

Karin Schermbrucker of Slingshot Media



By [Ilse van den Berg](#)

14 May 2020

"For too long people have been concerned with what we do, as if that can explain who we are. I am a wife, a mother, a storyteller, a light chaser, and a lover of people. My camera is hopefully an extension of who I am," says Karin Schermbrucker.



Karin Schermbrucker of Slingshot Media

She is someone who wants to tell stories that change perspectives and open eyes.

Schermbrucker, her husband, and their team at Slingshot Media typically focus on telling stories of communities and people who are facing “giants” like HIV, health, poverty, or education issues. She says their mission is to take down these giants using visual media.

“We believe that culture is shaped by the stories it is heard and believed,” says Schermbrucker.



#UnsungHeroes: Mhinti Pato of Sakhisizwe YDP

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Changing perspective changes the world

About 15 years ago, Schermbrucker did her first project with Unicef. She was the photographer on a brand awareness and community development project with Barclays, and Unicef as the community partner.



“We drove from London to Cape Town and I was able to tell the story of many of these community projects through the lens of my camera,” she says.

It was an eye-opening and life-changing experience and the beginning of a long relationship with Unicef.

“It was one-and-a-half years of travelling through Africa and by the time I got back home, I knew that I wanted to tell stories that matter,” she recalls.

“Changing perspective changes the world, and photography helps us to see. My camera has been like a bridge and a mirror. It’s a bridge to the people I’m meeting and photographing and a mirror that makes you look at yourself. Anyone can technically take a good photo - you can get the right lighting and settings, and be lucky with your location. But for me to take a really good photo means that you can feel it, you can smell it, it tells a story, it’s got emotion. That for me is the most important thing.



“Photography is not just about taking a photo, it’s about taking the time to look at the person. I love people, I love the fact that through imagery you can capture their story. There is a heart connection. Photography is actually about getting to know people, not just taking a photo,” she says.



#UnsungHeroes: Mervyn Serebro of Reach for a Dream Foundation

Ilse van den Berg 30 Apr 2020



A pivotal moment

In May 2016, Schermbrucker survived [a suicide bomb attack executed on the UN compound](#) while on assignment in Gao, Mali. They were shooting an HIV and nutrition story in a supposed “post-conflict zone”.

“It was a terrifying ordeal, but thanks to my incredible colleagues at Unicef, the other cameraman and myself were safely evacuated,” she recalls. Sadly, five UN peacekeepers were killed and another seriously injured.

“I remember getting on the plane and thinking we’re so lucky to leave this place, but I could never stop thinking about all the vulnerable children and people we left behind and that we never finished the story.

“It was a hectic experience, but I think a highlight for me was finding the courage to return to Sikasso in southern Mali three months later to finish the story. Though it was hard, it brought so much healing and restoration. It built in me a greater resilience and passion for telling stories that matter and for using my talent to make a difference,” she says.

Going back was a pivotal moment in her career as a photojournalist and storyteller. “I’ll never forget that feeling of leaving after we finished the project. I remember feeling so grateful that we could give those people eyes and a voice and that we weren’t defeated,” Schermbrucker recalls.

Another highlight for her was an exhibition she did with Unicef about two years ago. The exhibition, [uMama Onesibndi \(Mother of Courage\)](#), was a celebration of the courage of women, particularly in Africa, and focused standing firm in the face of HIV and making courageous life-changing decisions for themselves, their families and their unborn babies.



Image from [uMama Onesibndi \(Mother of Courage\)](#) exhibition



Image from [uMama Onesibndi \(Mother of Courage\)](#) exhibition

“It was such a highlight to see all these years of work and all the incredible women I’d met, compiling their stories, and exhibiting it at Constitution Hill,” she says.



#UnsungHeroes: Gloria Nkosi of Hope Worldwide SA
Ilse van den Berg 22 Apr 2020



Never losing love, passion, and purpose

Schermbrucker says that she never wants to lose her love, passion and purpose for what she does and regard it as merely a job.

“I want to always see it as a gift and a privilege to tell people’s stories through my photographs. I always want to see people

as I ought to - not as models or props, but as humans with stories, frailties, vulnerabilities, incredible courage and strength, who've allowed me to tell their stories. I never want what I do to become a job! If ever I feel I slip into that, then I immediately turn down a job or space them out to give me time to reflect and breathe. The heart of what I do needs to always be because I feel purpose and passion," she notes.



[Action Aid \(Somaliland\)](#)



[Action Aid \(Somaliland\)](#)

Practically, another challenge for her, being a mom and a wife as well, is having to leave her family behind and heading off to often far-flung, challenging places. "Reconciling these two worlds I live in is challenging. When I've just seen stuff that people will never really fully understand, I need to always have that grace to move between these two worlds. It's difficult."



#UnsungHeroes: Cornel Viljoen of A21

Ilse van den Berg 16 Apr 2020



When asked what inspires her to keep on telling stories that matter, she says: “A very wise man once said, there’s no greater love than laying one’s life down for others. That is what inspires me. My faith in something bigger than ourselves inspires me and the fact that our time on this planet really does matter. That inspires me to make my life count.”

For more, go to www.slingshotmedia.co.za.

ABOUT ILSE VAN DEN BERG

Ilse is a freelance journalist and editor with a passion for people & their stories (check out Passing Stories). She is also the editor of Go & Travel, a platform connecting all the stakeholders in the travel & tourism industry. You can check out her work [here](#) and [here](#). Contact Ilse through her website [here](#).

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