrifying breakdown and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). "To get by [on the front line], you're constantly trying to put aside the fact that something could happen to you," says Sally.

"When you come home, for me, there was this absolute shock of understanding where I'd been and what I'd done."

The most distressing story she had covered took place in the combat hospital in Kandahar, Afghanistan. "One boy had lost all but one of his limbs and they couldn't save him," she recalls. "I saw the mortuary van pull up and they came down with a body bag. I was so horrified. Half a boy in that bag. There was no way I could film that."

Sally had done all the right things, including phone counselling, but everyone, she says, has a breaking point.

In fact, coming home can be harder than being at war. For Ginny Stein, who returned to Australia after a car crash in Kenya two years ago, the transition has been difficult. "The hardest thing is, people don't understand, and you have to accept that. Most people don't know where you have been or what you have seen." Petty talk about property prices can be irksome, and the interest in her war experiences ghoulish. "You can get annoyed by people saying, 'Tell me the scariest thing that's ever happened to you'," she says. "It feels like war-zone porn."

Ginny now reports on indigenous affairs for *7.30* and *Landline*, while Sally works on *Foreign Correspondent*, based in Sydney. Over the worst of her PTSD, Sally has no problem covering gang warfare in Chicago or landmine-clearing in Laos, but she knows her limits now. Syria, for example, is out of the question.

After the traumas of Afghanistan, where just being female can consign you to a life of despair, Sally takes delight in the little things: fresh vegetables, lunch with friends, knowing her neighbours. "I ran in the rain this morning," she says. "Just to be free and running outside and the joy of your body moving – I came back as high as a kite." ■

GETTY IMAGES. GINNY STEIN: PHOTOGRAPH SUPPLIED.