



## KHADIJA ISMAYILOVA

Azerbaijan  
Freelance journalist

Investigative reporter Khadija Ismayilova has specialized in covering Azerbaijan's most taboo subject – corruption and conflicts of interest at the highest government level. To shut her up, a sex-tape was used in a blackmail attempt in March 2012 but, far from putting a stop to her reporting, she re-issued her most important articles.

Ismayilova gives as good as she gets in her relations with a regime bent on silencing all critics. And she has paid the price – smeared in the government media, prosecuted on spying and defamation charges and often picked up for questioning. She was finally arrested on absurd charges last December after spending several months following the cases of detained human rights defenders – organizing legal support and assistance for their families, helping to draw up a list of political prisoners and providing the international community with constant alerts.

The authorities have imprisoned Ismayilova but they have not managed to silence her. In letters smuggled out of prison, she has continued to criticize the government and call for resistance. As a result she has been placed in solitary confinement.

From a cell just a few dozen metres from hers, detained fellow journalist Seymour Khazi paid tribute to her in an open letter in January: *"I don't know if it is due to the extremely patriarchal nature of our society (...) but when they wanted to refer to a woman's strength, determination or courage, our fathers always said: 'This woman is like a man.' Nowadays (...) to refer to a man's character and strength of will, I would rather say (...) this man in like Khadija."*



## BRANKICA STANKOVIC

Serbia  
Editor of the investigative TV programme *Insajder*

Brankica Stanković has headed *Insajder* – Serbian TV station B92's flagship investigative TV programme – ever since its creation in 2004, paying a high price for daring to expose corruption and shed light on the links between the criminal underworld and Serbian politicians and businessmen. The threats against her have grown with the passing years, to the point that a four-member police detail has accompanied her everywhere since 2009.

The interior ministry ordered this inconvenient but necessary security measure at a time when she was the target of an extraordinary number of threats and insults, especially on social networks. After an *Insajder* episode about the judicial system's failure to address crimes by Belgrade football club Partizan's extremist supporters, an effigy of Stanković in the form of an inflatable doll was brandished in the stands of Partizan's stadium during a European match on 16 December 2009, as supporters chanted that "the whore Brankica" would suffer the same fate as **Slavko Ćuruvija, a journalist murdered in 1999**. They finally stabbed the doll.

Stanković has not let up in her investigative reporting, despite the continuing threats and the constraints of her police escort, and wrote a book entitled *Insajder: My Story* in 2013. Last year, she was profiled in the Reporters Without Borders list of “Information Heroes” and received the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women’s Media Foundation.



HLA HLA  
HTAY

Burma  
AFP bureau chief

Hla Hla Htay began working as a journalist in Burma under the military dictatorship and has been an Agence France-Presse reporter since 2004. She was the first reporter to get photos of Naypyidaw, the new capital that the paranoid generals had secretly begun building. She covered the bloody crackdown on the “Saffron Revolution” in 2007 and the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis the following year, when the military censored all attempts to expose their disastrous mismanagement of humanitarian assistance.

*“Under the military, we were often followed and I had to keep changing phones to contact my sources, which was very expensive,”* she said. During the years of military rule, Hla Hla Htay managed to participate in a journalism programme in Rangoon and did a three-month course in Cambodia, despite the dangers involved in any trip abroad. She joined AFP after two years as an editor at Today Publishing House and is now AFP’s Rangoon bureau chief.

*“Many people think journalism is a man’s job. I remember that some of my male colleagues used to ‘joke’ that it was thanks to my ‘feminine wiles’ that I managed to get an exclusive or verify information. As a Burmese woman, working as a journalist means confronting gender issues and cultural taboos. As far as I’m concerned, I pay attention to my professional honesty and try not to worry about this kind of discrimination.”*



FARIDA  
NEKZAD

Afghanistan  
Wakht News Agency founder

Co-founder and former editor of the *Pajhwok Afghan News* agency, Farida Nekzad has spent the past 12 years being threatened by media freedom’s enemies, who have repeatedly tried to kidnap or kill her. While investigating female journalist Zakia Zaki’s murder in 2007, she received phone calls and emails promising her the same fate. They just reinforced her determination to defend freedom of information and women’s rights.

She launched the *Wakht News Agency* in 2008 and still runs it, employing women journalists to cover a range of issues including women’s rights. Despite financial difficulties, the agency has a network of correspondents throughout Afghanistan and continues to be one the country’s leading independent news outlets.

In 2014, Nekzad was put in charge of the Independent Election Commission’s media commission, with the job of monitoring media impartiality during the presidential election campaign. Despite a climate of extreme tension, she spent several months

investigating media violations of the electoral rules and complaints from the public about election coverage.

The winner of many international prizes including the Courage in Journalism Award from the **International Women's Media Foundation**, Nekzad continues to spearhead the fight for women's rights in Afghanistan and to campaign for the overhaul of media legislation with the aim of getting more protection for journalists in their often dangerous work.



## NOUSHIN AHMNDIKHORSANI

Iran  
Journalist, writer and women's rights activist

A journalist, writer and translator, Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani is the founder and editor of the **Feminist School** website and one of Iran's leading women's rights advocates. For the past 20 years, she has tirelessly used her writing skills to condemn discrimination and abuses against women and to promote change in Iran.

She is also one of the founders of the campaign for "**One Million Signatures**" to a petition for changes to Iranian laws that discriminate against women – a campaign for which she and her fellow activists have paid a high price. Harassed constantly by the authorities for the past 20 years because of her writing and her defence of women's rights, she has been arrested several times and was given a one-year suspended prison sentence in 2012.

Although blocked inside Iran, her website is a key source of information about the problems of women in Iran, and a forum for debating these problems. Leading writers on women's rights such as Mansoreh Shojai and Azadeh Davachi are regular contributors. In all, Khorasani has written around 20 books and 100 articles, from those she wrote for *Jense Dovom* (The Second Sex), a periodical published in the early 1990s, to "*Shirin wants to be president*," her latest book.



## SOLANGE LUSIKU NSIMIRE

Democratic Republic of Congo  
Editor of *Le Souverain*

The only newspaper editor in the eastern Kivu region who is a woman, Solange Lusiku Nsimire is very proud of *Le Souverain*, a monthly that does investigative reporting, and continues to pursue its founder's goal of producing an independent publication that reflects a range of opinions. "*When we denounce embezzlement, inter-communal tension or the working conditions in mines, we do it for everyone, in the name of media freedom*," she said.

A mother of seven, she is also trying to revive an appreciation of the written word that 30 years of war have destroyed. "*I want to contribute to Kivu's collective memory, to document events for future generations and to prevent the spread of rumour and disinformation*." Her mission of peace is challenging but she tackles it with energy and, for her pains, is the constant target of threats not only from the government but also the opposition and sometimes even civil society. "*We pay a high price for our neutrality*."

As well as producing the magazine, she likes to stimulate a public debate and organizes participative press reviews in which members of the public and local government officials join in discussing press articles. Her political and social investigative reporting has resulted in her being banned from news conferences held by the provincial authorities. But she can rely on being fed information by colleagues working for less serious media outlets.

Is she ever tempted to stop? *"This would be to disown myself. I don't know how to do anything else."* Unfortunately, members of her family have also been the victims of threats and attacks as a result of her commitment. *"I chose my profession but what about them? What have they done?"*



Mae Azango has been a journalist for 12 years but it's the articles she has been writing since 2010 about female genital mutilation in rural areas of Liberia that have made her known to the general public.

In traditional areas of Central West Africa, the Sande secret society's "bush schools" prepare girls for marriage and to be mothers, with graduation consisting of a genital mutilation ceremony. Azango had to go into hiding for a month after writing an article that described the appalling violence of one of these ceremonies. *"I wanted to draw the public's attention to the public health dangers of such practices,"* she said.

But that is not how the Sande's guardians saw it. She began getting lots of threats. *"We are going to cut you,"* anonymous callers told her. Far from being intimidated, she wrote another article about this secret society, this time about its political and economic importance in rural areas. In 2013, her reporting led President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to condemn FGM, a hitherto taboo subject.

Azango does not just write about women's rights. In a country where newspapers seem interested only in politics and business stories, she tries to cover the lives of ordinary people. *"I write about human rights, seizures of land from small farmers, development issues, human trafficking and police impunity... I write for those who have no voice, for the poor, for those cannot speak out, for those who get the government's attention only during elections and are then abandoned. I write to create a public debate, so that change can take place."*



A freelancer for the magazine *Proceso* and founder of the "Journalists on Foot Network," Marcela Turati became a journalist because she thought it was *"a way to change things."* She specializes in covering violence, especially cartel-related violence, focusing on its victims and its impact on Mexican society with the aim of increasing awareness of this issue. It was not an easy choice in what is the western hemisphere's deadliest country

for journalists, one where physical safety is a constant challenge for those daring to cover sensitive subjects.

When she started out, she assumed there was no difference between a male journalist and a female one. Nowadays she thinks otherwise. *"It's much more difficult for a woman to be sent to a dangerous area (...) you have to work two or three times as hard to be able to go. I don't know if it's due to machismo or overprotectiveness, but you have to work harder than the men."*

She is concerned not just about this form of discrimination but also about the sexual harassment to which women journalists are exposed. She has found that the problem is not taken seriously. Women are doubted when they report sexual harassment. They are regarded as crazy or hysterical. People think they are seeking attention. To improve the situation of women journalists, Turati insists on the importance of combatting impunity, conducting investigations with a gender perspective and offering appropriate protection to victims



ZAINA  
ERHAIM

Syria

Journalist and trainer in northern Syria

Zaina Erhaim graduated from the University of Damascus in 2007 and was doing a post-graduate course in London when the Syrian revolution erupted in 2011. She obtained her master's in international journalism while helping to create the **Local Coordination Committee** media centres and doing frequent visits to Syria. Then went back to Syria as soon as she could.

*"Counting the martyrs and barrel bombs was easy" but surviving was a permanent challenge as she roamed the liberated areas amid air-strikes and bombardments and tried to document life, to describe "shop-keepers who continue to sell their fruit and vegetables in the ruins of a bombed building (...) children who play amid the graves after school."*

*"Lending my eyes to the world so that it sees what I see" was complicated and was not enough. She had to do more. As a journalist, she decided to help those who are now virtually the only source of news coverage on the ground in Syria – citizen-journalists. In 2013, she became a trainer so that the photos, video footage and reports they were risking their lives to produce would be taken seriously and broadcast internationally.*

For the past two years, she has been teaching citizen-journalists in Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Idlib how to construct media reports and has been helping them to get published. *"Some of them now work for international media. It's very satisfying to learn that an activist has found a job in a TV station."*

She transmits her passion as well as her know-how. Armed with cameras and notebooks, these men and women follow her lead in ripping aside the veil of violence in order to shed light on an alternative Syria in which *"people love, get married, have friends, have children (...) an admirable people fighting for its future."* The future Syria that shines in her eyes.



# FATIMA AL IFRIKI

Morocco  
Journalist and producer

*"I'm free now, I've broken my chains."* So says Fatima Al Ifriki, a Rabat-born journalist who has had an unusual career. The daughter of a policeman and a housewife, she entered journalism almost by chance but within a few years became one of the national TV broadcaster's leading presenters.

Despite her professional success, she became restless at the end of 2010 as turmoil swept the Arab world. In Morocco, the adoption of a new constitution by referendum in July 2011 failed to satisfy the hopes and dreams of a new generation that gave rise to the 20 February Movement. For Ifriki, it was a rebirth. *"These courageous young people were demanding what I'd always dreamed of. They were demanding more freedom and democracy, and more respect for human rights, while we, this country's elite, had never dared to go so far."*

When Ifriki began spearheading calls for freedom of expression and information, the national TV station shunted her aside and she began writing weekly columns for Arabic-language newspapers such as *Akhbar El Yaoum*, expressing a level of criticism that is rare in Morocco. After her family was threatened, she stopped writing for several months to protect her privacy. But she soon resumed contributing to *Akhbar El Yaoum* and its website *El Yaoum 24* and was one of the first to condemn the arrest of [Ali Anouzla](#), the editor of another news website, in September 2013, participating in his support committee until his release.

Although she is still threatened by possible reprisals, her continuing courage and determination can be seen in Freedom Now, a media freedom NGO that she and such prestigious figures as Khadija Riyadi, winner of the 2013 UN Human Rights Prize, launched in 2014. The government's refusal to register this NGO suggests that the road to freedom could be long and tortuous.