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better mother”



Award-winning
journalist and
mother of four
tells it like it is

BY CAMILLA RANKIN

Being a mother can be tough. Being a working mother can be even tougher. Add the Taliban, some pro-Gaddafi protestors and a few bullets, and suddenly being a working mother becomes a whole lot tougher. Alex Crawford is Sky News' Johannesburg-based special correspondent. She has covered war zones and trouble spots from India to Libya and has been honoured with top awards – most recently an OBE for her outstanding coverage of the 2011 Arab Spring from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain. She is also the mother of four children. Alex shares with *Your Baby* how she has negotiated her way through breastfeeding, birthdays, militants, bullets... and puppies.

Judgement call

During my career as a journalist, I have been arrested, detained, interrogated and faced live bullets, tear-gassing, rubber bullets, mortar shells and a lot of judgement for being a mother and placing myself in these situations. I am told how irresponsible I am and asked what would happen to my children if something happened to me.

What makes me angry is that these remarks are only directed at me: a woman journalist. I was doing an online chat with a colleague, Stuart Ramsay, and not one of these questions were asked of him – a father to three children. It is interesting that most of the criticism came from women too – motherhood is extremely competitive, I find.

Even on the school run there is such an “us and them” divide between working and stay-at-home mothers. I think a kind of mutual jealousy exists there too – some mothers give up careers to have their children and long for that life again, while the working moms constantly feel guilty that they are not being “perfect mothers”.

Through a women's eyes

Interestingly, the fact that I am a woman and have four children has earned me a lot of respect in some surprising places. I



On the frontline: Alex Crawford reporting live from Green Square in Libya

remember an African woman opening up to me: “I thought white women were too concerned about their stomachs to have so many children!”

As a woman I seek out different stories without realising it – these are just the stories I want to tell, the ones for which I have particular empathy. I remember describing the stories I was looking for to a fixer in Afghanistan: ones about sexual slavery, prostitution, and he looked at me shaking his head and said, “So stories about women and children then?”

I also get access to areas and people that male journalists may not – other women, especially Muslim women, but men too, perhaps because they are not threatened by me. An Afghan man – a militant leader – kept thanking me for coming and listening to their side of the story. “Not even our own women come here,” he said. So it is a win-win for me.

Keeping it together

We are a big busy family; my children are Nat (16), Frankie (14), Maddy (12) and Flo (9). Our equilibrium is maintained by Rick, my husband. Quite frankly I wouldn't be able to do this without him, my friends and Frankie's long lists. She once presented me with a very detailed list for the day: 7:05am wake-up, 7:15am drink tea, 7:30am shower... and got quite upset when I asked her what would happen if we missed a minute. It is understandable

that she is so driven to be organised – no-one else in the family is – and this is how she makes sense of a life that is constantly changing.

Every working mother knows that you need at least two, if not layers of, friends whom you can call on in an emergency, and who keep you grounded, prop you up when you are down and slap you down when you are getting too big for your boots. Thankfully I have those. Also, here in South Africa we have developed a relationship with two taxi drivers that help to fetch and carry the children.

The challenges change

The challenges of having a very young family are very different to having a family with teenagers. When they're younger, they are so demanding physically – breastfeeding, lack of sleep... We were in and out of Nat's bedroom three or four

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real-life

times a night for the first four years of his life – he only slept through when we put him in a room with his sister. I breastfed each of my children for over a year – which was really tough, especially after I went back to work. I always found leaving my babies and going back to work really hard. In the months leading up to going back, I expressed furiously in an attempt to stock up the fridge with breastmilk. Once, soon after returning to work, I went on a four-day trip to Sweden and was struggling to pump my way through the trip. I came home with enormous, tight breasts, and I was sure I would not be able to feed, but somehow we carried on. I would work 12-hour shifts and would express in the loo at work and then leave the bottles in the office fridge. I saw a man once put some of the milk into his coffee, and when I eventually told him, he was nearly sick on the spot!

As they grow into teenagers they become more emotionally needy. They want to discuss life with you, need you to be a part of their lives but actively push you away from other parts – being a parent is a continual learning experience. For my girls especially, as they become young women, get their first periods, first boyfriends, first heartbreaks, they want to share it with me, and yes I feel guilty that I am not always there to hear about it. Rick is very pragmatic and does not flinch at adding tampons or bras to the shopping list, even if the girls roll their eyes at him. But in my darkest moments I console myself thinking how wonderfully independent they are, how at ease with

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Just another day in the office: [Alex on the beat in Libya](#)

people from a huge array of religions, cultures and ages they are and how many languages – including Arabic – they can speak, although growing up they fought me tooth and nail about how much these qualities will benefit them in their lives.

Relative truths

Part of the emotional neediness that older children have is for you to become their moral compass in a way, and as we all know, the truth is complicated – especially in war zones. The other day Flo asked if I had ever been to jail and was horrified when I told her I had. She immediately asked, “Did you kill someone, mommy?” It is so black and white for children, so explaining the gray becomes really hard.

Emotional blackmail

When you have a child the scales really fall from your eyes. I don't think you really know love, real love, until you have had a child. This feeling is impossible to explain to someone who does not have any. I always feel like I am letting my children down in some way or another, and they are constantly reminding me of this: “You had better not miss my birthday this year, because you missed the last two, you know,” they'll say, or “Well, you wouldn't know, would you? You weren't here.” But then, which teenager doesn't use that tactic?

Flo will say just about anything to try to get me to stay: “You said you loved me. I am so lonely when you're gone. I know what will make me feel better: puppies.” So of course I got her puppies!

Frankie, is no longer sad when I leave, just angry. But a friend said, “My 14-year-old is always angry with me, and I am a stay-at-home mother. Teenagers are just angry.” That put it all into perspective.

Award-winning mother

I still can't quite believe that I've been honoured with an OBE. When I heard I told one of my fellow Sky reporters, “I can't believe this is not a prank!” Of the awards that I have won, I am particularly proud of those that recognise women, as I think they act as inspiration for many girls, especially my own. My children are excited about the awards, but for them it is tinged – it is just more time that I am away from them.

When I was nominated for an Emmy, they thought it was really cool that I'd have to go to New York to get it, then Maddy discovered that it was over her birthday. I told her that I wouldn't go if she didn't want me to, to which Frankie said, “She doesn't mean it, you know!” I did go; Maddy let me, and of course I bought my way out of the guilt with bags of stuff from Abercrombie & Fitch! I'm constantly trying to be a better mother, while also trying to be a better journalist. I'm constantly torn. ●