

National Geographic Showcases its Women Photographers

By Francyne Harrigan

WASHINGTON—The mosaic of images ranging from the beauty of a landscape to the devastation of war, gives no clue to the uniqueness of the National Geographic Society's latest publication.

Whether it is the dramatic photo of a newly circumcised bride in Kenya, the breathtaking ice landscape of Antarctica or the war-torn images of Kosovo, one element binds these striking images together: they were all taken by women photographers.

Perhaps more surprising is that *Women Photographers at National Geographic*, the recently published book, is the first time in the magazine's history that it has devoted a book exclusively to its women photographers.

From the pioneering images of Eliza Scidmore, who provided photographs for her article 'Young Japan' in the July 1914 issue of the magazine, to innovative work by Annie Griffiths Belt, who disguised herself as a man to capture a religious ceremony closed to women in Israel, the National Geographic Society highlights more than 40 distinguished visual artists.

Tracing the adventures and accomplishments of four generations of

women, *Women Photographers* is as much a history of women's challenges in the workplace in the 20th century, as it is a study of inspiring and quality photography.

Beginning with the first photographs published in the early 1900s, the pages of the National Geographic magazine contain the work of only a handful of women. Today just 14 of 70 photographers who regularly shoot for the magazine are women. Of the seven photographers on the magazine who hold the prized slots as staff photographers, only one is a woman.

"To be a woman photographer for National Geographic is to complicate the complicated," explains Cathy Newman, senior staff writer at the magazine and author of *Women Photographers*.

Chronicling the evolving history of these photographers at the highly respected publication, Newman reveals the advantages and difficulties of being a woman photographer.

"Not only does a woman face the same dangers and adversities on assignment as her male colleagues, she often has to juggle additional commitments to home, spouse and children."

In addition to the usual perils and discomforts confronted by every professional traveller, states Newman, women also meet obstacles unique to their sex. Gender can play an important role when it comes to access, as demonstrated by one woman photographer who was forced to give up an assignment after being harassed on the streets for trying to take pictures in a country where women stay behind closed doors.

As Newman points out though, being a woman is not without its rewards. "Sometimes doors open more readily to women, giving her access to closed cultures and customs, such as *purdah* in India or the *geisha* in Japan, that a man would never see."

This raises one of the central themes of the exhibit: what role does gender play in photography?

"Photographs taken by women have a unique perspective on human interaction," states Tipper Gore in the foreword to the book. "What is revealed through the feminine eye," adds Gore, a former news photographer for a major Tennessee daily, "is an artful unveiling of the spirit and a deeper understanding of the human experience."

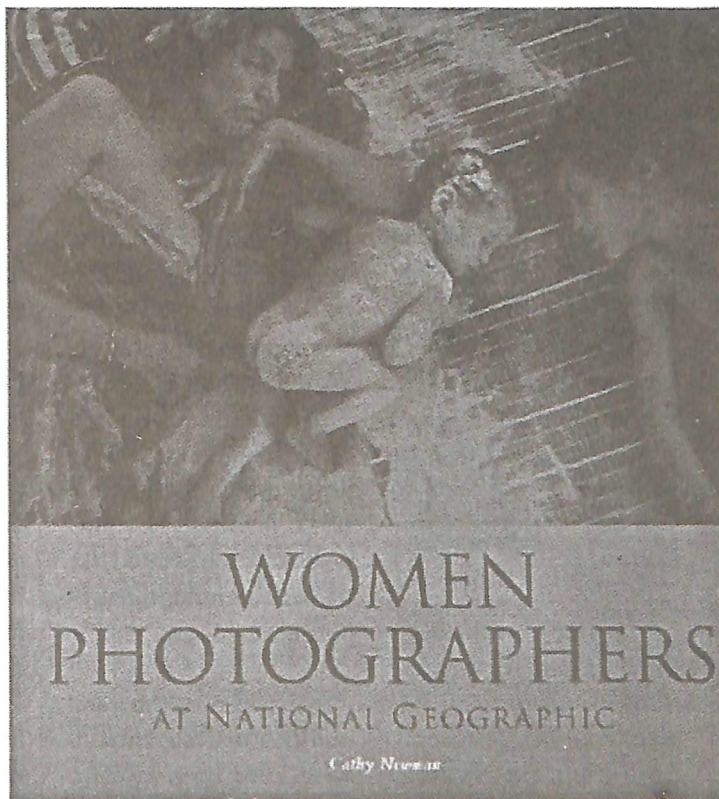
This is powerfully revealed in Lyn Johnson's intimate photo of a dying woman (Montana, 1993). As a friend weeps in anguish at her bedside, a harpist plays in the background, easing the passage into death.

Art historian Naomi Rosenblum, in her introduction to the book, further explores whether women see things differently from their male counterparts.

"If the eye that frames a picture is as distinctive as the voice of a writer's pen," writes Rosenblum, "then the photographer as a woman, and her experience and identity as a person, relates to the pictures she creates."

Photographer Maggie Steber, however, observes the downside of being seen through a gender lens: "I sometimes hear myself referred to as a 'great woman photographer.' Would you ever hear anyone referred to as a 'great man photographer'?"

Regardless of whether gender can be or should be identified in visual art, clear themes—including health, human rights, and the intimacy of special relationships—emerge from the collection. Amongst them, the most prevailing images are of women.



Photographer Mary Ellen Mark (Sydney, Australia 1983) catches the despondency of an Aboriginal woman whose abuse-blackened eye dominates the frame. In an equally moving picture, the despair felt by refugees is caught by the camera of Alexandra Boulat (Kosovo-Macedonia border, 2000), as a woman collapses in a field from sheer exhaustion.

In a career spanning more than two decades at National Geographic, staff photographer Jodi Cobb's most powerful work has often been of women. From her coverage of women in Saudi Arabia to her exploration of the lives of Japanese *geishas*, Cobb provides windows into lives often inacces-

sible to the outside world.

The dark eyes of a Saudi girl (Saudi Arabia, 1987) framed by a black veiled headdress become symbolic of the closed lives of Islamic women. She will remain covered to all men except those in her family. Similarly, the simplicity of the shot of stark red lips (Japan, 1995) sealed to the world, draws us into the mysterious life of the Japanese *geisha*.

"The two cultures are different as can be," writes Cobb, "but in their souls, women want the same things: dignity, respect, love, freedom."

In the final analysis, the collection of striking and frequently profound photographs is genderless in its celebration of the visual art of photography and its power to display humanity in all its variety.

The National Geographic Society, founded in 1888 for the increase and diffusion of geographic knowledge, is the world's largest non-profit scientific and educational organisation.

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