

Rania Transcript
Pavel Kofman

Introduction: Howard Lawson
26:28

We're very pleased to be able to bring Rania Matar to campus to share her insightful and moving work on Lebanon. Rania Matar's visit and the exhibition couldn't have happened without some generous support from various people on campus. The support from the School of Journalism, the Office of Communication Arts and Sciences, the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Inclusion, the Department of Art and Art History, the Art Museum at MSU and public humanities collaborative, so we're grateful for the support and that we were able to bring Rania to campus.

27:18

I first met Rania when I was reviewing work at photo recita in Portland Oregon last April. Without going into detail what photo recita is all about, very briefly, it's an international gathering where photographers, publishers and gallery people all come together to look at work. In this four-day period, hundreds of photographers presented their work and Rania's study of Lebanon really stood out to me.

27:55

Part of the reasons I was so struck by her work certainly has to do with my own personal love of the social documentary in the form of photography but her work goes well beyond just that, her work displays a wonderful sensitivity and concern for humanity. Most importantly her work provides a view of Lebanon that only a person who had access and trust could make. It is a view I think you not often see in the west. Rania is Lebanese, as she was growing up in Lebanon, she experienced the civil war she has photographed after studying architecture in Lebanon in the American University, she left in 1984 and finished her architectural studies at Cornell University here in the United States and she has lived here ever since. She studied photography at the New England school of photography, and at the main photographic workshops in Mexico with Magnum photographer Constantine Menoz.

29:08

Rania has traveled widely in the middle east and she has photographed street scenes in Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, she focuses her lens mainly on women and children in the middle east, her recent projects which examined the Palestinian refugee camps, the veil and its meanings and the aftermath of war, give a voice to people who have been forgotten or misunderstood.

29:36

Her work has been published widely in the United States, Germany, Argentina, and Syria. Denise Taylor wrote about Rania's work in a September Boston Globe piece called "Finding Humanity Among Ruins". Taylor commented in a quote "since 2002 Rania Mata has pointed her lens at what she calls the complexities of life in her native country, and arts institutions worldwide are beginning to take note." Leslie Brown of Boston University's photographic resource center, who was the first to show Matar's work said quote "The kind of photographer that Rania is doesn't come around often, quality in the light and the way she sees the delicate things that she does tells these stories that need to be told, is what makes her work so important." We're privileged to have Rania Matar as our lecturer this evening, let's welcome her.

Rania Matar
30:48

Hi thank you all for coming and thank you Howard for a glorious introduction. This is a great opportunity to be here and lecture at Michigan State University, so thank you to whoever contributed to that. I'm mostly going to go through the images and talk everything through them, because that's an easier way for me to do it, and I'll welcome questions all through because I think some you'll forget afterwards, and it might help direct me through to discuss the image as well.

31:27

I'm showing work about Lebanon, but I'm not trying to represent all of Lebanon. Lebanon is a very complex country with 18 religions; it's between the east and the west and there are a lot of layers to it. I'm mostly showing things in Lebanon that most people don't see and are often ignored, so I'm

showing it in three projects and the first one I'm going to be showing is the aftermath of war. Most of the images were taken in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 war of this past summer between Hezbollah and Israel. But then there's also a picture of different times in Lebanon because too many events have been happening since.

32:14

The second project would be about the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, there are 12 refugee camps and 400,000 refugees and that's another complicated story and so it is often ignored. And the last project I'm still working on and it's about the veil, women of Islam and the spread of the veil in Lebanon. When I grew up in Lebanon, I hardly saw women who are veiled, and in recent years it has been increasing quite a bit and I think it has many different meanings and it's not a straight forward phenomenon so I'll try to go through that. I added in this last project also images of the more western side of Lebanon to kind of put it into context so it will come at some point.

33:11

So this image is taken in the southern suburb of Beirut, and one more thing is, I did get stuck in the war I arrived on July 12, the day before the war started, but I arrived with my kids and I ended up leaving but I decided to come back and photograph the immediate aftermath. I think the media typically covers war and shows dead bodies and we see this side of it but the human aspect of this is people coming back to life and putting their lives back together and dealing with the reality of war is often not even discussed at all. So this is what my intention is on that.

33:57

Here this shows the magnitude of how huge the destruction was and this little boy in the middle was looking for metal wires in the rubble, so he could sell them and make money, (next slide) and he's doing the same thing here. And what struck me is how quickly these areas which to me would have looked like a complete no-man's land automatically were completely buzzing with life and activity as if nothing had happened. Just a few weeks earlier.

34:31

(next slide) So motorcycles were going, people came back and it was very surreal to see that and the resiliency of people going through that. (next slide) This is the one picture I took that summer and this is when we were crossing with my kids through the Syrian border to leave Lebanon, and these were women and kids leaving by the truckloads to get out of the country. And this is when I decided that I would really like to come back and photograph the immediate aftermath.

35:01

(next slide) This is in southern Lebanon, taken actually this past September, in the middle east there's a lot of notion of glorification of the martyr, and so people who die, I'm assuming they were Hezbollah combatants because you see the kind of the gun on top which is a symbol of Hezbollah, but they glorified the martyrs if they died for a cause to make sense of it.

35:39

(audience question) What is the writing, what does it say on the martyr's pictures?

Rania: They are giving the name of the guy, and that he died for the cause and then they're giving his name. And in the other one they are just saying the martyr and then just giving his name underneath it.

(next slide) this is a normal family, the son of this women whose the father of this boy died as well, he was in a shelter, and it struck me that his photo is still there that his photo stays there as if his presence is always there, whenever they move they carry the photograph with them.

36:22

(next slide) and this shows in a way the resiliency in a way how destruction almost could become normal in people's lives. And so the broken wall she's hanging belts and towels on it and the other layer of this image is this woman's house was completely destroyed, she lost everything, but on the wall, it said Hezbollah are the winners.

36:48

(next slide) This shows how people moved back right away (next slide) (next slide) this image I'll talk about it a little bit, because it's the one that keeps getting picked all the time somehow. The moment was actually was very powerful, this was the buildings were pretty badly damage so there was

no way of restoring them in any way, but people could not access anywhere to go in there and get their belongings from the buildings. So what you see there's a wrecking ball, there's a crane and they are destroying and hammering through the building all day long for the building to fall down. So the people come they would come at eight in the morning and stay all day so that in case the building fell they were there because their apartment was in there so they could run and look through the rubble for their belongings.

37:48

(next slide) which is what is going on here, and surprisingly enough, they would find things. (next slide) (next slide) This is in a mosque in southern Lebanon and again it's like places were fully demolished but were getting used again very quickly. And there's a man, I don't know how much you can see, but there's a man sleeping there on the rug. (next slide) This image is very much to me because it represents the schizophrenic side of Lebanon in a way, because you have this very ornate sofa, with a rocket hole right above the little girl. (next slide)(next slide) This is in southern Beirut again, and this image, I mean a lot of the people would bring their plastic chairs and sit where their homes used to be, so they could reconnect with all their neighbors.

39:00

(next slide) and this man used to own a shoe store and obviously everything is gone, but he's back there in the middle of the destruction setting up his shoes on the racks and trying to sell them. (next slide) and this again we see how the destruction becomes normal, they are using the hole to hang laundry wires. (next slide) and here this girl is juggling, there are a lot of foreign volunteers that worked with the local NGO's (non-governmental organizations) to come and help the kids and teenagers move past the war and the war effect and here they were teaching the girl how to juggle. And there is a Lebanese flag in the background and the boy is jumping rope and I think the whole photo has a mysterious aspect to it.

40:01

(next slide) and here the women is surveying all the destruction below her (next slide) this was taken this past September, the blind lady on the floor used to live in the same home that we saw the old lady with all the belts hanging and a year later things are getting rebuilt but they are still living at families homes. (next slide) (next slide) and this was at a rally where they were mourning the martyrs . (next slide) the next few pictures were taken very recently this past September, there was another war that happened in the northern part of the country, and there are Palestinian refugee camps, which I'll get into later, actually they are pretty isolated from Lebanese life and they are allowed from treaty to have weapons inside. And some elements of Al-Qaida infiltrated in the camps so the army went after the camps, and the camps were fully destroyed and a lot of the people were made refugees again and went to a neighboring camp, so these are some of the images that I will be showing you here.

41:20

(next slide) this is part of the same series so they were 40, 000 refugees that had to go and be accommodated in a camp that used to house 12,000 refugees, so they set them up in schools and in garages and they divided the classrooms in four or six depending on the size, and put tarp between them and whole families would sit up on futons. (next slide) (next slide)(next slide) But again it's always the kids to see how the kids deal with this destruction is always such an invigorating experience because no matter where you put them they make the best out of it. (next slide) here it was Ramadan when I was there and they were waiting in line to get food from an NGO that prepared food for what they called "iftar"? It's when they are allowed to eat at sunset.

42:28

(next slide) and this is when they started serving the food, it became a complete battle zone. (next slide) so this also when they are setting up to eat, so basically the same space they were sleeping in was used for everything (next slide) (next slide) and these are the school sinks where they were washing dishes (next slide) (next slide) and that's a soldier that died during that same war (next slide) now again I'm also showing life kind of going back to normal on the streets (next slide) the notion of time as we know it in the U.S. doesn't exist in Lebanon, it's like time goes on and people just sit and wait and these old men just sit there all day and watch the cars passing by. (next slide) (next slide) so you always have these contrasts in Lebanon and I think it characterizes the country quite a bit.

43:44

(next slide) the hard rock café is there and this image of the iman (e-mon)? came up right after the war last summer. (next slide) and here's a Christmas tree with a mosque (next slide) (next slide) ok I'm going to move on to the next project now.

44:08

(audience question) You shoot digitally, right?

Rania: actually not, 35mm, I shoot mostly film, I do carry a digital camera and I have been shooting both, because I'm always worried if anything is going to happen to my film when I go through security. And if I need some images for immediate then I would shoot it digitally. But I scan my negatives and most of these images have been printed from scanned negatives.

45:03

(audience question) Do you just approach the people and ask them can I take your picture?

Rania: You know, the ones that were taken on the street, a lot of times, I don't even have to approach them, if it looks like it's ok then I can take the photo. When people are willing if I go to somebody's home obviously they know I am photographing them, and usually when you want to photograph them but take the time to listen to their stories, because then you get to the next level photographing them. So I guess it really depends on who.

45:38

So the next few images now are going to be in the refugee camps in Lebanon, and I'll say a little bit about that, there are 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and a country of 3.5 million. They live in 12 refugee camps scattered all over the country, and they live in pretty bad conditions, they are not allowed to work, they are not allowed to own property, and they have to rely on the UN agency and the NGO's for any kind of schooling or health or whatever to survive. The camps that are in the south are surrounded and you only could access them by going through a Lebanese army checkpoint, the ones around Beirut are more open, I mean not everybody would venture in but they are pretty open otherwise. So they reason I am saying all that, the ones in the south they are not allowed in building material and a lot of the homes are made out of this kind of corrugated metal (next slide) but the ones where you see there's more construction and more kind of semi-permanent with the pipes coming through, this is around Beirut.

46:47

(next slide) this woman is holding her ID card, and you can see on the picture how young she is, and this is the only kind of identifications they have which is the paper identifying them as refugees and if they don't have that, they don't even get help from the UN agency so they need to own that, so that is the state of their status, they don't own passports or anything.

47:09

(next slide) and there is quite a bit of this whole generation aspect and I have the next few photos play on that theme, because they have been refugees since their great grandparents came so these kids are born in the camps with a status of refugee right away, and now it's the fourth generation of kids born there. (next slide) (next slide) (next slide) I found that they have a lot of these political posters and billboards and I think in a way to feel like they're part of the conflict that happens between Israel and the Palestinians (next slide) I show the baby with that and then he's standing with this defined look under this banner, and all these are rocket holes in the building. (next slide) here the man, this is kind of funny, he happened to be sitting next to that image of (chay fassen?) who was killed in Gaza a few years back and this guy looks exactly like him

48:14

(next slide) the camps have no green space or anything, so the kids mostly play in the alley, and all the life in the camps happens in the alleys (next slide) and here you see and these water pipes and it's kind of the camp turning from something which was supposed to temporary into this state of semi-permanence. And these are pipes that they got water from and from the main on the streets (next slide) and now they even have I mean soups and they are pretty self-sufficient within the camp in that sense. This is a market. (next slide) (next slide) (next slide)

48:58

(audience question) I notice that you photograph a lot of children and of course here in the U.S. you have to jump through a lot of hoops to produce photographs that contain minors, is it different when you were in Lebanon or any other country who might have done photographs of children?

Rania: You know what, we were talking about that today and in Lebanon it's much easier I found everywhere it's a lot easier to photograph than the U.S. You don't have to deal with releases or anything along those lines which is what you have to do here quite a bit. So you don't lose that kind of spontaneity when you photograph them. And typically the people love the kids to get in the photos and the kids love it so It's never an issue.

49:43

So I'm just kind of showing daily lives going on, and for me this is what that is about, not to make any political statement, just show the humanity of people who live in these conditions and how they move on with their lives. Something that is very important is the sense of hospitality, and if you get offered something it's insulting not to take it, so that's how you have show respect to people even if you think you're going to get sick from the water.

50:18

(next slide)(next slide)and the electricity gets cut off quite a bit so they have a whole system of candles and gas lamps (next slide) and here the kids are making we call (mena-eesh) which is this pita bread that you put thyme and olive oil on it and you bake it becomes like a sort of pizza. Usually you just go to any bakery in Lebanon to buy it and the kids go on Sunday and they take their bowl of thyme mix and the kids work on it in the bakery so that they only have to pay for the price of the dough basically

51:02

(next slide) and this is inside the home and they are eating the (mena-eesh) on the floor (next slide) and the homes have no furniture whatsoever so all the activity happens on the floor, they put the futons up during the day and they take them out in the evening. (next slide) and this is the same thing about the pipe I was talking about, they have all these wires hanging and they kind of tape as the years go by to bring electricity to other rooms and kids are so oblivious to it and it's pretty scary. (next slide) (next slide)(next slide)this is how they are putting away the futons and the sheets during the day (next slide) and just in case nobody saw it, there is a cigarette down on the floor, this woman put it down to nurse the baby. (next slide) (next slide) and I guess everybody saw this photo outside, (next slide)and that's again that notion that time doesn't move, the men are taking turns between the cigarette and the water pipe and the little girl is staring at all his leg injuries and these are all bullet wounds.

52:29

(next slide) and that's again the notion of the martyr and the fact of kind of feeling to what happens to the persons in the territory is what happens in the camps. And sadly there's quite a bit of these images all over the camps. (next slide) this women lost through the wars in Lebanon, her husband, her two sons, and her father (next slide) (next slide) and that's again on the same line as being the dome of the rocks in Jerusalem, even though her son was killed in Lebanon. (next slide) and between the time I started photographing the camps and the last year I went there, there was quite a bit of shifting to religion as well (next slide) and this is in a religious school (next slide) and this is in a school, above it says all humans are equal no identity no future, past, present, future, there are pictures of Tarzan and happy families right next to it.

53:44

(next slide) these are kids at school (next slide) and this is again is the life going on in the alley, this man is fully dressed and he goes and sits there in the alley in his shoes and suit and the woman next to him has on what you call prayer beads, but in Lebanon they are not just used as prayer beads, it is used when you sit there and a lot of people have them and it's just a way of passing time and it was just a happy accident that the girl is going through them and looks like she is, I mean they look at the time there and she is just passing through. (next slide) (next slide) and this is also a shot, here they are dancing over there the kids are playing (next slide) so it's this kind of happiness in kids (next slide)(next slide)

54:47

(audience question) Can you talk a little bit about, the idea of access and how you would get into these places and some of the problems you've encountered with them?

Rania: Yeah the camps was actually the toughest access to get, and it's something I had to build over time, and I think I any kind of project you need to get into in depth because you have to go through all the right channels otherwise you won't be able to photograph. I mean very few people could photograph in the Palestinian refugee camp especially at this depth of getting to people's homes. So I had to go through somebody who was a local, then I went through NGO's, I mean I was interested in photographing the women and the local guy could not get into that side of access, I had to go through NGO's which is an organization that helps the camps, and then they were able to get me to the families that they help and from there I kind of built relationships on my own from there, but it's a long process and it's very important to create trust and respect with the families to get, first that they're very open and willing to help, and then I don't feel like I'm stealing images or stealing it from them, and the other thing is I try to visit them on next trips and always take images to them and I think this means so much to them, because all of a sudden it feels like I didn't ignore them, I didn't just take the shot and ignore them.

56:23

(audience question) Do they feel sometimes, that they want to be subjects of these pictures because you might go back and tell their story?

Rania: Yes, and they will, the people are willing to be photographed absolutely, that's the reason they are willing to do it otherwise there is no reason to put up with me doing that, absolutely, and sometimes it's a huge pressure on me because some of them think that I am really going to be able to change the world, so yeah there definitely is that aspect there. But a lot of them are angry because a lot of people used to come and photograph them and never show up again and nothing would ever change for them, so you have to be very careful not to make them feel like that.

57:16

The next few photos are about the women and the veil, and that's something also I think is very misrepresented in the media where they tend to associate a veiled woman as always being oppressed. And Lebanon is a country with many religions, again, women do not have to be veiled, I am never veiled when I am there photographing these women and nobody ever cares. So a lot of women who are taking on the veil are doing it by choice, it is a recent phenomenon, I call it the veil modesty fashion devotion or statement, and I really think it's all of the above.

58:03

(next slide) here this girl, the black shadow you see behind her is her teachers trying to dress her trying to cover her up because she needed to read a passage from the Karan. And she wanted her to be veiled to do it. (next slide) and now what's going on is not only women are getting veiled but girls very young are getting veiled, mostly by choice, like it's the thing to do so most girls want to do it. The girl on the right is nine years old and that's a portrait of her dead mother behind her (next slide) now I'm showing you the devotion side and this is during a Shiite holiday where they have to, it's called (Ashura) and they have them mourn the prophets, so for forty days they meet, the women meet and have a mourning session and they all wear black at that time.

58:53

(next slide) and this is what that is, and the reason they are facing the wall is when they pray they have to face Mecca, which is a holy site in Saudi Arabia. (next slide) now you start seeing some of the overlap of the two different cultures and here these are tents in downtown Lebanon that are set up now by Hezbollah and by some Christian supporters of Hezbollah to protest against the government, and the women visit each other from the tents at the Christian party to the tents of Hezbollah, and something I didn't notice when I took the photo but noticed after is actually the only women who is not covering her face is the only one who is not veiled. (next slide) this one was at a rally and so what I'm just showing is that the women are very active no matter what, and it's also a revelation to me because I didn't realize that much. (next slide) this is at the same event. (next slide)

59:50

(Audience question) What was the rally for?

Rania: it was a rally against the war and now the country is pretty paralyzed so they are kind of rallying against it for a clean government and all many different things.

1:00:04

(next slide) like here they are crying over the martyrs (next slide) and here this woman lost her son so she is angry and you can see the boy behind her carrying a Karan next to her, and for some reason there is a picture of che Guevara on the bottom right. (next slide) and here it's the opposite where the woman lost her son but for her she is proud of him because he died for a cause, so her son's picture is next to Hassan hasselah who is the leader of Hezbollah and she is showing it with pride. (next slide) now this is kind of moving into different aspects of the fashion aspect of it as well, and what I found interesting in a lot of these the women are always blue eyes and look very western even though they are covered, in the poster in the background (next slide) here the mannequins is the same thing they kind of look very western and the veils are made in Korea. (next slide) this woman is here for a Botox consultation, so the woman on the right is a plastic surgeon and the woman on the left wants to get Botox.

1:01:17

(next slide) and that's in that same plastic surgeon's office, I'm sorry this should not be yellow (next slide) and this is at a beauty parlor and you see quite a bit of this kind of complete interrelationship of different people in Lebanon, so here's a woman getting her eyebrows done who I'm assuming also had plastic surgery and the veiled woman who is doing her eyebrows. And at the end of the session she put me in the chair and forced me to have my eyebrows done too. (next slide) and that's kind of the same thing, here's a woman who is getting her hair done, she let me photograph her from the back even though she is officially veiled and she spent about an hour getting her hair done and then covered it up (next slide) and that's kind of the very western way of wearing the veil I would say (next slide)

1:02:16

(audience question) The veils in Lebanon don't cover the face, just the hands?

Rania: You know there's everything, you see one where the face is covered, I mean in Lebanon it's really a free for all you have this in Lebanon and you have the veil

1:02:34

(next slide) one more and you're going to see the covering the face (next slide) here this is actually at the American university and I talked to quite a bit of women who were veiled and actually took their stories and what was fascinating about this one is that she actually didn't even speak Arabic, she's Lebanese but actually born and raised in Michigan but decided to gradually get veiled I mean it goes in stages so she decided to get veiled and decided that she felt like she wanted more and eventually she got to that which is called an (ekub) and she is the only one in the whole university wearing it and I think it takes a lot of courage, but she's deeply convinced, I mean it was fascinating talking to her because she was saying that she feels liberated now because she doesn't have to worry about how people judge her on her looks even though for me she looks like everybody would stare at her because of that but she was really at peace with herself and I think there's a notion of her friends saying oh they're not ready and I realize that there's a notion of stages in the veil whether you are ready to get veiled and if you are ready to get veiled, are you ready to go to the next stage and next stage, and I think they think about it quite a bit because once you go there you can't go...she would be considered a failure to go back to putting just a normal veil on. But you see the two girls in the background and they are wearing jeans and pretty low rise.

1:04:03

(audience question) So they feel that the more they cover the more free they are?

Rania: I think she feels, no she does, this is one person's coat, this is very rare in Lebanon the covering the face very rare, but the fact is that she did it completely voluntarily which I found fascinating and she feels liberated not free but liberated I guess, those are the words she used, because she felt like she doesn't have to prove anything to anybody and whoever is going to like is not going to because of her looks and she doesn't have , I mean the whole concept....

1:04:40

(audience question) Is there pressure one way or another, I mean I get the sense when I listen to the news about other countries and there's often pressure coming into to be veiled or is it the reverse to not be veiled?

Rania: I think there's no pressure either way but I think slowly the more Muslim women are getting veiled the more the ones who are not veiled maybe feel like they should. Or they are starting to consider it for future so I met some woman who would wear long sleeves and just sat there halfway veiled but they are not ready to cover their head so I think it's a movement and I think the more its peer pressure in way it becomes, but I mean there is such a large Christian population that it's never going to be

1:05:28

(audience question) What the percentage?

Rania: You know there hasn't been a census, an official census in Lebanon since 1932, and at that point the Christians were a majority, but now they're not, I mean during the wars the Christians were the more affluent then most of them left the country and the Shiite Muslims have tons of kids so now the Muslims are the majority but outside there are probably about 35 percent Christians. So it's still substantial it's not going to turn into a Muslim country in that sense.

1:06:00

(next slide) But I found that I photographed two sisters, this is Lebanon for you, side by side it's not like you have to go to a different place to see that, so there's also the pressure, there's more plastic surgery in Lebanon than anywhere in the world from what I hear, so

1:06:18

(audience question) Is it by the women who are covered usually?

Rania: Probably not covered but I'm realizing that also the women that are covered, so that's why I'm saying the veil is very hard to narrow it down to one thing, I think it's really layered I mean some women who wear the veil and are very kind of fashion conscious, and others wear it like this woman who wears the black and wants to step away from all of that.

1:06:46

(next slide) this is at the same university at AUB, I mean the woman who was covered with the (ekub) is at the American university of Beirut so she is studying electrical engineering. (next slide) these are usually people from the Gulf countries in Lebanon but I'm showing that because you have that and again (next slide) you have that, I mean don't even think you see something like that in a public space in the U.S. (next slide) (next slide) I found this was very nice I went at Christmas and I went with my in-laws and kind of got sick of it and so I went and photographed and I realized there were only Muslims around the Christmas tree, because all the Christians are celebrating and it was beautiful because everybody was getting photographed under the Christmas tree

1:07:44

(next slide) and that's a very new phenomenon in Lebanon where women are swimming fully dressed, and then you have (next slide) that they are drinking champagne in the pool (next slide) I mean I just added the more western ones to kind of put the context in there (next slide) (next slide) I think we are getting towards the end...(next slide) these are the girls of that plastic surgeon and one is nine and one is eleven and they literally just got veiled, they said they wanted to but I don't know, they got veiled also (next slide) and actually they were going to a French school and she had to take them out because they were getting picked on because they are veiled. (next slide) this is at Ramadan at the house, and they set up the table and then wait for the call to prayer that is time to eat.

1:08:40

(next slide) and this is in a mosque, and I found that the mosques are very, I mean I had not been in a mosque before, this was the only time I had to put a veil on, it was mostly out of respect, and I found that it was very different than going to church where people dress up and have to be at their best behavior, at the mosque it's like a second home, people lay on the floor, everybody catches up, the kids run around (next slide) this is at the mosque as well (next slide) (next slide) that's in a religious school (next slide) (next slide) this picture is the picture that made me start the whole thing on the veil, this was actually taken on the camp, and I was photographing the camps, and then this girl spent about an hour and I'm not exaggerating, fixing the veil, changing the color, braiding it, and layering it, putting layers, and it just hit me that it's like my daughter fixing her hair, and it was the first time I started looking at the veil in a very different way, her mother is hovering over her because she doesn't want her to get veiled, she thinks she is very young, the mother got veiled much later, and it was strange to have the doll there as a constant reminder of how young the girl is

1:10:10

(audience question) What do boys think of the veil? Like dating?

Rania: You know that's actually a very interesting concept, the whole dating thing, I think that, it's like they won't touch hands, if you get veiled you don't even say hi to a man by the hand you just go like that, so the dating issue becomes like ok if you know it's going to be something serious, you start going out with the person, I didn't get to a point to ask because they were kind of all saying that this would not happen, it's only after you get married, there is a lot of variety in Lebanon but I'm sure there are a lot of boys who would look for that in a woman now.

1:10:55

(audience question) It might be an interesting thing to photograph boys and girls together to see...

Rania: Yeah, I actually have a couple, I didn't put them in, but they were kind of just flirting and I wish I would have put it in now, there is this kind of flirting going on but no touching

1:11:22

(audience question) Is there a formal ceremony that people participate in for the veiling?

Rania: No, but its kind of a big event, I think a lot of the girls now, because they are young, they are putting it because people are putting it around them so in the beginning it starts at play and I expected it to be a big deal but it's kind of goes and transitions, some of the girls I spoke to now who decided they want to get veiled but they're not ready to put on the scarf they wear long sleeves and eventually they would put on the scarf when they are ready, so I think it's really a very personal choice how they go about it.

1:11:59

(audience question) Is there any sense that for some of these women when they put the veil on and after some time they decide it wasn't for them to do?

Rania: I think that's why it takes a lot of girls a lot of time to decide, I found that some of them do that and they were mostly the ones that get veiled very young, because they didn't know what they were doing, and they would take it off, a lot of them who wait until they're teenagers or later, they really think it through because, I haven't met anyone who takes it off, they think it's a failure to take it off, actually sorry, I met one, there were two sisters and one was veiled and one wasn't and they were kind of very modern and I went to their house and talked to them quite a bit and the one who still wore the long sleeve and considered herself half veiled and she said when she went to college in Lebanon, she actually felt very self conscious with the veil even though she wore it when she went to Los Angeles and then when she went to Saudi Arabia with her family. When she came to Lebanon, she took off that head scarf, she thinks she says she going to put it back when she's ready her sister kept it on, but ironically it was the sister who kept it on who felt the most modern of the two because the one who took it off said that she would only marry a Sunni Muslim and the one who took it off was like I don't care as long as he likes me for what I am, but she was the one who kept the veil on. So I think it's really fascinating and I don't think I'm done with it...

1:13:30

(audience question) If you write a book will you capture them and let them speak?

Rania: We were talking about that with Howard, a lot of the veil one I literally interviewed the women, so I have a bunch of material that I never edited at all but I have it because I was fascinated with the variety of things I heard from them, so I think with the veil, If I'm going to do a book just on Lebanon I might put a statement but not include all and eventually if I do something just about the veil, I would like to include the stories absolutely.

1:14:05

(audience question) If a woman takes off the veil, does the family fail also?

Rania: No but typically girls that are getting veiled means that people in her family are veiled, I mean I had a friend growing up who was actually Christian protestant who converted to Islam by choice and decided to get veiled...her parents are horrified, but that's different because I mean her grandfather was a minister, I mean it's really getting to a point I think there is more impolite pressure on girls to wear it, because a lot of people are wearing it, and I think quite a bit is political atmosphere around the world right now and I think a lot of people are relating to Muslim countries as a reaction to the west

1:15:08

(audience question) You have two very contrasting pictures, you have a picture of a girl that had her face covered was born and raised in America and felt more comfortable wearing it in Lebanon, and you were telling us a story of one lady who had it on in America and took it off in Lebanon? Socially, what do you attribute that to?

Rania: I think again it's a personal thing, probably the woman who was veiled in the states was kind of in a community of a lot of Muslim women around her, I don't know, or maybe she was young enough that she didn't know and this is what it was, I think when she went to college in Lebanon and made her different friends, she said she would put it back, now I don't know what the reason is I think you could go one way or another when you have extremes you go one way or another and I think that's what it is

1:16:00

(audience question) Do you think it's the comfort level of Lebanon I terms of she doesn't feel accepted if she wears it?

Rania: She was with a group of people who didn't accept her because you do have that, but some women I think are wearing it to belong to a group to accept them.

1:16:26

(audience question) When do they feel comfortable not wearing the veil? At home, in the morning?

Rania: They don't wear it at home, with male close relatives or other women so when I'm alone with them at their house they take off the veil, but if my camera comes out, the veil goes back on automatically. And I learned not to try to overstep that, it would completely not be ok, to photograph who is veiled if she doesn't want to.

1:16:52

(audience question) is the veil supposed to be a symbol of modesty?

Rania: It's supposed to be a religious symbol yes of modesty, I think it's being interpreted many different ways but yes this is what it's supposed to be.

1:17:08

(audience question) How much time do you spend with your subjects?

Rania: I think it really depends like a lot of these young women who I photographed at the university they were so open that I just spend a few hours two days in a row, but in the camps I had to go over and over to get to that level of trust so I think I varies quite a bit, there's no easy answer, and I think if you want to do that kind of stuff you always have to go in with an open mind and kind of go with the flow a little bit.

1:17:43

(audience question) this person is all in white, and everybody else is all in black....?

Rania: You know, she was at home, and she didn't, when they pray in the house they cover themselves in white and I don't know the exact meaning of what it is, the reason a lot of them are wearing black again its first the scarf then you could take on the scarf which would still be colorful and then the coat this is the next level from just wearing the scarf with normal clothes and they you could just take on what they call the (abayah)which is the black, and then you could go to the **knee camp**????

1:18:23

(next slide) this was in the tent of Hezbollah the women had all the activities and when it was time to pray, they kind of just put newspaper and cardboard as praying rocks and preyed on them. And that's it, so I'll take questions...

1:18:53

(audience question) Rania when you are at the camps, where are you staying?

Rania: When I got, a lot of times, I mean I have my parents in Beirut and I live in the U.S. but I don't see my family that often so it's always a huge juggling act when I am there, but I go and I end up sleeping at home and Lebanon is not that big it's easy to get in the car and come back/

1:19:35

(audience question) your photographs where you capture those cultural contrasts are very effective and dramatic at some point do you begin to look for those as a photographer? Do you have a sort of visual agenda in mind?

Rania: Someone asked me that in a classroom today, I don't actually look for them, I think they are just about in your face almost everywhere you go in Lebanon , I mean it's hard not to see them, ironically the people who live there don't even see it anymore, so I think for me, I am photographing in a place like that I'm kind of in an ideal situation where I'm an insider and an outsider at the same time so I could speak the language and approach people pretty easily but at the same time I see those things through the western eyes in a way because they're pretty fascinating and you don't have to look very hard for them, and some of them were not within the same image I just added to put the context in and that's really what Lebanon is I just showed the one aspect of it
1:20:39

(audience question) is working in black and white with a thick standard focal lights help make the images transparent?

Rania: I don't know, I like to work with black and white because most of my images I kind of try to just show the subjects and I don't want too much distraction and I think it worked well with the subject I was doing, and once I was in it it's hard to change in the middle, so I kind of just sell it like that, I do work with a fixed lens, it's one less thing to deal with and I have a wide angle lens and I like to be pretty close to people

1:21:12

(audience comment) I just want to tell you Rania, I think that your images are so compelling that..i just wanted to say that we all think you're an amazing photographer.....

Howard: And I think perhaps on that note we should move to the reception area.....