My role as a journalist is to share reality

Post conflict maternity: a sign of hope

During the 50 years of fighting in the jungle, FARC women were banned from having children. Those who could not avoid pregnancy were obliged to abort or abandon the baby. Since peace was signed, there has been a baby boom among the former female guerrillas.

Being Pregnant after FARC Child-bearing Ban
Nominated World Press Photo 2019 - Catalina Martin-Chico.

Paris based, Franco-Spanish photographer Catalina Martin-Chico works for numerous French and international publications. She has been documenting Yemen and the Middle East for ten years, has won the ICRC’s 2011 Humanitarian Visa d’Or and the Canon Female Photojournalist Award in 2017. This year, Martin-Chico was nominated for both the World Press Photo of the Year and the World Press Photo Contemporary Issues Story for her reportage (Re)Birth, on female former-members of FARC in Colombia.

She was at the opening of World Press Photo at the United Nations in Geneva, organised by the Dutch Mission, where I interviewed her.

How important are these nominations for you?

‘It’s like being nominated for the Palm d’Or and an Oscar at the same time. This is how I explain it to my friends, who are not into photography. The World Press Photo appreciated my story about former FARC women, pregnant or as mothers and not as sexy warriors. No spectacular photography with blood and gore but a story, an insight into their other lives. I truly believe in the value of slow journalism, and I’m honoured that the jury recognised and valued this in my work.’

What is slow journalism?

‘Underlying stories we cannot see at first sight. To cover these stories, I develop a genuine relationship with my subjects. They let me into their lives, I sleep at their homes. It takes months and months of preparation and photographing.

If we get only five days to document a story, we will only capture the idea we already have. But if we stay longer, we begin to appreciate the situation from another perspective and the reality may be completely different from what we originally thought. My role as a journalist is to share this reality and not the assumption of a story; an idea that conceived in an office in Paris or Amsterdam. Covering news stories is different. News stories are fast news, straight forward, like the Yemen war I covered. I didn’t know the peoples’ names. I was only present at a moment where human rights were abused and people suffered. The sight of injustice makes me feel useful because my photos can shock the world, I can influence public opinion.

‘Our weapon is the camera and our images are the medium to express and witness injustice.’

Catalina Martin-Chico

What is the role of a photojournalist, can they make a difference?

‘I feel we are the window to a world the public doesn’t see or gets access to. The people in my stories very often represent the dark side. They live in the shade and I put them in the spotlight. My aim is to show the total spectrum of grey in the world, not just the black and white. This can be difficult, people don’t
always want to see the grey. They want Instagram stories, fast, simple, good, bad, black, white.

I depicted the FARC guerrillas as human beings like you and me, as mothers with their babies. I try not to be judgemental. Half the population of Colombia might hate this story because I humanised the monsters.

Do you feel a responsibility here?

‘Of course! I often choose stories and attract attention because people need help. The communities I document are often abandoned, invisible, unreported. They sometimes ask me: ‘Please tell the world what is happening here!’ But I’ve also introduced myself by saying: ‘Nobody talks about you, but I want to talk about you’. It makes them happy - ‘You came from that far to tell our story?’

My reportage on the nomads of Iran was such a hidden story. Their numbers have been decimated, mainly by government policies, imposing a sedentary lifestyle. The world has forgotten them. It was my responsibility to make them visible.

Women seem to play a dominant role in your stories, is that a conscious choice?

‘In the Middle East it is an asset to be a female photographer, I can tell stories that men cannot. I can get close to these women, they let me in. I don’t necessarily focus on women but I give a voice to minorities and women often happen to be the minority within minorities. Take for example my FARC coverage. We know about the fifty years of guerrilla, of male and female fighters treated as equals. But they were not. Women fall pregnant and men don’t. Women had to sacrifice motherhood, abort their babies or abandon their newborns. I give these women a podium and their photos and stories travel the world with World Press Photo. We frequently text about a next exhibition and where they will feature. They love it and worry - ‘Oh no, but now everybody can see my belly!’

China, Iran, Yemen are countries where freedom of the press is limited. How difficult is it to do your job there?

‘Dictatorships are difficult to work in. One tries to be invisible and tell the story without being noticed. It can be frightening, not only because of the government’s dominant role but also the journalists’ vulnerability to kidnappings. For example in my case, by the tribes of Yemen or the armed groups of Colombia. There is a growing suspicion towards the press. Not only in these countries but also in France, the United States, globally. We live in an upside-down world. A world where we, journalists, have to fight so hard to report reality. It should be the other way around, we should be supported, stimulated to do this. This new reality makes it difficult to tell stories that really matter. And believe me, there are still a lot of stories to be told, everywhere.’

By Mandy Kleewein

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