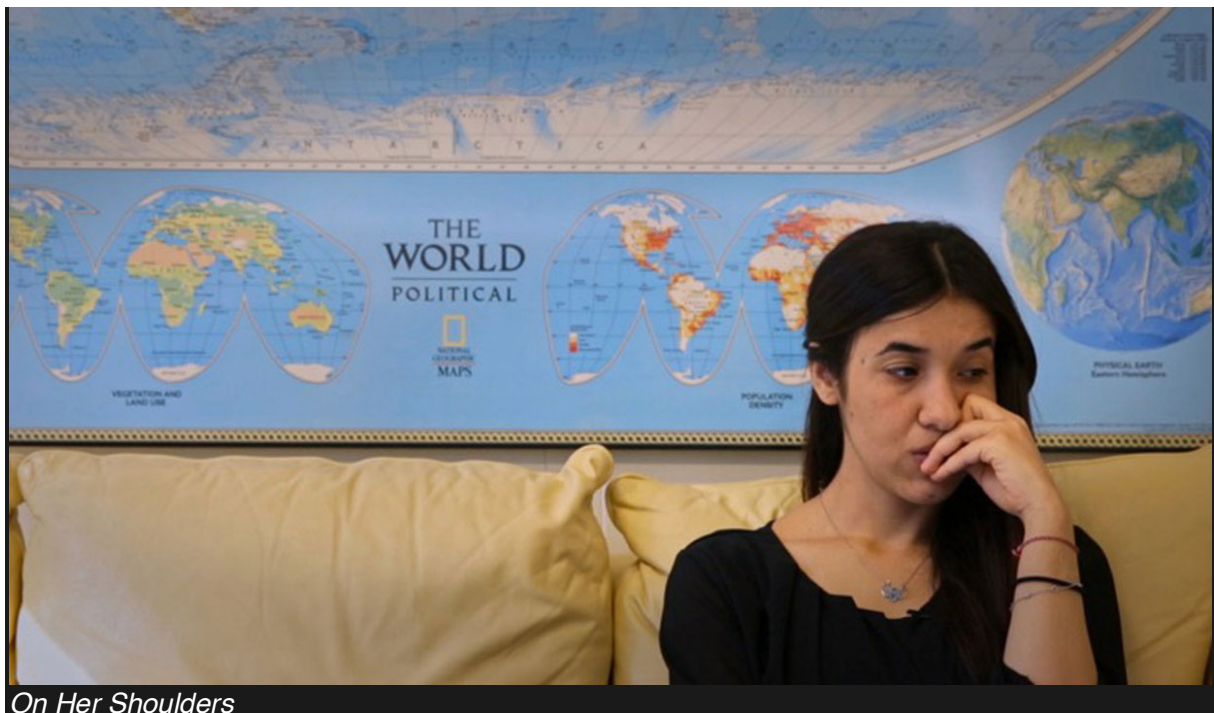


Filmmakermagazine.com Interview with  
Alexandria Bombach

# “What is Our Responsibility to Survivors?”: Alexandria Bombach on her Sundance-Winner *On Her Shoulders*



*On Her Shoulders*

by [Lauren Wissot](#) in [Directors](#), [Interviews](#), [Sundance](#) on Oct 17, 2018

Recently announced Nobel Peace Prize recipient Nadia Murad, a survivor of the Yazidi genocide and a current human rights activist, is the star of *On Her Shoulders*, Alexandria Bombach’s Sundance-winning (both for Best Documentary and the U.S. Documentary Directing Award) portrait of Murad as she navigates a world that would be overwhelming and intimidating for any 23-year-old, let alone one who has

experienced unspeakable crimes at the hands of ISIS. But speak Murad must — to the prying media, to the cold bureaucratic UN, to indistinguishable assorted government officials. And to the refugees at camps who look to her as a modern day Moses, heaven-sent to lead her people out of relentless misery.

*Filmmaker* caught up with Bombach to discuss the director's fly-on-the-wall journey with this tireless yet strikingly fragile crusader prior to the doc's theatrical debut

**Filmmaker:** How did you first encounter Nadia's story, and how did you develop enough trust with her to make the film?

**Bombach:** I first heard of Nadia when she gave her first testimony to the UN Security Council in December 2015. It wasn't until July 2016 that I got a call from the production company RYOT to make a short film about Nadia. At that time she was going at a relentless pace, saying yes to almost every interview, meeting, speech and invitation. Nadia and her team were doing everything they could to get the world to listen. So there was not much hesitation at all when the documentary was suggested.

**Filmmaker:** For me, the first half of *On Her Shoulders* really brought home how tone-deaf, craven and shameful the media can be when approaching sensitive stories like her's. The fact that reporters repeatedly want to hear specific details regarding her being held captive and raped — under the pretext of "necessary journalism" — is pretty disgusting. (If they were honest they'd just say, "Sorry to ask such personal questions, but sex slavery sells really well here in the West.") Was it hard for you to stay objective behind the lens while a woman who'd been exploited by ISIS seemed to be getting re-exploited by the Western media over and over again?

**Bombach:** I don't think objectivity exists in documentaries. I was shaken by the questions Nadia was expected to answer, and I'm still disturbed by people asking those questions to me in Q&A's during the screenings of this film. I want the audience to question why they even want to know these things in the first place. Does it make a difference to how much you care about the Yazidis? How much you care about what Nadia and thousands of other women went through? Will you act if you know just how many times Nadia was raped, how long she was in captivity, or how she escaped? This film made me question everything we do as storytellers, as well as the current landscape of journalism and documentary filmmaking, and how we package stories of trauma for a world that will so easily forget them no matter how much detail you give. What is our responsibility to survivors? It was difficult to witness and grapple with these things, but it wasn't hard to make the choice to not ask Nadia those questions in this film.

**Filmmaker:** I also wondered if anyone around Nadia tried to talk her into getting some mental health treatment while she was going through this trying media and speaking blitz. It just seemed dangerously masochistic for her to be repeatedly recounting her traumas in public without a therapist standing nearby to at least guide her.

**Bombach:** I felt similarly while with her, although it would never be my place to suggest something like this. What is maybe missing in this film is just how frantic and desperate this campaign was at the time. During that summer Nadia and her team were doing everything they possibly could without many resources to do it, or with any kind of background in advocacy work. It was a relentless pace and not sustainable. Thankfully, she's taken more control of her life now. But it's important to point out that they were all also dealing with survivor's guilt, and as Nadia said in the film, she didn't feel right about getting mental health treatment when so many people were still in captivity.

**Filmmaker:** Nadia bristles at having her identity summed up as "victim," yet she must in order to spur the international community to take action to save her people. She has to fit an acceptable preconceived storyline, as do many activists. Yet the "damsel in distress" image is also quite disturbing, especially since she's being molded, and isolated by an all-male team. Where are the women and female role models in Nadia's life?

**Bombach:** Nadia doesn't have an all-male team — she was just working closely with Murad and Ahmed at that time and traveling with them. She has many women supporters. She was also very comforted by having two people from her community to work closely with and says so in the film.

**Filmmaker:** We don't see much of Nadia behind the scenes, so to speak. Other than one scene in which she's cooking we just don't get much of a sense of her daily life outside the spotlight. Did you feel like your access was limited, and if so, by whom?

**Bombach:** My access wasn't limited by anyone but myself, because of wanting to give her space to breathe. But how much downtime you see in the film is an accurate reflection of how much downtime she had at the time. There wasn't really a "daily life" to be had — that moment in the kitchen was rare. This campaign was her life during that year. If she wasn't doing interviews, testimonies, meetings, speeches, or meeting with her own team, she was talking to her existing family members on the phone, or trying to keep up to date on the issues Yazidis were facing from the news or from people reaching out to her. If anything, there were some meetings we couldn't film with NGOs or politicians, but that was it.

