

# BEHIND WORDS AND SILENCES

ANNIE SAKKAB SHARES THE STORIES OF SYRIAN REFUGEES WITH SENSITIVITY AND RESPECT

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

Jordanian-Canadian photographer Annie Sakkab focuses her lens on women because she hopes to raise awareness about the issues they face. Lately, she's concerned herself with the struggle of Syrian refugees seeking shelter in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

I've never felt drawn to stories that weren't women's stories," declares Annie Sakkab, who was born in Amman, Jordan. "I come from a place where women's rights are largely ignored and where violence against women is endemic. As a child, I remember reading a story in the newspaper about a girl being misdiagnosed as pregnant, whose parents, upon hearing the news, threw acid in her face. I also lost a childhood friend at 13, to early marriage."

These experiences, and others of the same kind, stayed with her and informed how she relates to the women she meets in the field. When they share how they've been hurt and discriminated against, and how they continued on, she can relate. These stories not only rouse her empathy and anger; they also stir up personal memories. Thanks to that understanding, she's uniquely positioned to grasp the hidden meaning behind their words and their silences.

Last November, Annie Sakkab, who immigrated to Canada in 2008, traveled to the Middle East

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with the intention of turning her lens on the growing numbers of Syrians who seek shelter in Jordan, and whose plight is being eclipsed in mainstream media by the reports of those who make it to Europe. Spending several months in the field researching the issue, she learned about the informal refugee camps where tents have been set up on private land outside the compounds run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

There refugees often offer to work on the farm in lieu of rent. In doing so, though they relinquish access to most of the services provided by international NGOs, they gain freedom and a sense of ownership over their fate. When visiting these settlements, she naturally struck up conversations with the women. "They shared their stories and opened their hearts readily. They've experienced a lot of loss and trauma. Some lost their husbands and their eldest children, so they have to look after themselves and their younger kids alone," says the photojournalist, who also hints at the difficulty of doing so in a country that affords women little rights and freedoms.

In addition to their daily concerns, these women also must manage and handle the whole gamut of child-rearing responsibilities—maintaining their hygiene while they have their periods, carrying a pregnancy to term, giving birth, breastfeeding and caring for their children. Sakkab was particularly taken by a young mother who was



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six months pregnant with her second child: “She couldn’t eat the right food, didn’t have access

to healthcare or other services, and had to work to provide for her family.” The bump is barely

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noticeable in the photos taken at the beginning of her third trimester.



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In these circumstances, Sakkab doesn’t take the act of photographing lightly. Of utmost importance is the need to make sure that those in her images understand her intentions and the potential implications of being photographed. “Some of the refugees in Jordan still feel unsafe. They don’t know if they’re staying in the country or returning to Syria, in which case, you don’t want to be known as someone who fled. Same goes for the ones who still have family on the other side of the border. You don’t want to put them in harm’s way. And, those in the unofficial



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camps, who are working illegally, they could be deported,” explains Sakkab.

Given the potential repercussions, she takes the issue of consent to heart, asking for it repeatedly. In one instance, she witnessed a woman—the one who was six months pregnant and had by then given birth—openly breastfeeding in front of ten people including two men. It took the photographer by surprise because of how taboo that natural act is seen worldwide. At the time, she

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didn't take a picture, but the next day, when the woman once again casually took her breast out of her garb to offer it to her baby, she asked for the permission to photograph, which was granted without hesitation. Still, once the portrait was made, Annie Sakkab inquired again. “I asked her: ‘Is it okay for you to breastfeed in front of other people inside your home?’ She answered: ‘Yes.’ Then I wondered: ‘Is it okay for you to breastfeed in front of men other than your husband?’ Again, she said: ‘Yes.’ In the end, I got the consent from her, from her

husband, and from the mother of her husband. As much as I feel like it should be first and foremost the woman's decision, I also don't want to endanger her if her husband or family finds out later on.” In other situations, sometimes people make it clear that they don't want to have their likeness seen far and wide. When that happens, even if it's the most striking photograph she's made, Sakkab respects those wishes because, for her, being a photographer is all about relating to and respecting those on the other side of her lens. ■