

## Kiran Nazish

Founding Director, The Coalition For Women In Journalism

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Kiran Nazish, founding director of The Coalition For Women In Journalism, who was previously an award-winning foreign correspondent. Launched in 2017, The Coalition is the first worldwide support network for female journalists, including those reporting from the frontline who are at immediate risk of violence and harassment. Born in Pakistan, Kiran has extensively covered conflict, peace and security in south Asia and the Middle East as a reporter contributing to leading publications, including The New York Times. She launched The Coalition as an independent body to provide support for female journalists from all backgrounds after facing death threats from her own reporting inside Pakistan. Kiran, thank you for joining me.**

Thank you for having me.

**What an absolutely incredible initiative. I mean, I was reading a briefing note and just doing some research. I mean, since August 2021, you guys have evacuated and assisted 320 journalists, women leaders, and activists to safety. That is an incredible achievement.**

Thank you. I must say that the numbers that you see on our website are just the cases that we evacuated more immediately in the months leading, you know, right after the Taliban took over and the US pull out. But we are still, it's been one year down, and we're still working on a lot of cases, we have hundreds of journalists who are in third countries and in Afghanistan that we're working with three different governments to process their cases as well. We just, in fact, like last week we got a new batch that is ready to come to Canada, you know, we've gotten all of the paperwork done and sorting out the flight details, et cetera. And then we have these new cases from Afghanistan, as you probably are hearing in the news. It's one year down and women leaders, activists, and journalists are still being targeted by the Taliban, in the meanwhile we also continued to provide safe houses or other

resources for women leaders and internists who are there and still working on a lot of cases to try to get them out of the country, which is really, it's been just a new layer of challenges since, you know, I would say like the last 9 to 12 months have been just new layer of challenges because the dynamics since Taliban took power and the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan and the sitting Taliban government, all of that, they're new complications, they're new diplomatic streams that we have to try with different governments and including Pakistan, but also you're in England, so, you know, the UK government and the Canadian government and the US government. So just new layers of things and, you know, it's a completely new dynamic, something that has never happened before. And we are learning so much and trying to navigate so much.

**I mean, there's so much to get through. I've got so many questions. I think what you're doing is an incredible job and much needed. I'm very grateful you know, as a citizen of the planet that you're doing this, I mean, it's amazing. Share with our listeners, if you can, how did the conversation about launching The Coalition start? I mean, I know you yourself faced threats of violence after reporting on the Pakistan Intelligence Agencies. Could you give us a brief press of your career before you started The Coalition Of Women In Journalism and then also how that began and where you've gone so far?**

Well, yeah, I think that, you know, The Coalition is so, like the work that I do now, like now we cover press freedom is so different from what we started. And I have to say that I think, the forming of The Coalition was something that was always there in my career throughout, you know, I grew up in Pakistan, I started actually, you know, my first article was published when I was eight years old in a children's magazine. And then, when I was a teenager, I started interning at Dawn newspaper, which was the leading English newspaper founded by the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and it was a prestigious newspaper and I started as a kid in a kid section, and then teenager, and then I was in the launch of the science magazine called science.com and so just, you know, I was in school while I was working as a copy editor at the paper. So my career really started in Karachi because as a kid I liked writing, and, you know, I was curious, and I had no plans of being a journalist. You know, at least my father wanted me to be something else. And I studied Maths and Economics, and I did Double Masters in Maths and Economics and Statistics and alongside I was working. But by the time I was done with my Masters, I was working as a TV producer and director at a news channel. And so, I grew up in Pakistan in the post-9/11 world. And the media was changing, shifting really fast in the country

because under Pervez Musharraf there was a media boom, we used to call because he gave a lot of opportunities for news and channels to open. And so we had like dozens of new news channels and media outlets that were opening up. And there was just, things were really booming. This is also when we had an influx of foreign correspondence because of the, you know, the war in Afghanistan, the US invasion of Afghanistan and the US presence in Afghanistan. And, you know, by default, the presence in Pakistan as well. So, you know, the United States and the post-9/11 world was just everything was happening here in Pakistan. And so I kind of, you know, I did my first decade of my career there as a TV producer-director and then eventually, you know, it was a terrible time between 2005 and 2009. We had, you know, we used to have bomb attacks and suicide attacks in Pakistan, all over the country, almost on a daily basis. There was a time in 2006 when, you know, this was happening on a daily basis. But other times too, like there were horrible attacks, you know, like journalists' work became all about covering terrorism and terrorists. So anyways, I kind of, you know, sort of grew up in that environment and eventually because of the terrorism and some of my friends that I made friends along the way in my career as a journalist, you know, as a producer, but also eventually I started doing foreign correspondence and started working with foreign media, covering Pakistan and Afghanistan alongside, I lost some friends and one of my friends who was also a colleague who was killed by the Pakistani Intelligence Agency, Salim Shaza, who eventually proved the distinct relationship between the Pakistani Intelligence Agency and the terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban. So anyways, I think that a lot of this was going on, and alongside I was travelling to travel areas to FATA, to Waziristan, places where, you know, Taliban were trained or they had taken over villages in Pakistan. So I was reporting on all of these things. And oftentimes I was the only woman. And when I worked as a journalist in Pakistan, in, you know, at the TV channel, I was, you know, oftentimes one of the rare women in the play, in the positions that I was in. And so there was a lot of, you know, I think the build-up to The Coalition has been just, you know, growing up, seeing myself as, you know, one of the few women doing the jobs that I was doing and seeing a lot of misogyny along the way, and seeing how women, you know, had to do that. And eventually, you know, I think I worked in India after, and Nepal, I started dabbling to stay away from some of the challenges I had, you know, both from misogyny, but also safety challenges from agencies, from Intelligence Agencies in Pakistan. I think I decided to leave the country precisely because it was just dangerous. It was impossible. At one point, I think by 2010 and 11, it was impossible for me to work and be able to report on the stories that I was witnessing and I was able to, you know, even have access to, you know, in tribal areas. Or like, you know, when I

would interview the Taliban, for example, the TTP or right after the Malala attack. And a lot of things that were, that I was witnessing as a journalist with the access, I was not able to report on them for many, many reasons, and I think that's when I started realising that I want to, you know, go cover. I wanted to be a journalist by that time, I had spent so much time doing it. So I, you know, left and I went and covered Iraq and other countries. I had also, you know, briefly worked at The New York Times and it was a fantastic experience. I always, you know, I was teaching, I was also dabbling with working as a professor in India when I got that fellowship offer to go to The Times. So I left my professor job and, you know, went to The Times because, you know, that was something that I think as a journalist I wanted to do. And then I saw two things, one that there was great journalism and I found great mentors, but I also saw that women were not, there were a lot of women just working the night shift and, you know, copy-editing and, you know, women were not equal. And so I've seen that along my career, I saw that everywhere from, you know, Pakistan, to India, to Nepal, Afghanistan, Mexico, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and one of the best newsrooms in the world. And so how The Coalition was essentially the idea eventually culminated where I had to just leave everything and do this was, I was after, you know, a run in Iraq, I was in Iraq trying to cover the rise of Mosul and the rise of ISIS and Mosul, and I was doing that and then I just kind of collapsed, went back to New York. I was based in New York at the time, between New York and Iraq. And I went back to New York and completely collapsed after a HEFA training, you know, and ended up in the hospital like I was immobile and couldn't move.

**This is horrendous.**

Yeah. I think the trauma builds up and I think that was a lot, the trauma was not just of, you know, I think there was moral injury of not being able to do, you know, witnessing a lot of things like covering after curing Al-Qaeda and Taliban and losing friends, and covering Syria, and losing friends there, and in Afghanistan. And then, you know, seeing that, you know, as a journalist, there's a purposefulness. I think when you are on the front lines for a long time, it becomes more than just telling a story because we are more than journalists, we are also human beings and we relate to the trauma. So sometimes we want answers for the public. And sometimes we just, in that responsibility, the moral responsibility, I think as journalists, we also want answers for humanity and we get frustrated and we feel helpless. And I think a lot of journalists have faced this. And I've seen a lot of my friends who actually were unable to after collapsing or unable to get back into it. You know, journalists,

oftentimes after covering conflicts, don't always come back and are not able to always go back and do the job.

**Well, you might suffer from physical and mental injuries like PTSD.**

Yes, exactly. I mean, PTSD is now that we can openly talk about it. PTSD has been there for journalists covering conflicts for a long time. And recently in the last, I think five, six years, this has become a conversation thankfully, and there's much more work on that. So anyways, I was in, you know, in the hospital and when I got out of, I was in the hospital several times over the next few months, and when I got out, I started talking to women who were ahead of me, you know, mentors who had been 20 years ahead of me, women who were Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists, former colleagues at The Times, and I basically just wanted to understand how they did it, cuz they were there and they had gone through and they had covered conflicts. And I was just confused about why it was, because you know, I must say that as a journalist, after covering difficult stories in the world, you build resilience and strength and a lot of qualities that come with witnessing and, you know, navigating very difficult scenarios and very busy industry, right. So I think we build skills, and I think that, I was surprised that after being able to navigate all that, I was now somehow immobile. So anyways, I wanted to ask other women and I did, and I think I found almost a hundred per cent of women I spoke to, you know, these are leading women journalists with Pulitzer Prizes and women who have worked as executive producers at top news channels in America, you know, from PBS to New York Times, CNN, et cetera, and ABC - a lot of my mentors who had been there, the top of the industry, and they all said that they never had mentorship or support, and they just had to find a way to navigate everything themselves and that they had seen a lot of their other female colleagues who had not been in journalism had to leave or had not made the progress they had and the story that we saw, that women we saw, and, you know, I must say, please, that this is before 'MeToo'. And so 'MeToo' and 'Black Lives Matter' and this whole movement about women and gender that has come out after 'MeToo', the conversation has really illuminated some of those things that were there in our industry for decades. Women were invisible wherever you are in the world for decades, including in the best newsrooms, you know, in really progressive parts of the world, so I think from there, I still couldn't figure out what to do, you know, what kind of support organisation to form but I just knew that I did not want to see this go on. And I just thought that I also can't do journalism like this if we are in the same environment. And then again, because there was no 'MeToo' and there was no conversation about it, it was just us talking amongst ourselves. And so I started with

a small community of support network for women journalists, you know, friends and foreign correspondents that I knew. And then I did a survey, spoke to 101 editors and reporters in US newsrooms, Canadian newsrooms and Mexican newsrooms because I was working a lot in Mexico those days, so just had access and, you know, availability to be able to do that. And I found that, you know, 62% of women journalists after four to five years in their career had a plateau, they would hit a plateau in their career in which the plateau meant they could not make progress, they would not rise to managerial positions, and that affected other things. And then sometimes they would also decline in their performance, so reporters like crime reporters, health reporters, education reporters, freelancers, they would, after four to five years in their career, they would hit a plateau that not only kind of “plateaued” their career, but also sometimes declined their performance and ability to work, which was kind of correlating to, you know, the challenges they were facing in the newsroom. And there were, we got different feedbacks about different, and also from a lot of male editors who give feedback on, you know, why they really liked working with women, but they couldn't, they had to navigate a difficult male-dominated environment. So a lot of ‘HeForShe’ in the newsroom, who felt paralysed because of the systems, and this is especially true in, you know, countries like Mexico or smaller newsrooms in the US that are not well resourced, like the big media. So anyways, we decide, and then one more, you know, out of those 62%, we found that 41% of women journalists were likely to leave journalism and work in other professions.

### **What a loss to journalism.**

Well, exactly. And so what we were seeing consistently in this data is like there was a loss for journalism at the end. You know, not only when women journalists working in the newsroom were not able to perform to the best of their ability, that was a loss for journalism. And when they left, that was a loss for journalism. And the parallel, we were also seeing that, you know, at Columbia University or Northwestern, all of these big universities, we were looking at data and we were seeing more women graduate from universities. This is 2004 and 5. You're seeing more women journalist women graduating from journalism school, you know, from top universities. And so there's this influx of these journalists women entering the industry. And then you're seeing that after a while they're not successful, they get discouraged and then they, you know, either leave or they don't find it interesting anymore. And there's a whole psychology behind this, right? Like this environment, how that sort of translates, and you know, now I think there's much more conversation about mental health and how that affects your creativity and all of that. But there are these realistic challenges that



no one was even looking into and most of the time, and we still do get the same response from a lot of, you know, newsrooms when we, you know, where we're trying to figure something out regarding gender equality, we hear, and we used to hear that you see all these women they're everywhere in the industry. So, you know, I think the thing is that women have been there in the workforce generally in population, but because they cannot realise their full potential, that leads to a lot of other challenges for the women, but also for that industry, which is, you know, which we are talking about the media right now, but this is true in a lot of industries where if women or anyone working or someone from a racial background, working, faces mental health challenges, or discouragement, or lack of support in that system or industry that would affect inevitably the industry as well, and the dynamics of the industry. And so I think that that's something that we are seeing. And thankfully, I think with 'MeToo' and everything, 'Black Lives Matter', we are seeing more policy changes, which is something that we always wanted. Policy changes in the newsroom of inclusivity. It doesn't really help, sometimes you're just doing the, you know, window dressing in the newsroom and bringing in diversity and stuff and it doesn't really solve all the problems, which is a more detailed conversation and more detailed work to do. But I think that it does bring in more women, brings in more perspective, letting them do the work, you know, improves the quality of journalism as well. And thankfully, now we can openly talk about that and, you know, it's something that we all understand. But yeah, I think that the CFWIJ, The Coalition For Women In Journalism has been a culmination of a lot of events in my career and how I saw women from a country, which was extremely misogynistic where women were, you know, there was a lot of misogyny in journalism to being in a place where women are supposedly equal and seeing the same challenges there, I think that was what really sunk in, and that's what I wanted to change.

**I'm blown away by what you're doing. Could you paint a picture for our listeners? Like what a typical week looks like? Give us a 1-0-1 in terms of, I mean, I wouldn't even know where to start with your achievements. There've been so many, but like, what is the regular working rhythm and what do you look to at the moment?**

Yeah, I mean, there's a lot, and we're like, I think for the last year and a half or two years, we've been up to our eyeballs. So we, you know, we started as a support organisation, which, you know, focused on mentorship. I was still working as a journalist and I must say that when I was an exile, I got an emergency fund. And so I started the organisation with that fund. And so it was always this idea that we were

gonna do mentorship and then I will continue my journalism, which kind of eventually changed. And how that changed is what we are doing now, we started these support networks in different countries, where I had worked in seven countries at the time, and through those networks, we started seeing some of our members, women journalists were getting targeted, so, you know, one of our colleagues was taken to jail in India without any warrant arrested, was she was covering a protest. Another colleague was deported from Turkey. Another colleague's house was raided in Southern Turkey. She was Kurdish, you know, a journalist was targeted in Mexico. And then in the backdrop, you know, at the time, you know, Gauri Lankesh, an Indian journalist was killed. A Pakistani journalist Zainab Shahzad was abducted by the Pakistani Intelligence Agencies, and I actually, it was Zainab's case that I really took on where I was like, okay, all of these events are happening, and we tried to get, you know, other leading press freedom organisations to like, look at these cases and report them, or find ways to supporting them, even though that's not something that we were doing, but these were women in our network, so we basically wanted to, you know, find support for them. And in that work, we found that actually most of the time, all of these cases were not being documented or paid attention to, and then one particular case that I really fought for from, with a lot of like organisations to get support was Zainab Shahzad was abducted by the Pakistani military agencies. And eventually, it was long months, long trying to get someone to support her and like, sort of, publish her statement and ask the Pakistani authorities to release her. That didn't happen. And eventually after three months there, the final response I got, and I'm not gonna name anybody, and that is changing too, I think because of our work, somewhat anyway, that we got a response saying that she's, we couldn't say that she's a journalist, and that really like succinctly describes what women have been for a very long time, women journalists from middle-class.

### **Adding insult to injury.**

Yes, adding insult to injury. And I think that there's a realistic dynamic to that as well, because, you know, you can't really vet somebody who writes in a completely local language, so it's very hard for international organisations to, you know, unless they have dedicated staff in every country, it's hard for them to find, to be able to vet a lot of these cases. But here we were saying that we know them, and we know that these are actual journalists who are getting targeted because of their work. But I think that at that time, because women, this whole psychology again, before 'MeToo', was different. And so, you know, if you are a local journalist and there was no



understanding that local journalists actually can be very invisible because they work for local media and you don't find anything online on them. All you can find is through people who work with them to vet them, right? So we were able to do that because we had networks in different countries. By that time we had networks in 12 countries. So anyways, we launched the press freedom newsroom eventually in December of 2018 is when we started like setting it up and with the help of Craig Newmark actually who is a wonderful ally and supporter of The Coalition. We were able to launch our press freedom advocacy part of the organisation, which is what we are now. We became a nonprofit, we are based out of New York and we also recently just got our status in Canada, nonprofit status. And we are based out of New York. And a lot of the advocacy work that we do we started with 12 countries, now our press freedom newsroom monitors and covers 128 countries and the goal is essentially the whole, what we want to do is make sure that when women and LGBTQ journalists get targeted, there's somebody vetting and reporting those cases because it starts with documentation. These journalists who get targeted often need somebody to be reporting on these cases. They take these, a lot of our reporting has been used in courtrooms, in Turkey, by Kurdish journalists, because sometimes there is no other proof or evidence or public record for what happened to them or if they were deported or if the police treated them badly. A lot of times American journals have used this as well. And so, I think that, you know, to now answer your question, like what does our week look like? You know, a regular week, it's basically we have a team in different continents. We have team members in almost all continents except Australia and Africa actually. We have some correspondence in Africa, we get information from them, but basically our team works around the clock. We like to say that we don't sleep because there's somebody awake at all times as a sun rises. So what we do essentially, like we get a lot of details from our networks. Sometimes, if journalists are targeted, we get information through either our networks or somebody tells us, you know, an informant chain or we also monitor the landscape, just keeping an eye on what's happening in different parts of the world. So every morning we wake up and we look at the landscape to see if a female journalist has been targeted somewhere or not. And we document those cases. We try to talk to the journalist. They're if we cannot have access to them, say if they're taken to prison or jail or they are in a hospital, which happens often as well after targeted attacks, so we try to talk to their colleagues, or editors, or family, or lawyers and so on. And so we try to document the cases and try to stay in touch with the journalists as well. So most of the time our team is doing that. And then alongside that work, a lot of the work then becomes about cases that have been going on for a while. I mean, there are cases that we started covering in Bangladesh and Mexico

and El Salvador that have been going on for years. There have been along the year, you know, along the way, there have been cases that, you know, in Turkey, for example, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, we have cases that we've been just covering court hearings after court hearings for years. And so, so we document those things, but we also even we see a trend or we see something that is of more concern, so I'll give you an example that is more familiar with everybody, is Maria Ressa in the Philippines. So the targeting of Rappler and Maria, we had been covering for a very long time when it was happening from the beginning of the work we started and that eventually has gone through so many layers of how many times Maria has been targeted over and over with different kinds of new tactics by Duterte government. And while he's targeting Maria, they're also targeting other journalists, so we are following all of those cases. And I will say that, you know, there are a lot of women in the media in the Philippines who are targeted both online and there's lots of new ways of legal targeting of journalists in the Philippines. So we, we basically follow all of those along. And when something like that becomes a trend or worthy of deeper coverage, we try to do features, we do conversations, we try to make sure that if we need to reach out to journalists at a given situation that we are doing that, something that, for example, we've done in the US during 'Black Lives Matter', or in Canada, when one of the right-wing politicians here, Maxime Bernier, you know, leaked information of a female journalist where there have been a lot of targeted, yeah, like, and you know, what we see happening in Canada or what happened under Donald Trump in the US is something that we saw happening in Egypt years ago, or like in India years and years ago, right? And so we see the same tactics being used to target women journalists. And I think I should mention that one example that I got in Pakistan, we took a delegation to Pakistan to speak to, you know, to get the government to act because why online violence and in-person violence against women journalists was really increasing two years ago, in 2019, so we took a delegation and we spoke to the Human Rights Minister and relay a proposal to the Prime Minister. And it was about, you know, taking steps that they could take under resources that we know they had. And they agreed to look to the proposal. And we saw a decline, for three months we saw a decline in attacks against women journalists. And after that, it was resumed because of the sitting government and opposition got into fights again. And then it was back to, you know, targeting women. And one other thing that I learned from that, so the two takeaways that I think apply in a lot of places is one, one of the parliamentarians told me, he's a, you know, as a journalist, I know people who are in the government even, you know, if the government has problems and the military and stuff, so this parliamentarian told me out of friendliness, he said "Kiran, when we want to silence the media, it is

more effective, we've learned that it is more effective for us to target the women. It's more effective when we go after Asma Shirazi", who's one of the leading journalists and a member of The Coalition as well. He said "it's more likely that we are going to get better feedback, more momentum, and we're able to successfully be able to target the media and style as the media, if we target a woman, because then everyone joins the chorus that it is more divisive." It becomes divisive because people are more likely to join that conversation in hating the female journalist because in society, there's more mistrust. And it just like really, really stayed with me. And this is two years ago. But since then, I've been just really observing, you know, the landscape, you look at Turkey, how they target women, you know, women journalists get targeted more.

**I read a report recently, you reported about the escalating cases of police overreach and legal harassment of female journalists in Turkey, and you mentioned India as well. I mean, these authoritarian states are relentless in their onslaught against the independent press.**

Absolutely. And I think that this thing that women used to be years and years ago, before 'MeToo' and before the conversations about gender equality in the media or the fact that women were, I think women just started exposing a lot of things that male drones were restricted to but what I'm trying to say is, I think there was a years ago when I was working as a journalist, I got a lot of access to everything from the Taliban, to Al-Qaeda, to Prime Ministers, you know, to sitting government ministers, to military officials, everywhere I got access because I was a woman and mostly because I wasn't taken seriously and that worked for me. And I think at some point, and I think a lot of women got that access but I think that what changed, that psychology changed when women, when media was being censored in a lot of these countries, Turkey and Egypt and Lebanon and Pakistan and India and Mexico, and we, you know, I think those who wanted to target journalism sought asylum, the press started noticing that women are now doing the stories. So they started taking women seriously because women were asking questions in the media because men couldn't anymore. And men were either getting imprisoned depending on the country or getting killed, depending on the country. So women were asking questions and then they all, you know, simultaneously, I think we see this rise of divisiveness around the world, this polarisation around the world and alongside, we see this rise of targeting of women, both in the media and politics.

**It's genuinely chilling. Could you give a kind of help that you give your, I don't know what you would call them, they're journalists, aren't they, but you've done everything from relocations, providing safe transports to evacuating them, and many others with their family. I know that you provide mentoring and general support for journalists, who frankly are out there on their own that need some support and need that connection. I mean, in a sense, your work is never done. You've got a huge amount of countries, a huge amount of journalists needing your support and a large amount of support that you need to offer. Do you have enough hours in the day?**

Yeah. So, thank you, yeah. I think that the work has really become several, like you're working in several areas now we just started as, you know, a support organisation, then a press freedom advocacy and stuff, but alongside, you know, on a daily basis, my work looks very different from, you know, say our reporting team. We have some particular team members that work only on advocacy or developing strategies. I guess one thing that I want to say is that emergencies is something that is very new, newly added to our work. And it started maybe about a year and a half ago before the Afghanistan, before the Taliban takeover that we started, you know, taking journalist cases were like from Egypt and Lebanon and Syria and just members or journalists were targeted in different ways either by legal charges or just, you know, their lives were under threat. What we started doing is trying to help them in the support world we wanna do. We started helping them with, you know, court cases, and it all started really organically, which is something that now we are doing more officially, but I think that we are just so overwhelmed since Afghanistan and Ukraine, that we like really are up to our eyeballs and on a daily basis that we get new cases of, sometimes you're almost asking for support, but we, you know, the support work essentially started with trying to help one journalist, you know, get asylum in Europe, one journalist from Turkey, and it started from there. And then, you know, we started helping, we never really officially launched the emergencies until the Afghanistan situation arrived. And even before the Taliban takeover, we had, we were at the time working on 12 cases of 12 women journalists to relocate them in Pakistan, Turkey, and Canada, and then the Afghanistan thing happened, so I think that we are kind of like right now looking into how to be able to do this work as much as it is needed because we have more cases of journalists who need support than it is our capacity to be able to help. And one thing that we do to solve that problem to navigate that is also, we send a lot of the cases that we get to other organisations, or we direct them to other places where there are resources for women journalists as well. But then, you know, I think that a lot of the work that we do is focused on, you

know, women and LGBTQ journalists. And we do consistently also end up being the only organisation working on these cases, but on a daily basis, you know what, I'll tell you what, my day or some of my colleagues' days apart from the newsroom, it looks like, is like we are doing, you know, we get a lot of cases every day, journalists reach out on different cases every day, so from, you know, right now there's something happening in Canada with a senior Western female journalist, a top journalist in Canada who got sort of her contract got dismissed Lisa LaFlamme because of her grey hair. So that has been something that's just, we've been getting almost hundreds of responses and conversations from journalists who want to do something about it. And we are trying to work on proposing policies to newsrooms about this as a response, and just like talking to journalists about it in the last week, while I'm also working on several cases of still Afghan relocation, Ukrainian journalists looking for support to get vests and helmets and high-fat training and just, you know, on a daily basis, talking to journalists about connecting them with mental health resources and lawyers, and just going over a lot of times, like I'm working also on a lot of slap cases with some of my colleagues, and slap cases, I wonder if you're familiar with them, but these are essentially legal cases that journals are facing, either false libel cases by government officials or corrupt politicians, you know, to silence the media, or cases of false terrorism charges against journalists for the same reason. One distinct case you might remember of slap cases is Daphne Caruana Galizia was killed a few years ago in Malta. And so, you know, that she faced a lot of those charges and there has been because of the very devoted work of her, very brilliant, you know, and compassionate family, her sons, and her sister who have been able to start this movement against libel cases. So we're part of those coalitions and we work on a lot of those cases when it has to do with women and LGBTQ journalists.

**I was reading the Press Freedom Tracker 2022 on your website, just as I was preparing for this podcast, and 11 murders, 73 imprisonments, 71 instances of legal harassment, 62 physical assaults, 51 detentions and 29 major organised troll campaigns just this year alone. And then the pie chart directly under it, Turkey is 67% responsible for the number of cases, Russia, Ukraine, India, even Canada, I mean, I was shocked to see Canada in that pie chart, but you mentioned them earlier, the scale of the challenge that you face is overwhelming, the job you're doing is incredible, but how do you personally stay so positive? Because whilst you're making an incredible difference in doing so much good in the world, you're seeing so much injustice day to day that it must take a toll, does it not?**

I think, yeah, I think that it does it, it certainly does. You know, I think at the end of the day, you know, you get back into the work and I think it's the training that I got as a journalist on front lines, in different parts of the world that kind of prepared me for this. But I feel sometimes, some days are just, you know, just really, really hard, I think, especially since Afghanistan, like the whole work on Afghanistan has just been very, very hard. I will say that, you know, sometimes working on Mexico is very, very hard because there have been times where we are targeting, women journalists are getting targeted, say for example, in Mexico, like Lourdes López who was being targeted for years in Mexico. And we had done so much work, like sent letters to the government, lobbied with public officials, you know, collaborated with other, you know, press freedom and human rights organisations to like sort of raise awareness about her case from in the human rights circles, but also with the government and like, you know, accountability, and then eventually she was killed, you know, in January 2022, and was really like, these events are really, really hard and what happened in Afghanistan as well, or what happened in Palestine, you know, Shireen Abu Akleh who was killed while she was wearing a press jacket, there have been two women journalists who have been killed after that. And so like sometimes it is certainly very hard. There have been cases where, you know, a journalist is you know, there was a journalist, she was an El Salvador, she was targeted with bullets while covering a protest. And then, you know, eventually, she succumbed to the wounds. And so, like, we were trying to pay her hospital bills and all, and a week later she got killed. She succumbed to the wounds and she died. And so like, these are daily, on a daily basis this happens and I will say that I think it takes more toll for my team. You know, some of them are actually journalists. You know, I do make a priority to sometimes you know, give an opportunity and platform to, and for the ability to work for women who have been targeted themselves as well. So a lot of our staff is women journalists who had been imprisoned themselves, or who had faced some difficulty in the industry themselves because they understand. So they come with a lot of knowledge, nuance about this, so they're prepared for this work in a way, but also it's just really, really hard, still is very, very hard to be able to do that. And we try to do a lot of things in our team. We you know, we try to keep mental health as one of the focuses, not only internally in our team, but also in our network, we try to create groups and conversations about mental health. And I will say that is very important. It helps to keep going and, you know, getting back into the work, I think it's essential to take care of mental health in any capacity. But I think that's still, while we are trying to take these precautions, it still becomes hard sometimes.



**What's the biggest challenge in front of you? What keeps you up at night at the moment?**

It's the women who are in prison for terrorism charges. It's a lot of the cases that we, you know, there are women journalists that we want to relocate, that we think that they will be able to do a really good job doing it, it's women and LGBTQ journalists who we were able to relocate and are in exile, and they're now not able to find jobs in foreign countries, in Western countries, and trying to find ways to help them. I think that that is very, very hard. And the second thing is sometimes we just feel stripped of resources. Like, you know, there are things that we know that we can do in our capacity, but we are stripped of resources to be able to do that work. And so it's saying "no" sometimes to journalists or saying, "oh, we are too overwhelmed because we spent all our money on our own Afghanistan" you know, I think that is one of the challenges right now. But I do wanna say that one thing that we have, or not being able to tap on the resources that we have, so for example, one of the resources that I have, because it's not just that I, we sometimes feel like this is out of our hand, it's too much, it's happening everywhere, and that can be demoralising. But one thing that wakes me up every morning that I think anyone who's doing this work wakes them up every morning is the things that we can hold onto. And that is the allies. And there are people like, I want to say that there are, all of this is happening by some really bad actors around the world, but at the same time in every country in the world, in Mexico, and Pakistan, and Egypt, there are people who are in the government, who are in civil society, who are trying to change things in America. Like, look at, you know, you can see that more visibly in the US landscape. You see, you know people who are in the government, congressmen, you know, who are involved and who want to do better and who are committed to, you know, democratic systems, systems that accommodate press freedom and also, you know, women and gender. So like there are a lot of people who are working on it. And I think what happens every morning is like we're doing this work, and we're writing these statements, and sometimes like corresponding and trying to solve problems with journalists about the issues they're facing, how do we do this? How do we make this possible? Is an allyship of those people who are also trying to work on this? And I think this is a thing we kind of miss this part of the conversation that we need to be aware of globally, that there are a lot of people who are putting in the work, trying to draft new laws, trying to fight for the freedoms, and equality, and democracy. And they're doing it, they're working, they're waking up every morning and doing this work.

**I'm blown away just by how courageous you personally are in your team. I mean, it's as if you have no fear, I mean, you began your career reporting from the Pakistan's tribal regions under Taliban control. I read that that's one of the most dangerous zones for any report to work from, much less a woman. Do you, do you have any fear at all? I mean, are you driven by an overwhelming sense of mission and that I just, I'm just in awe of you and your team and the work that you're doing.**

Thank you, Paul. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I would say that, you know, I think like the dynamic that I started and I got all of my training to be able to go to Afghanistan or Iraq, or, you know, work on Syria or cover ISIS, and all of that really like started in Pakistan, like, or things that I, for example, I'll tell you even the newsroom, like how editing is done and how reporting is done. I learned the basics of journalism in Karachi at Dawn newspapers and the same rules applied, the same editorial and journalistic values applied when I worked at The New York Times. So that's one thing I wanna say. And I think I learned everything about journalism, what journalism is, who a journalist is, who we are, you know, whether it is as impartial witnesses of what, you know, how the humanity is changing and what is happening to humanity, or that we become at times participants that sometimes we become activists, you know, like Maria Ressa says you know, "journalism is activism." And that is something that also, I kind of felt you know, working in Pakistan, seeing divided country, seeing terrorism, you know, bloom under, you know, this thing that was happening with the US presence in Afghanistan and the drone war and all of those things that I learned that I saw everywhere in the world I learned in Pakistan. And then just one thing I would like to say that, however, like I mentioned earlier, I think that when I started my career, I was able to travel to a lot of places and interview a lot of people and have access to everything between refugee camps, to soldiers, to militias. Cause as a woman, people were willing to talk to me, and that is something that has changed now. Like I think people don't trust women as much as they did before. And that's a massive dynamic and I think that is happening because of that international divisive politics that's happening around the world where, you know, Duterte hates on Maria Ressa or says things about her because she's a woman or that, you know, even when women journalists are killed you know, that they are called traders and terrorists. Like this conversation is completely new. It's a completely new dynamic and territory. And I think what women are doing, like it is amazing to see how women, you know, we have women who get out of prison and go into the field right away. Like I've seen so many women along these last few years covering press freedom challenges. We see women that are arrested, they get out of

prison and they go back to, and then they launch a digital newspaper. Can you imagine how amazing that is?

**I'm blown away by the coverage and the drive. It's amazing.**

Yeah. And I think it's a great resource, like how hopeful this is for journalism and, you know, the press that we have, these people who see repression, and then they come out with some sort of moral courage.

**How can our listeners as I am inspired by hearing the journey you're on and the difference you're making, how can we support you? What can we do to help?**

When I started this organisation, it was all about like we're gonna do this. And you know, we're gonna do this in the least, we are not gonna ask for any help. And in the beginning, we had this challenge of not really asking for help because you know, different dynamics were going on. But now I think that we are at a point where we need two kinds of support. Obviously, we need, you know, we would very much appreciate donations. You know and those donations can directly go to journalists who are either behind bars or paying legal fees or mental health support, or training them with high-fat or training them to be able to go and work in conflict or cover protests, being able to be safe by helmets and all that. So direct support for journalists we need resources for that. And that is not getting, you know, like what we are seeing is like these, these situations are only rising. So we need, you know, over the year, we've seen, you know, the need for resources for women and LGBTQ journalists to rise. So that is something that we definitely appreciate, and we're happy to help anyone understand where those donations are going. Sometimes you do direct support depending on whatever you want to give money to. You can, for example, you can say you are helping a journalist settle in Canada with the relocation, or you can buy a helmet or you can buy one or two sessions for therapy and all of that. And then second is like, they're a human resource. People are talented, you know, and if anyone has expertise in something they can help us with, you know, whether it is to be an advocate for the work we do, or, you know, help logistically with something, you know, like social media, setting up events, or putting an event together, getting women journalists together and all that. So volunteer work is something that we would really, really appreciate. And if anyone wants to help in

that capacity, whether it is as a volunteer or an expert pro bono support, that is something that is, we are very open to talking about.

**And how do our listeners get in touch with you? What's your website? How do they actually send you an email?**

So our website is [womeninjournalism.org](http://womeninjournalism.org). We have a 'donate button' there, and if you wanna reach us, you can reach through, we have a contact form, obviously, but you know, you can also just reach through email, which is [press@womeninjournalism.org](mailto:press@womeninjournalism.org). We also have a Twitter and Instagram that is [@womeninjournalism](https://www.instagram.com/womeninjournalism) on Instagram and Twitter is [@CFWIJ](https://twitter.com/CFWIJ), which is our initials.

**Kiran, that was a hugely inspiring and amazing conversation. And just as a citizen of the planet, I'm incredibly grateful that you and your colleagues are there and doing such an amazing job that you are. Thank you ever so much for your time on the podcast today. And I wish you the very best of luck with The Coalition.**

Thank you so much, Paul, thank you for this conversation.

***Well, wasn't that amazing? It was created and produced by Podcast Partners. They are really lovely people and rather good at all this podcasting guff. Find out more at [podcastpartners.com](http://podcastpartners.com).***