

Why I never underestimate

THE POWER OF *lipstick*

She went on the journey of a lifetime, interviewing women all around the world about their very different lives. But what **ZAINAB SALBI** found is that some things cross all boundaries – friendship, family and the fact that, even in a war zone, make-up really matters

The photographer set up his make-shift studio, using just white fabric as a background, a flash and his expensive camera. As a top fashion photographer, he was used to shooting stars like Lady Gaga in LA hotels, rather than portraying a survivor in the front room of her home in war-scarred Bosnia. But the less than glamorous setting didn't matter to the woman in her 50s who was posing. As soon as she'd finished, she came skipping towards me like a teenager, her long hair bouncing around her shoulders and eyes sparkling. 'I have lived through war and lost my home, I have seen hunger and poverty,' she said, 'But today, I am a fashion model!'

As she posed for pictures, it was glorious to see Muska, who'd survived a massacre in the Bosnian war, being treated not as a mourner or a refugee, but as a beautiful woman – perhaps for the first time in her life.

I'd been working with women who had faced

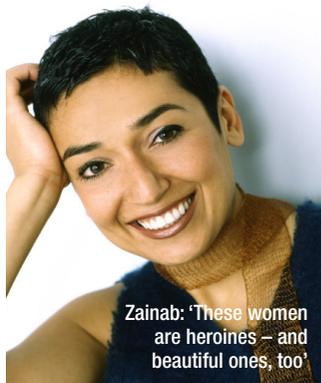


Women around the world share the same values



Check out her great boots!





Zainab: 'These women are heroines – and beautiful ones, too'

[CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE] poverty, rape and homelessness for almost 20 years, but even now I was learning new lessons. I used to think that caring about how I looked was superficial and a waste of time, a kind of weakness. Throughout my 20s I wore only black suits because I wanted to be indistinguishable from men so I could be taken seriously. But then I started interviewing and photographing female victims of war or injustice for my new book, *You Knew Me You Would Care*. Every woman I met taught me that beauty really matters. It's their weapon.

I met one person who told me that she wears lipstick every time she leaves her home, because 'if a sniper thinks about killing me, he must know he is killing a beautiful woman'. I thought I had to fight for equality like a warrior, but it's through beauty that these women combat injustice, by embracing it in all senses, from wearing colourful headscarves to singing and dancing. They taught me how to shape my eyebrows and apply make-up, and which clothes suit me. Now I'm in my 40s, and I've finally embraced

my love of fashion and make-up. They showed me that in the depths of darkness, you can come back through beauty.

The more women I worked with, the more I realised the survivors I know are very different from those gaunt, frail, weeping victims we see on the news. They are fighters, they are strong and courageous, stylish and fun, and they laugh a lot more than they cry. And they spend a lot of time talking about make-up! I feel just as comfortable chatting with them in a conflict zone as I do with my girlfriends in a café at home in New York.

They have the same independent spirit of women I knew as a child growing up in a loving, middle-class family in Iraq. One of my aunts was headmistress of a school, another was one of the first women in Iraq to own and run her own factory. My mother kept our family going while my father was working or on the front line of the Iran-Iraq war. She made us go to school, fed us, and played puppet shows with us in the middle of the raids and sirens.

While my upbringing was relatively privileged, I heard about the poverty, violence and injustice from my school friends who saw it every day. My father was the private pilot of Saddam Hussein, so I knew I couldn't speak out about it or my family would be killed. Despite that oppression, my mother was a very forward-thinking woman, and she taught me I should always be independent and strong. But aged 20, I was sent to America for an arranged marriage that went horribly wrong. I stayed for three horrific months. During that time my sense of self-worth was destroyed, and I began to think all my ambitions and plans would come to nothing. Still, when I finally built up the confidence to leave, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life. Not long after that, I founded a charity – Women for Women International – and much later I started working on the book. I wanted to show the women I'd met as they truly are – giving them a voice to tell their own

happy endings not as victims, but as heroines – and beautiful ones, too.

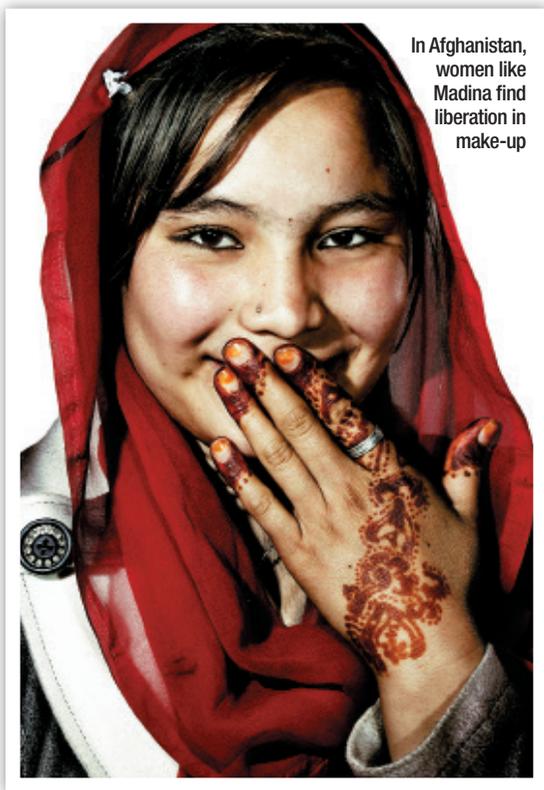
Together the photographer Rennio Maifredi and I travelled to Eastern Europe, Africa and Afghanistan. The women we met had encountered unimaginable horror, but they had come through it with the courage and determination to build a successful future for themselves and their children. I thought that I could try to help them, by giving them a voice. But I never expected just how much they would help me.

They taught me how to let go of

'EVERY WOMAN I MET TAUGHT ME BEAUTY REALLY MATTERS'

anger. When I founded Women for Women International, I was angry at injustice. At that time, I clung on to my rage as my driving force and anchor. However, on this trip I met women who taught me that it is also exhausting and depleting. I finally saw that only with love, not anger, as my motivator, would I ever feel at peace.

And as for peace, I learnt a very valuable lesson from a Congolese woman called Nabintu, who has endured unimaginable terror. She said, 'Peace is inside our hearts. No one can give it to us, and no one can take it away from us.' That was very important for me – before, if I felt unhappy, I blamed other people or the world for conspiring against me, but Nabintu taught me that I am responsible for my own sense of inner peace. I've been to countless yoga lessons to try and grasp what Nabintu knew instinctively. She inspired me to make some big changes in my life. I used to see taking care of myself as a luxury, something to be sacrificed for work and left until I have a day off. But now I see everything that brings me happiness as a non-negotiable aspect of my life, as well as working hard. Whether it's spending time with people I love, having a massage or dressing up to go out, I never let these things slip down my to-do list. We can't care for other people if we don't also care for ourselves. □



In Afghanistan, women like Madina find liberation in make-up

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