

Remarks for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
By Sulome Anderson

First, I'd like to thank the Committee to Protect Journalists for asking me to speak, and the members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for their interest in this important topic.

"What's it like being a female journalist in the Middle East?" is one of the most common questions I'm asked, and my least favorite. I dislike it because I'm lucky enough to have been raised by parents who taught me I could do anything a man can do, and because it so often reflects well-meaning ignorance about the region. Yes, many parts of the Middle East are restrictive and oppressive towards women. Yes, there are places I simply cannot go and people I am unable to speak with because I'm not a man.

But I've personally managed to interview ISIS members, Hezbollah fighters, military leaders and all manner of people in situations that may seem entirely inaccessible to females from the perspective of someone unfamiliar with the Middle East. The truth is, women actually have a few advantages over men in this context. Not only are we less threatening to sources, we're able to draw aside the curtain of cultural taboo and access other women who would not feel comfortable sharing their personal stories and traumas with male journalists. I believe that's part of the reason why so much excellent reporting out of conflict zones right now is by female correspondents. Their work helps shape public perception of these conflicts, and they give us a crucial window into the pressing issues women face in every country.

But the fact is that women in journalism face unique risks, and that's something none of us can afford to forget. Conflict reporting itself obviously carries a fair amount of danger regardless of gender; something I am acutely aware of. In March 1985, my father Terry Anderson was Middle East bureau chief of the Associated Press, covering the civil war in Lebanon, where I am now partly based. Three months before I was born, he was kidnapped by an Islamist militia and held in captivity for almost seven years. That event shaped the course of my life and career. The stories of his brutal treatment at the hands of his captors have haunted me since childhood.

What particularly disturbs me about that scenario is the knowledge that, as horrific as my father's captivity was, it pales in comparison to what I, or any female journalist, would experience in the same situation. And yet, women all over the world risk that outcome every day to report important stories, and dozens are killed or imprisoned every year. I've been fortunate enough to escape sexual assault while doing my job— at least twice, quite narrowly—but many female correspondents are not so lucky. In an industry that frowns upon perceived weakness, it is particularly difficult for women who have had such experiences to process them, heal, and continue to work.

The death of Kim Wall underscores the risks faced even by women reporting stories that appear not to be life threatening at first glance. It should also sound the alarm for an industry struggling to find a business model that provides adequate support and compensation for all journalists, especially freelancers, but particularly women. In addition to experiencing the same gender pay gap of most industries, when a reporter is being paid \$250 a story—the going freelance rate for many prominent American outlets—she can't afford someone qualified to keep her safe in dangerous situations. So there needs to be an effort on the part of the media to establish satisfactory industry standards, especially for independent journalists.

At a government level, funding for programs that provide grants to women in journalism would be extremely helpful. But more generally, there needs to be an effort not to undermine and disparage the job that so many female correspondents risk their lives and bodies for. “Fake News” has become a rallying cry for dictators across the globe seeking to escape unflattering news coverage—many of who are currently jailing or otherwise silencing women working to expose their corruption. The American government should appreciate the perils faced by these brave reporters and empower them instead of making their jobs more dangerous.

Thank you for your time.