



For over two decades, **Sally Armstrong**, an award-winning Canadian journalist and human rights activist, has reported on the realities of women in war zones. She spoke to Sheima Benembarek in Toronto.

Q *What led you to base your journalism career on the status of women and girls in conflict zones?*

A In 1992, I was in Sarajevo [Bosnia and Herzegovina] covering a story on the effects of war on children when I began to hear rumours about rape camps. I could not imagine that one side was gathering up the wives, the daughters, the mothers of their enemy and putting them in camps and gang-raping them. I had never heard of such a thing. I knew there was a story, but I was working for Homemakers magazine and the earliest I could race this headline story to press was in about three months. So I gathered names, anecdotes and mobile phone numbers. I went to a large news agency in Toronto, handed over the data and said, "Give this to one of your reporters. This is one heck of a story." I waited for weeks for the headline, but nothing. Seven weeks later, there was a four-line blurb in Newsweek magazine about it. I phoned the guy I gave the material to, and he said, "It's a good story, but I was on deadline and I forgot to assign it." I said, "Twenty-thousand women were gang-raped and you forgot?" And he said, "Oh, Sally, you're always on about women."

At that time in Sarajevo, everybody was there: CNN,

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the Guardian, BBC, CBC, the Globe. Everybody was there, but nobody was picking up that story. And I thought if no one else wants to do these stories, they're going to be my stories. And that's what I did.

Q *Your latest book, Ascent of Women: A New Age Is Dawning for Every Mother's Daughter, discusses a positive shift you noticed around 2010; can you explain this shift?*

A At first I thought it was wishful thinking on my part, but I did the research and found out I was right. I noticed a shift in the way women were speaking out about their own issues. Women in Africa said to me, "We have no right to say no to sex. If we don't form a group and take action against the impunity of men, we'll all be dead from AIDS." Women in Asia realized that with the rise of Islamism, they'd become the targets of their own religious extremists; they knew they had to form groups to protect themselves, and they did.

Women were forming groups, but that's not where the liftoff came from. It came from Facebook. It was the first time women around the world could speak to each other. And what a conversation they started to have. Women wearing the hijab found out that despite what the fundamentalists told them, women wearing jeans were not whores after all. And women wearing jeans found out that despite the assumptions they had, women wearing the hijab had plenty of excellent opinions. I dare say it was the worst day in the lives of misogynists and extremists, the day those women started to talk.

Q *How do you measure progress in this fight for equality?*

A Infant and maternal mortality rates have plummeted. We have huge numbers of girls in school who were never in school before. In Afghanistan, women refer to their illiteracy as being blind. I asked a woman, "Why do you call it being blind?" She said, "I couldn't read, so I couldn't see what was going on." In Kenya [in 2013], 160 little girls between the ages of three and 17 sued their government for failing to protect them from being raped — and won. This is a sign of

the times. We've always depended on public will and political will. But what's happening now, which is what I was able to measure, is personal will. For example, you have Malala [Yousafzai]'s story. There was no politician in Pakistan's Swat Valley saying girls have to go to school. There was no public protest about it. This was personal will. She said, "I'm going to school," they shot her, she recovered, she said, "I'm going back to school," and she started a movement.

The change in attitudes of people toward culture and religion is also measurable. I was the Taliban's worst nightmare, as you can imagine. They kept saying to me, "You have no business writing about our women — you're not from here, you're not part of our religion, you're not part of our culture." But what happened to the women of Afghanistan was not cultural, it was criminal, and now people say it. The atrocities haven't stopped, but the discussion has changed enormously. The changes are powerful, and they are happening all over the world.

Q *How have women and girls been affected during the ongoing crisis in Syria, especially with regard to rape as a war tactic?*

A Rape is a scourge that is as old as time, and rape increases in war. Someone asked me on the radio, "Why do men treat women like this?" I said, "Because they can." Rape was not [officially recognized as] a war crime until 1998. It was the women in Bosnia who went to the Hague and made rape a war crime. The idea of rape is so colossal, people prefer to look the other way than to admit that something terrible is going on. Rape in war is only new because now we are writing about it. These Syrian women are definitely experiencing rape, but perhaps even more so, they are experiencing violence. And we have to understand that about who is coming here, the kinds of needs they will have. Once people are safe, they can broaden and look after other parts of their lives.

Q *The recent tragic shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado speaks to the pervasive fear in society*


of allowing women to decide what happens to their own bodies. Where do you think that fear comes from?

A Women know they're holding the biggest card of all. They're holding the reproductive card. You want babies? It's only through me that you're going to get them. So this creates some tension as soon as she is willing to speak back. Even though in many places abortion is legal, you still have this clutch of men saying "You may not." But women cannot disrupt that alone. I was in Cairo doing a story on the women of the Arab Spring, and I went to a women's equality-seeking centre called Nazra for Feminist Studies. Half of the people there were young men. When I asked what they were doing there, the women said, "We'll never get to the finish line unless we walk together."

Q *What can Canadians do to help women and girls experiencing violence in politically fractured countries?*

A First of all, this country is not free of it. If there were over 1,200 missing Aboriginal men, we would have had an inquiry long ago. We have a polygamous cult in Bountiful, B.C., that we can't seem to shut down. The 30 percent statistic for violence against women is worldwide.

People don't realize how powerful their voices are. I admit I've wrecked a few dinner parties in my day, but when you speak up, you plant a seed. You don't have to scream; you don't have to burn a car or your bra. The more we say, "This is not okay with me," the more that becomes a country-wide protest, and the more our government knows we shouldn't be buying oil from someone that doesn't let a woman drive a car.

As for the women over there, what they need, besides financial support, is to know that we are cheering for them. Your voice is your most powerful tool. 

This interview has been condensed and edited.

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