

Let's talk about Gaza

An interview with a young photographer and writer who aims at inspiring others

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Asmaa Elkhaldi is a young woman that is about to finish her studies of architecture at the Islamic University of Gaza. For many, this is already enough ambition but Asmaa aims higher. In her free time, she works as a freelance photographer and writer. Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip talked to Asmaa about her work, her aim of inspiring others and her sources of hope and good energy while living in a restrictive and closed environment.



You told me before that you write to inspire. Can you tell me more about this?

Actually my first experience in the writing field was with a project called 'We are not numbers'. It is directed by 'Euro-Med Monitor for Human Rights'. The whole project aimed at telling the Western world about life in Gaza, especially after the three wars. The majority of the involved writers write about their experiences of these wars. Some have lost their beloved ones; some have gotten their homes destroyed. So what you maybe notice now is that my presence in this project differs from the one of the other writers. "I write to inspire" means to me searching for pieces that talk about the beauty or the other face of Gaza. We live here so we are surviving. That is why there has to be a positive aspect to it. It is not only 100 per cent life under war. Still, we can't go to other places. Being in Gaza means that it is very important that you take control of your life. You control what to live for and what to see. Despite of the sudden attacks and escalations, we can focus on other things. This is what I consider my role in writing. I mainly wrote the four pieces for 'We are not numbers' to inspire people. Even though I mention the word struggle, it comes with hope and motivation. As I said before, I have had enough. Reliving the reality in art is a miserable thing for me. Let's write about something that makes us happy and gives hope for a better future. I wrote for example a piece about a horseback rider in Gaza. She faces struggles as well but she found herself in this sport. I also wrote about a graffiti artist who is living his dream designing a 20 meters mural in Gaza. I also made a story about holidays in Gaza, for example Christmas. I am a Muslim girl talking about a Christian holiday, which is very unusual. Yet, it was a way to express my opinion about this event. When I published this story, it was read a lot in the Western world. It even got republished on a website called Arab-America. I felt this story was very successful. I think that people always want something that is close to their own lives, close to their hearts. From this perspective, I start writing my stories, either with words or pictures.

You told me before that you want to tell the stories of female entrepreneurs. You made a project called ‘Groundbreaking Gazan Women’. Can you tell me more about this project?

‘Groundbreaking Gazan Women’ was launched in 2015. Actually, the aim of this project is to show women that challenge the status quo in the same geographic location. They are living under the same restrictions and every woman is facing a particular challenge. What links all the stories is that each of these women is living in the same place facing many different obstacles but at the end they achieve success in their own way. Showing their success was the main objective of this project. I also wanted to inspire all women in the world to just go for it and realize their dreams. So far, I made three stories about different characters. One of them is a horseback rider who finds her fulfillment in this particular hobby. The second one was about the only female bus driver in Gaza. She was just amazing. Talking with her was a lot of fun. The third story was about a female blacksmith. When I investigated her story, it was actually very sad and shocking. Yet, when I wrote the story I tried to focus on the positive aspect of it. Every story I make, I feel it with all my emotions and my whole body. This is, what I think, storytelling is all about. You live different lives, different stories. Two of these stories will be published on the website of World Press Photo. I am now trying to connect with other women to find stories about female entrepreneurs. Being in such a position in the Gaza Strip is really challenging so I am excited to investigate and discover more. I want to do another three or four stories. I don’t only want to publish these stories in newspapers and websites but also pitch them to women’s organizations to show what is happening on the ground.

Your motto is “Whatever it takes, grab your dream”. What is your dream?

Living for only one dream is a bit naïve I think. That is why I have many dreams. By now, I discovered that I have something bigger to achieve. I would like to be a change maker. I want to inspire women, make them believe in themselves and motivate them to challenge the obstacles that are surrounding them. I would like to see women proving it to themselves, not to anyone else. I also dream about traveling freely whenever and wherever I want. I have big plans but I also live in a small box that is called the Gaza Strip. Things always change because change is the only constant. Under such circumstances, nothing will last forever. When I finish my studies, I hope that I will be able to use my skills to fulfill my vision in art.

I see you as a young woman that is full of hope. But then, you are living in Gaza, a place where everything makes you feel hopeless and desperate. From where do you get all this hope?

Any human being has to experience highs and lows in life. In such a place like Gaza, you expect to experience lows at any moment. Yet, it depends on the response to this environment. I try to avoid very negative people because this usually affects me a lot. For me, it is also about creating safe spaces where I can dream and find good energy.

Links:

<http://www.asmaaelkhaldi.com/>

http://wearenotnumbers.org/home/Contributor/Asmaa_Elkhaldi

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/academy/workshops/visual-storytelling-photography-workshop>