

women at war

GATHERING FORCE
SUPPORTERS OF THE
REVOLUTION GATHER
AT THE CENTER OF
BENHAZI ON JUNE 16.
ALL PHOTOGRAPHS
BY FRANCO PAGETTI.



MARCHING TO FREEDOM

The Libyan revolution has been largely powered by the nation's extraordinary women. **Janine di Giovanni** travels to a country on the cusp of a new beginning.

The drive from Cairo to Benghazi, the rebel stronghold in eastern Libya, is long and arduous, nearly sixteen hours through barren desert. At the border, while you wait in the unbearable heat for the painfully slow passport and document checks, the sounds of African music drift up from the impromptu refugee camp set up in the no-man's-land between Egypt and Libya. It houses displaced migrant workers who fled when fighting broke out in February. Now they can neither get into Egypt nor return to Libya, a disconcerting reminder of how pervasively the conflict in the region affects lives.

It's the end of June, four months since the Libyan revolution started, and I have come to the shadow of a new country—the Libyan Republic—one that has been carved out of Qaddafi's old Libya. There is even a new flag, painted on walls and flying everywhere—red, green, and black, resurrected from the time of Libya's King Idris, who ruled before Qaddafi, and replacing Qaddafi's flag, a block of solid green.

To the naked eye Libya looks like a wasted and undeveloped land, scattered with meager shops, gas stations, and depressed towns. In fact, with its wealth of oil, it is one of the richest nations on the continent; Qaddafi once boasted that he was the “king of kings of Africa.”

When we finally reach Benghazi, it is dusty and hot, but everywhere there is a sense of excitement, of newness. “Welcome to free Libya,” the hotel clerk says as I hand over my passport.

During the night I wake to hear shooting in the streets, but the war has moved west from Benghazi to Misrata and to towns southwest of Tripoli. It's

the endgame for Qaddafi, who has ruled for 42 years since seizing power in a bloodless coup in 1969. In Tripoli, farther up the Mediterranean coast, his country is still called the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, but Benghazi is a new frontier.

I have come to Libya to meet some of the women who have—to an exceptional degree among the recent uprisings in the Middle East—powered this revolution, which began here in Benghazi. Women have always played a large role in Libyan society, which has for the past four decades been run on a mix of principles of socialism, dictatorship, and Sharia law. Bolstering Libya's low standard of living by bringing a second income into their families, women can often be seen in traditional men's jobs such as medicine and engineering, for which they study hard in school, competing openly with boys. Although not allowed to testify in criminal court, they drive at night unaccompanied and preside over matriarchal families. When the revolution came, they sprang into action, not just inspiring it but making it happen. *women at war >43*

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SISTERHOOD

ALONG WITH HER SISTER IMAN, SALWA BUGAIGHIS (ABOVE), A LAWYER, IS A KEY REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVIST. TOP, A YOUNG PROTESTER.

On February 17's "Day of Rage" and those that followed, women were the marchers on the streets, but they were also organizing in the background: Impromptu

kitchens were created to make hot meals and sandwiches for the front-line fighters (more than 3,000 sandwiches a day were distributed to the soldiers). Women set up medical tents, and tended to the wounded.

The symbolic instigator of the revolution was the mother of Fatih Turbel, a human-rights lawyer who had been imprisoned for protesting Qaddafi's prison massacre of 1996. She sat in front of the Benghazi courthouse until he was released, mobilizing crowds to join her stoic, defiant response. The crowds, who were shot at by government forces, became angry demonstrators calling for an end to Qaddafi's rule. That fire soon spread throughout Libya.

The women I meet are all highly educated and blazing with the kind of energy that I have seen before when countries are born—Serbia after the fall of Milošević, for example. They may be feeling their way, but they are determined to push hard for a new Libya. After Qaddafi goes—at press time, many political analysts tell me this is imminent—there will be a new power base in Tripoli. But right now, the rebels have been putting together a short-term quasi-government, the Transitional National Council (TNC), in Benghazi, and this is where the exhilarating sense of creating a democracy can be felt. They are leading discussion groups and volunteering their time trying to share with others the concept of a democratic society, something that has been utterly foreign to their lives.

"We are like newborn babies," says one woman I meet marching in the crowd. "It's like we are just waking up." There are demonstrations every night in Benghazi, starting at sunset. Women gather and march toward the Corniche, the seaside road that flanks the Mediterranean. They range in age from teenagers to the elderly. For several days I fall into step with them and begin to hear their stories.

By the time they reach the Benghazi courthouse, in Al Mahkama Square, there is a party atmosphere. Vendors sell flags, key chains, T-shirts saying I LOVE LIBYA. Children wander through the streets eating candy. The walls are full of anti-Qaddafi and pro-NATO graffiti, painted with the flags of France, England, and the U.S.A., heralding the NATO bombing. The slogans are touching: WE HAVE A DREAM and THE PEOPLE OF LIBYA THANK YOU!

"Qaddafi closed our cinema!" shouts Ghalia Khalifa, a 28-year-old lawyer who is marching in the crowd with her cousin Elbtasm al-Arabi, 30, a pharmacist. Al-Arabi is more somber. "Forty-two years ago we lost all human rights," she says. "Today we are beginning to regain them."

I had come to Benghazi armed with a few names of "strong women" from a Libyan friend who had fled Tripoli on the first day of the bombing. What is interesting is the way one name leads to another, to a whole network of women who are trying to band together, meeting others they may not have known before, forming groups and uniting their skills.

I talk to Salwa Bugaighis, a lawyer, and her sister Iman, a professor of orthodontics, credited by many as being the real forces behind the movement. Along with a group of lawyers, the sisters decided to actively fuel the revolution by passing the first few days camped out in front of the courthouse. They had a visit from Qaddafi's son who tried to quiet them down, but they refused to negotiate.

"We told him, 'No way,'" says Salwa. "We were demanding an end to corruption, a new constitution—things to you in the West that are taken for granted."

The sisters have started impromptu workshops with an emphasis on empowering women. It sounds easier than it is—everything is complicated in eastern Libya, even making phone calls, since Qaddafi cut the main network during the first days of the revolution and everyone had to scramble to find cell phones. Being Libyans, and resourceful, they managed to get a new network going.

"That's pretty symbolic," one young Libyan said to me. "Qaddafi tried to cut our voices, but we found a way to keep talking."

When I ask people why, at this moment in history, they decided to break through and try to end Qaddafi's regime, they usually have the same answer. "People had had enough," says Lamia Abusedra, a 37-year-old systems engineer with a Ph.D. from Exeter University, who explains what it was like to live under total fear and repression. She leads me into the cool of her house, through a garden of lemon, grapefruit, and apple trees.

"It was the whole concept of not being allowed to have an opinion. People became numbed, dulled by it."

Lamia's response was to start by going out onto the square—she was there the first day with her mother and her 25-year-old sister. "I turned to see that *women at war* >444

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my mother had tears running down her cheeks," she recalls. "Having lived under Qaddafi for so long, she was sure we were all going to die for marching." Later her mother told her, "If I was going to die, at least I would die marching for freedom with my daughters."

Since then, Lamia has decided to push the revolution forward by using what she knows best: computers. "First I was marching, then I was helping distribute food to families in need," she explains. "Finally I realized we needed to get organized with all the NGOs and the people who needed help. What do I know how to do? Computers."

So she and a team set up a database for people directly affected by the events of the war—the missing, the wounded, those who had lost their homes. "It's a practical way of helping the country," she says, bringing out a dish of sweets from Tripoli and pouring fresh fruit punch.

Lamia was educated in the West—she grew up in Florida, the daughter of a professor, and went to university in Britain—and she has an easy confidence, something she says most Libyan women do not.

"This is one of the things we must work on," she says. "It's not that they are not educated; they are highly trained. It's just that they need the empowering skills to move forward."

It is easy to see why women here lack confidence. Qaddafi operated a murderous regime, and people who stepped out of line were brutally punished. One day I meet Mabruk Jibril, a 46-year-old mother of five who brings her teenage daughter, Jamila, and a group of her "lady friends," all eager to tell their own stories of political activism. Mabruk has been imprisoned four times, once with her five-month-old son. But she has no self-pity, only a burning desire now to be part of a new Libya. "Not one person in this circle," Mabruk says, pointing to each of the women, "has escaped Qaddafi's regime unscathed. Everyone has either lost a close family member or suffered somehow."

One by one, the women mention a name of someone close to them killed under Qaddafi. It's like a roll call of death.

"My uncle, martyred."

"My brother."

"My husband."

"My son was infected with HIV during that scam that Qaddafi engineered in Benghazi in the 1990s. . . ."

Mabruk's crime, when she was a young student of economics at the university in Benghazi in 1983, was to protest when her department moved to Tobruk, a city several hours away. It meant that she and others could not continue their

studies, as they couldn't afford to commute. It seemed a mild enough complaint. But in Benghazi in the 1980s, the most brutal time of repression, when people were actually hanged in the street as a symbol of exactly what Qaddafi would do if you did not conform, it carried a big risk.

Mabruk began organizing protests and was involved in the university's underground political movement. "There were only three of us—and one died," she says quietly. Then Qaddafi's men caught up with her. She was sent to Tripoli's notorious Black Horse prison and repeatedly tortured.

"It changed me, being in prison," she said, fingering her simple cotton skirt. "Before, I was not a nervous person—I believed in speaking out, even with the risk. But I think what Qaddafi tried to do was silence people. It worked."

In the new Libya, it is women like this who will finally be given a voice. But they are still scared in the same way people were scared in Baghdad after Saddam Hussein fell. Freedom is not yet tangible. After years of living under a shroud of quiet, they are reluctant to talk.

While the friends all sip tea and tell me their stories,

another woman, elderly and unknown to the group, comes and sits behind us. The group stiffens and begins to whisper. "We are still afraid," one explains. "Qaddafi had spies everywhere, and he still does."

Salma Abu Baker, M.D., is a 31-year-old thoracic surgeon and the only doctor in Libya to hold a particular advanced degree in chest surgery. She works at the Benghazi Medical Center, an extraordinary modern hospital packed with high-quality French medical equipment. Yet it is still unfinished, and the completed parts took 30 years to build under Qaddafi. (It is said it was originally used as a front to stockpile biological weapons in the basement.) A beautiful young woman, recently married to another doctor who is now very active on the TNC, Salma is an arresting mix of traditional and modern. Her hands are still hennaed from her wedding ceremony in April, and she wears a pink-and-blue head scarf, but when she puts on her green scrubs and operating mask and goes into her domain, she assumes a posture of pure authority.

"My vision for this country, for the new Libya," she says, pausing to adjust the tubes of a patient wounded by shelling in Misrata, "is that this new generation of women can do more—for instance, getting them into government positions. Making them more financially viable."

Salaries are ridiculously low. She was *women at war* >446



A BRIGHTER FUTURE? TWO GIRLS IN BENGHAZI'S AL MAHKAMA SQUARE.

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earning, as a specialist, about 90 Libyan dinars a month. She now earns 700 dinars—still only about \$575.

And yet, Salma believes strongly in the power of resilience. From a poor family with no father, she and her elder brother both went on to become surgeons. Two sisters are teachers. Another brother, also a teacher, was shot in the back the first day of the fighting on the front line and was brought into the hospital where Salma was working and protesting on the streets 24/7. “I would protest, then go do surgery—I was sleeping in the hospital, then rushing to the streets.”

When she saw her unconscious brother brought in on a stretcher, it hit home how serious the revolution was.

“I couldn’t remove the bullet,” she says. “I saw my brother bleeding, and maybe dying, and I let another surgeon operate.” (He survived, and returned to the front line west of Benghazi).

“There’s a whole new generation of Libyan women,” she says. “They will have the chance of a good life. They will get to choose what they want.”

The TNC is still in a state of flux pending the prospect of free elections, but it cannot be ignored that there are currently only two women high up enough to be involved with it, and their ranks do not include such obvious candidates as the Bugaighis sisters, though Iman was briefly its spokesperson. One, Hania al-Gumati, Ph.D., head of social affairs, is in charge of orphans, women, and families—a “soft” post; another, Salwa Fawzi el-Deghali, Ph.D., a Sorbonne-educated constitutional lawyer, was given an equally subordinate role on the Council. It is almost as though men placed these women there because they had to do something with them—but they weren’t yet ready to take the big step of putting them in charge of health or foreign affairs. When I meet al-Gumati in her office in a former government building for the disabled, she, too, concedes the problem.

“Women have done a great job in the revolution, but taking on an official role is . . . well, difficult. The first reason is our society probably doesn’t want them . . . certainly one woman in the Council is not enough. . . .” Despite their obvious skills, there is a lag between ability and status for women here, something international law professor Hala al-Atrash views with indignant defiance. What women need,

she tells me when I visit her, is not empowerment so much as “economic empowerment. The solution is not education. We have education. We lack ownership.” And while quotas can be helpful, she is against the concept in the TNC. “It means it’s a struggle for women to get a seat,” she says. “But we started this war against Qaddafi—so we will, one day, get our positions of power.”

Slowly, the city of Benghazi is coming alive. People who left during the fighting are returning; clothing stores selling Italian sunglasses and American-style sneakers are opening. In the evening, people are out walking the streets, doing the *passaggiata* as they do in Italian seaside towns. They are bracing for life post-Qaddafi. A hotel coffee shop I visit is like a scene from *Casablanca*—full of leftover spies, diplomats, journalists, and carpetbaggers getting ready to make a fortune once Libya frees up.

On the day I leave, there is a sense of hope on the streets. Another march is planned. The rebels have taken more territory in the north. More foreigners are coming to Benghazi and—as the U.S. has since done, freeing up funds in the process—recognizing the TNC as an official body.

“Most of all,” says Lamia Abusedra, “I am thinking of the next generation of women and all that they have ahead of them.”

Before I leave, I see Jamila, the teenager whose mother, Mabruk, had been imprisoned during the Qaddafi years. She asks to meet me for a coffee, arrives in a head scarf, jeans, and a pretty shirt, and begins to pepper me with questions. She wants to be a journalist but can’t imagine life without censorship.

“Do you love your job? I love your job. I want to talk to people, to see the world.” She pulls out a small pink camera and tells me she is working for a new youth newspaper, one of the many that have sprung up since the revolution.

Her English is perfect yet strange—learned from watching Will Smith movies. It’s something I notice in a lot of Libyan teenagers—they speak English fluently, with American accents, but it’s Hollywood speak. “Awesome.” “Yo, dude.” “Bring it on.”

“I love America,” Jamila says breathlessly. “I love American people. They saved us.”

She wants advice about her career. She wants to learn what it is like to be a Western woman who grew up with no obstacles. “Do you really think I can become a journalist?”

Before we part, I give her a gift: a blank Moleskine notebook that I had brought along with me to Libya. When I hand it to her, she looks as though she will burst into tears. I encourage her to keep a diary of her thoughts and feelings during the revolution. I tell her I had young friends, in Sarajevo and Iraq, both of whom later published books. (Zlata Filipović’s diary became an international best-seller.)

But really, I suggest she keep a diary because this is an important time for young women. “Everything is happening, and you are a part of it,” I tell her. “This is your moment.”

She is thrilled and touched. She carefully unwraps the plastic on the notebook and writes her name inside. “I will begin today,” she says solemnly.

Which in a way is the theme of every Libyan woman I met. It’s a brand-new day. □

QUIET CRUSADERS
SALMA ABU BAKER (LEFT) PRACTICES CARDIOTHORACIC SURGERY AT THE BENGHAZI MEDICAL CENTER. LAMIA ABUSEDRA IS A SYSTEMS ENGINEER WHO SET UP A DATABASE TO AID WAR VICTIMS.

