

The Role of Gender in Photographic Works: Do Men and Women Capture Different Photographs?

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Abstract: Gender usually plays a significant role in the works of photographers and causes men and women to take different photographs. Nowadays, photographs and photography have a crucial and pivotal status in societies. The majority of the events and accidents unfolding in various parts of the world are communicated to the people via newspapers, magazines, internet and television, and undoubtedly, photographs play an imperative role in all of these media. It is not surprising that photography is called 'the eyes of modernity' and imagining the world without photographs is very difficult. Additionally, one of the topics that researchers have paid a lot of attention to in the past century is the subject of gender, and the similarities and differences between men and women. Female photographers have always been an irrefutable part of the history of photography, and today, we are seeing a dramatic growth in their presence and success in different genres of photography. Hence, this question is raised that 'do men and women capture different photographs?' Some valuable researches have been carried out in the past decades on the subject of gender and also the differences between how men and women see, but only a few have focused on the differences between male and female photographers. In this article, the hypothesis was accepted by assessing the following aspects: studying the differences between men's and women's point of gaze (where one is looking); examining the differences between male and female photographer's emotions; studying and comparing the works of various photographers; examining the working conditions of photographers; reviewing the different reactions a single subject might have towards a male or female photographer; and finally, studying some of the interviews and memoirs of successful photographers.

Generally female photographers are more drawn to story, narrative and emotion, but many males are also drawn to such subjects; male photographers are

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more drawn to technical and action-filled subjects, but many females are also drawn to such subjects. Hence, for each stereotype regarding photographs and gender, numerous photographers or photographs can be found that challenge or defy it. Men and women capture different photographs but this should not give us the excuse to impose our stereotypes and clichés on a particular photographer, whether male or female.

Keywords: Photo, Men, Women, Gender, Eye Tracking

Introduction

Nowadays, photographs and photography have a crucial and pivotal status. The majority of the events and accidents unfolding in various parts of the world are communicated to the people via newspapers, magazines, internet and television, and undoubtedly, photographs play an imperative role in all of these media. For example, a major part of an Iranian teenager's perception and idea of the Vietnam War is formed by the pictures that he or she has seen from that event. Furthermore, since in the minds of ordinary people, a photograph is considered very convincing and seemingly trustworthy, and is also incorrectly treated as innocent and unbiased, its effectiveness and advantage is multiplied. In the words of David Bate (2009, 17) "photographs give the illusion of a transparent access to 'reality' as the real 'language' of photography". It is not surprising that photography is called 'the eyes of modernity' and imagining the world without photographs is very difficult. In the past two decades and after the spread of digital photography and mobile phone cameras, the general public has more than ever photographed everyday events, street life, trips, and tragic accidents, and some of them are newsworthy images.

On the one hand, one of the topics that researchers - psychologists, sociologists and physicians in particular - have paid a lot of attention to in the past century is the subject of gender, women's rights, and also the similarities and differences between men and women. In Iran, some fruitful researches and also initiatives have been carried out, especially after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. On the other hand, women photographers have always been an irrefutable part of the history of photography, and in recent years, we are witnessing a steady rise in their presence and success in different genres of photography, such as photojournalism, fine art,

architecture, portrait, commercial, industrial, and even war photography. In the field of art and photography education around the world, the number of female students is also constantly growing; for example, at prestigious universities such as The Rochester Institute of Technology and The Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, women now outnumber men (Mitchell, 2009). Hence, this question is raised that 'do men and women capture different photographs?'

This article's hypothesis is as follows: Gender usually plays a significant role in the works of photographers and causes men and women to take different photographs.

The research subject of gender is an important, endless and multidimensional subject, and when the difference between men and women is examined, the research becomes even more interesting; especially when this comparison is performed in an ever-growing field such as photography. Some valuable researches have been carried out in the past few decades on the subject of gender and also the differences between men and women's point of gaze (where one is looking), but only a few have focused on the differences between male and female photographers. In this article, first a review of literature will be presented; subsequently, in the research statement's section, a description of how the research is carried out will be presented and some of the differences between male and female photographers, such as their point of gaze (where one is looking) and their working conditions will be discussed. In the discussion section, a handful of examples that challenge the hypothesis will be analyzed; finally, the article's hypothesis is tested against the findings of the research and the conclusions are stated.

Literature Review

A myriad of researches have been carried out in the field of gender and a limited number of those studies focused on the differences between the sexes, but only a few have concentrated on the role of gender in the works of photographers.

Vassalo et al. (2009) study the difference between how men and women orient their visual attention to the image of various portraiture containing a particular static emotional facial expression, using a technology by the name of eye tracking (the method which human's eyes look at a scene / image by recording and analyzing the eye movements). In this study, 50 healthy participants (23 male and 27 female) view a series of six universal facial expressions, while the participants' eye

movements are recorded. Subsequently, their accuracy and reaction time in correctly identifying the expressions are measured. This study concludes that in identifying the expressions correctly, there is no difference between men and women; however, women recognize this expression significantly faster than men. Furthermore, for the first time this study proves that even though both sexes look more frequently and spend most of their time at the subjects' eye region, men spend more time looking at the subjects' mouth and nose.

Anderson et al.(2012) examines sex differences in virtual navigation using eye tracking and concludes that men and women see in dissimilar ways and focus on different parts during navigation.

Among the relevant literatures that have been reviewed by the author, Mitchell (2009) concentrates more on the differences between male and female photographers. This research relies on studying the works of male and female photographers, interviewing critics and well-known photographers, as well referring to a couple of eye tracking studies. Mitchell concludes that most men, compared to women, capture different photographs. One of the shortcomings of the aforementioned research is that it does not sufficiently address the working environment of photographers and how it affects men and women in various cultures.

Research Statement

The International Center of Photography in New York held an exhibit of photos of the Spanish Civil war by Robert Capa and Gerda Taro in 2008. The two were partners and colleagues. Capa became one of the most renowned war photographers of the 20th century while Taro (one of the first active female war photographers) died at the age of 26 in 1937. According to associate curator Kristen Lubben: "We had Taro upstairs and Capa downstairs. It was an interesting test case for some people - do men and women take different pictures? As I gave tours of the exhibition, I was constantly asked about it" (ibid). Thus, the present research is also interesting for the general public. It is worth noting that in this section, arguments and examples that support the hypothesis will be presented, whereas in the next section (discussion), examples or so called exceptions that challenge or even reject the hypothesis will be reviewed and discussed.

Eye Tracking

The first question that comes to mind is that do men and women physically look at images or scenes differently? The answer to this question is to a large extent positive. Because of the technological advancements in recent decades in the field of human vision and eye tracking, we can support this claim. Eye Tracking is the method of recording and analyzing either the point of gaze (where one is looking) or the motion of an eye relative to the head. Some of the applications of eye tracking are in the fields of psychology, medicine, neurobiology, product design, cognitive studies and driving. When looking at a subject, our eyes scan it very quickly and jump from one point of interest to another. Each of these rapid jumps, known as saccades, lasts between 20 and 200 milliseconds, and the majority of humans are unaware of their pattern of looking. Scientists have proven that different people have different points of gaze and look at things differently, or in other words have different scan paths, which depend on the viewer's characteristics and also the subject's features. For example, when looking at a photograph of a landscape, if a human being is also within the frames of the photograph, most viewers first look at that person. Or if they are faced with a portrait, the majority of the viewers look at the subject's eyes. Some elements or features attract the viewer's attention because over time, the viewer has learnt to obtain a lot of information from these elements; such as, eyes, mouth, writings, billboards, traffic signs and so on. In some cases, these elements are also somehow related to the viewer's emotions, needs, or wishes, i.e., cuteness, fear, fetish, desired objects, and religious elements and symbols. Thus, the pattern a viewer looks at a scene / image and the corresponding reaction depends on many factors, such as the viewer's characteristics, interests, feelings, beliefs and also education. For example, if a writing - even a very small one - is present in a scene or photograph, the first or second point that most people look at is the writing (Freeman, 2007, p. 60); however, an illiterate who has had a different experience during his life, usually will not pay much attention to the writing and will subconsciously have a different scan path.

Now the question raised is that 'does gender also play a role in eye tracking?' An article in the Online Journalism Review in March of 2007 attracted a lot of attention when it reported an eye tracking study that examined where viewers looked at on a particular online news page. When viewing a human figure, females usu-

ally looked at the face whereas males glanced at the face and also at the sexual parts of the body (Mitchell, 2009). As mentioned in the literature review section, Anderson et al. (2009) using eye tracking concluded that men and women see in dissimilar ways and have different scan paths. Vassalo et al. (2009) studied the difference between how men and women orient their visual attention to the image of various portraiture containing a particular static emotional facial expression. The participants viewed a series of universal facial expressions, while the participants' eye movements were recorded using eye tracking. This study concluded that in correctly identifying the expressions, there is no difference between men and women; however, women recognize this expression significantly faster than men. Furthermore, it concluded that even though both sexes look more frequently and spend most of their time at the subjects' eye region, men, compared to women, spend more time looking at the subjects' mouth and nose.

In the year 2000, Life Science Magazine published a very interesting Japanese eye tracking study that found a striking difference between the point of gaze of men and women. In this study, "when presented with an image, women looked for longer periods of time at fewer places, while men's eyes moved more frequently over the image" (Mitchell, 2009). This result may confirm the common belief that women are more detail oriented, lingering patiently over a scene, as opposed to men that quickly scan the image. It is interesting to note that according to some scientists, even though such difference in visual behavior is demonstrated in a number of studies, the biological or physical reason that creates such difference is unknown.

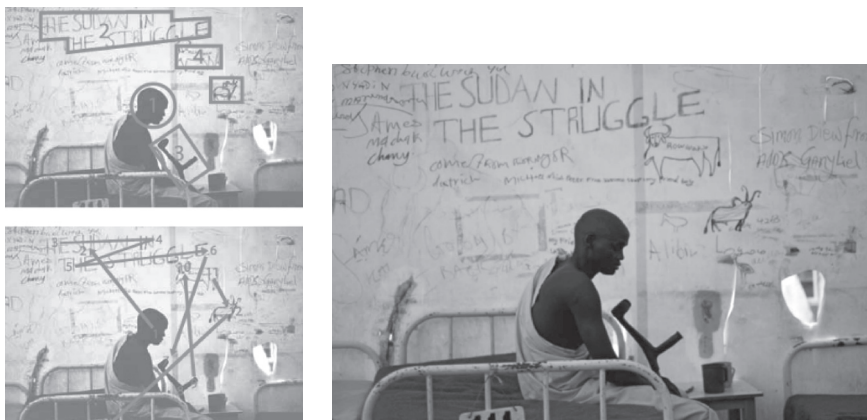


Image 1– The numbers and arrows on the left show a human's typical scan path when viewing the image on the right (Freeman, 2007, 60)

Emotions and Feelings

Scholars and scientists have sometimes opposing views regarding the differences between the two sexes, particularly on the subject of whether women are more emotional than men, or how different do women react to emotional subject matter; however, it should be noted that when talking about a male or female photographer, considering merely sex does not give us the whole story and the focus should be on gender, since in addition to the biological differences, it also takes into account cultural, geographical, social, and religious factors that have affected him or her since childhood. For example, such difference is exaggerated in Eastern and Muslim countries such as Iran, which have very different upbringings and cultural norms compared to the West. Volume seven of the book series *Imposed War, Defence VS. Aggression* - one of the most famous Iran-Iraq war photo books published in Iran – exclusively covers photographs of Iranian women in the Iran-Iraq war. Despite the fact that the book is comprised of a diverse number of photos that clearly demonstrate the active and heroic role that Iranian women played in the war, ranging from military training and logistics to nursing and assisting the war victims, it starts with this sentence:

“God created two kinds of every living being. In creating human beings, God gifted the women with delicacy and mercy, feeling and art of loving, patience and kindness, tenderness and goodness. And these became the material with which women were created”

(*Imposed War*, 2006,4).

If a similar book was going to be published in the West and started with the sentence above, some of the Western feminists would object or even protest against such remarks, but sentences similar to the above quotation face little or no objection in the Iranian society.

Emphasizing the emotional aspects of women or stating that women are more emotional than men is sometimes considered a taboo in academic circles of the West; however, some of the Westerners themselves do implicitly suggest that women are more attracted to emotional subjects than men. For example, Reid Callanan, director of the Santa Fe Workshops, states that more women are drawn to fine-art photography, “that’s a realm of emotion and memory. Those parts of ourselves are more easily accessible by women” (in Mitchell, 2009). Furthermore, Vassalo et al.

(2009) also proved that women identify a particular static emotional facial expression significantly faster than men. Thus, this talent might lead to photographs that convey a lot of emotions, because before capturing an image, it first has to be anticipated, created or imagined in the mind of the photographer.

According to Dennis Keeley, chair of photography and imaging at the Art Center, his male students usually have a more technical approach, and pay more attention to photographic equipment and the like. Or Kathleen Hennessy, director of photography at the San Francisco Chronicle, states that during the process of photo selection "men really talked about the physical dimensions of the photograph, the technical aspects, and the composition... and the women tended to talk about the story and the emotion and the impact"(in Mitchell, 2009).

When a successful and effective photographer reviews his past photographic works, he or she usually realizes that most of his works are rooted in his or her dreams, memories, subconscious, spontaneous or intuitive discoveries, and past experiences. Hence, even the most advanced eye tracking methods cannot take into account all of the aforementioned factors that a photographer brings to a scene. In other words, my photographs implicitly state who I am and how I experience the world. Therefore, if one believes that men and women experience the world differently, then consequently, they capture different kinds of photographs.

War photography is generally known as a 'masculine' genre; nonetheless, numerous female photographers have also been active and successful in this category; but the women that photographed wars, mostly covered subjects such as women and children in the war, the adverse effects of war on family, and refugees. Such tendency is observable in the photographs of Ms. Laleh Sherkat, a renowned and brave female photographer that covered parts of the Iran-Iraq war. Deborah Copaken Kogan – American photographer, author and journalist whose photos have been published in Newsweek, Times, and New York Times – writes in his book (Kogan, 2002): "While I was taking the photos, I didn't think I had a female take on war. I thought I was taking the same pictures as the guy standing next to me, [but] when I put together my slide carousel I noticed that they were, for lack of a better word, female. Meaning a lot of what I was fascinated by in war were the children, the women: How does war affect family life? How does war affect the psyche of a child?" (Deborah Copakenkogan, 2014).



Image 2- Photographer: Laleh Sherkat, Iran-Iraq war (Imposed War, 2006, 50)

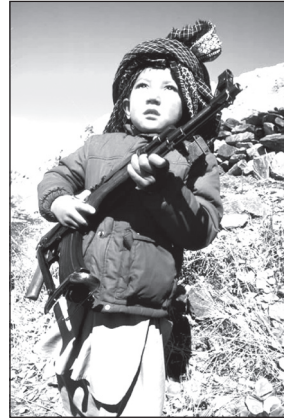


Image 3- Photographer: Deborah Kogan, War orphan, Afghanistan, 1989 (Deborah-copakenkogan, 2014)

However, this question comes to mind that is it only because of the fact that women are more drawn to emotions, family and children, that they capture such subjects; or their working conditions also exaggerate the way they photograph, which brings us to the next section.

Working Conditions

One of the aspects that has to be considered when examining the differences between men and women's photographs, is the dissimilar working conditions of male and female photographers in different societies. For example, a female photographer's access to refugee camps and entering the houses of families during war is unrivaled when compared to males, especially in traditional and Eastern societies. On the contrary, a women's presence in the firing line during war can raise concerns on both sides. In addition to war photography, such concerns and differences are also present in other genres of photography; obviously, these concerns take various forms in different cultures. For example, photographing children in Western societies has its own challenges and concerns, especially when the photographer is male. The authors have had some experience photographing in both Eastern and Western societies, and it seems that the concern and skepticism that Easterners – Muslim countries in particular– have towards a stranger photographing their wife or sister, Westerners have towards someone photographing their child; but

when it comes to photographing their wife or sister, Westerners react in a relatively relaxed manner. David DuChemin – contemporary photographer of international and humanitarian projects and author of famous photography books– who has had extensive experience photographing various cultures, in his book titled *Within the Frame: The Journey of Photographic Vision*, states:

“In developing world, parents are no less protective of their children [compared to West] but they tend to be less paranoid, which gives photographers greater latitude and responsibility” (DuChemin, 2009, 123).

Similarly, in Eastern societies such as Iran, especially in traditional communities, the difference in the working conditions between the sexes is conspicuous. On the one hand, photographing Iranian female villagers and entering their traditional houses is challenging for men and requires delicacy and tact. Of course, some of the Iranian photographers, namely, Nasrollah Kasraian and Nicol Faridani overcame these challenges with traits such as politeness, determination, patience, and delicacy. On the other hand, photographing some of the religious events and rituals that are performed mainly by men, are challenging for female photographers and may upset or even infuriate the religious participants. Thus, an Iranian woman might be just as interested as men in capturing a particular religious ceremony; but because of segregation, and cultural and religious norms, she may not succeed in making such a photograph. Therefore, irrespective of the reasons, it causes men and women to capture different photographs.



Image 4- Photographer: Sadegh Mousavi, Religious prayers during Ashura, Saari, Iran



Image 5 - Photographer: Sadegh Mousavi, Villager moving a leather bottle, Chahar Mahal Bakhtiari, Iran, 2014

Subject's Reactions towards a Photographer

Obviously, a photograph is not captured in vacuum. The gender of the photographer usually plays an important role in the final image, since subjects react differently to men and women. This phenomena is not related to the photographer's perception of the scene, nonetheless, it can significantly affect the resulting photograph. Many fashion photographers assert that female models react differently towards male or female photographers. Similarly, in traditional societies, the reaction of a female villager towards a male or female photographer is different, and is in accordance with the cultural and religious norms of that society. In image 5 – captured in a distant and small village in Chahar Mahal Bakhtiyari province of Iran—in order to lighten the atmosphere, the male photographer starts a friendly conversation with the subject (villager) and makes a joke right before pressing the shutter, then the villager starts laughing, but because she sees herself in front of a strange man and not just a camera, her laughter is combined with shyness, and then she starts to blush. Such a reaction would have been implausible if the photographer was female.

Discussion

The arguments and examples that were presented in the previous section are generally true for most male and female photographers; however, for each of them, a particular photograph or photographer can be mentioned that challenges that argument. For instance, Laleh Sherkat whose photograph was presented in Image 2, also has 'masculine' photos of military training and combats during the Iran-Iraq war. Conversely, some of the male photographers that photographed the Iran-Iraq war extensively i.e., Sasan Moayedi, Ali Fereydooni, Saeed Sadeghi, and Mohammad Farnood, in addition to capturing numerous compelling 'masculine' photographs, they have also created



Image 6- Photographer: Sasan Moayedi, Iran-Iraq War (Imposed War, 1989, 55)

a number of delicate and emotional photographs that cover subjects such as family, war orphans, and refugees.

Deborah Kogan, the photographer whose photograph of a war orphan was

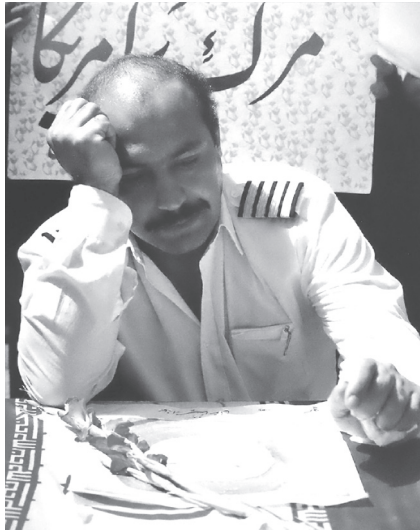


Image 7 - Photographer: Mohammad Farnood, Iran-Iraq War (Imposed War, 1989, 143)



Image 8- Photographer: Saeed Sadeghi, A mother and son saying goodbye during the Iran-Iraq War

presented in image 3 has also captured the image below. Taking into account how difficult it is for a woman to photograph radical Islamists and traditional Afghani villagers during war, it becomes very difficult to guess that the photographer of the image below is woman.

Another renowned photographer whose works defy the classical stereotypes of 'female style of photography' is Margaret Bourke-White. Her photographs were truly unique and compelling during the



Image 9 - Photographer: Deborah Copaken Kogan, Villagers and Mujahedeen fighters with their weapons, Sanglakh, Afghanistan, 1989 (Mitchell, 2009)

mid-twentieth century, a time when professional photography was male dominated. Her photos of war, architecture, and journalism were published in famous magazines and newspapers of that time, such as the first cover of Life.



Image 10 - Photographer: Margaret Bourke-White, Head of North Korean soldier held by a South Korean, 1952

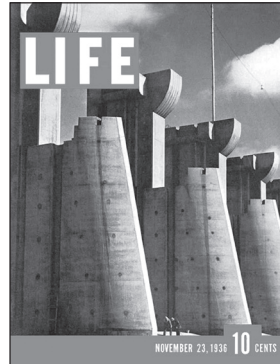


Image 11- Photographer: Margaret Bourke-White, Fort Peck Dam (first cover of Life magazine), America, 1936

As stated in the research statement section of the article, Robert Capa and Gerda Taro both photographed the Spanish Civil war; however, Taro also made a series of morgue photos that are more brutal than most of Capa's photos from the Spanish Civil war, challenging the article's hypothesis. Two more examples of such an exception are also shown below.



Image 12 – Photographer: Gerda Taro, Spanish Civil war, two republican soldiers carrying the dead body of their friend



Image 13 - Photographer: Robert Capa, Captured German soldiers, D day, WWII, June 1944

Steve McCurry, the famous national geographic shooter and veteran war photographer, believes that men and women do not take different kinds of photographs; but he does admit that war, acts of aggression and violence usually attract men (in Mitchell, 2009).

The examples presented in this section challenge or even contradict the hypothesis and the arguments stated in the previous section; thus, it can be concluded that men and women capture different photographs, but this should not give us the excuse to impose our stereotypes and clichés regarding photographs and gender, on a particular photographer (whether male or female), especially before seeing all of his or her works.

One of the aspects that can further substantiate the hypothesis is performing extensive eye tracking for male and female photographers; especially simulating scenarios and scenes that photographers typically encounter during shooting, but this is beyond the scope of this article and is an interesting subject for other academics to pursue.

Conclusion

The hypothesis mentioned in the introduction of this article was accepted by assessing the following aspects: studying the differences between men's and women's point of gaze (where one is looking); examining the differences between male and female photographer's emotions; studying and comparing the works of various photographers; examining the working conditions of photographers; reviewing the different reactions a single subject might have towards a male or female photographer, and thus, its effect on the final photograph; and finally, studying some of the interviews and memoirs of successful photographers. Thus, gender usually plays a significant role in the works of photographers and causes men and women to take different photographs; however, predicting this difference in the outcome, i.e., the final image, is perplexing and difficult.

A series of internal and external factors and multiple reactions are involved in making a picture, thus, reducing the process of making a photograph to one thing, even an important factor such as gender, is a reduction. It is worth noting that special attention should be given to the word 'usually' in the hypothesis, since numerous examples come to mind that reject or challenge the above claim. In

general, it can be concluded that female photographers are more drawn to story, narrative and emotion, but many males are also drawn to such subjects; male photographers are more drawn to technical and action-filled subjects, but many females are also drawn to such subjects. Hence, for each stereotype regarding photographs and gender, numerous photographers or photographs can be found that challenge or defy it. One of the applications of this research is to understand new aspects regarding how men and women see and also photograph. Furthermore, since the hypothesis of the research was proven for most photographers, one can also take into consideration the issue of gender when choosing a photographer for a particular assignment, for instance, photographing war orphans.

An effective and great photo is taken by a great photographer, regardless of being male or female, and numerous men and women have existed in the history of photography that have captured timeless photographs. In the words of Pulitzer-Prize winning San Francisco Chronicle photojournalist Deanne Fitzmaurice: "whether you're a man or a woman, you need a certain set of traits - such as compassion, patience, and perseverance - to build a relationship with a subject and craft a long-term story" (ibid). The goal is to make compelling, effective, and unique photographs that are not confined by the photographer.

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