

# The Afghanistan Shootings, Safety and Media Industry Responsibility

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## Overview

On Friday, two seasoned foreign journalists were shot while covering the lead-up to the Afghan elections. The incident and what's happened since raises important questions not only about journalist safety in the field, but also about the media industry's responsibility for its workforce.

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Last Friday, on the eve of the presidential elections in Afghanistan, [two foreign journalists were shot](#). German Photographer [Anja Niedringhaus](#) died immediately from her wounds and Canadian writer Kathy Gannon is in [stable condition](#) with wounds in the shoulder and wrist. The assault came from an Afghan police commander in the Khost province as the two waited to accompany a military convoy delivering election materials to a remote area along the Pakistani border. Both women had decades of experience in the volatile region and were working together for the Associated Press. Niedringhaus was 48 years old; Gannon is 60.

I do not know either of these women personally and I have never been to Afghanistan. Reporter deaths, particularly in the Middle East, [are not uncommon](#). Even less rare is the loss of innocent civilian lives in countries like Afghanistan as a result of general political turmoil and targeted military action by local and foreign governments. Yet I've been preoccupied by the incident since Friday.

Admittedly, it hits home. Though I am not a war correspondent, I occasionally report from conflict zones. These two women knew Afghanistan better than almost any outsiders covering the country. On Friday, they purposefully entered an unstable region, but they [planned their trip carefully](#) and were accompanied by military and police. If something like this could happen to reporters like them, what does that mean for those of us who parachute into troubled territory with minimal understanding of the situation on the ground?

But my fixation on the crime, I have realized, is mainly because of what it reveals about journalist safety and our media industry's responsibility for its workforce.

First, there's the gender angle. The International News Safety Institute and the International Women's Media Foundation recently released a [40-page report](#) on violence and harassment against women in the media. Among its findings is the fact that almost two-thirds of the survey's 977 respondents experienced [some form of intimidation, threats or abuse relating to their work](#) throughout their career.

We may never know if Gannon and Niedringhaus were targeted for being women. It's possible: as women's movements have gained strength in Afghanistan, there has been push back. For example, a record 300 women candidates ran in Saturday's election, yet these women were [disproportionately targeted by militants](#) in recent months. Was the Gannon and Niedringhaus shooting a related message directed towards the West? Even if it wasn't, the International Women's Media Foundation report reminds us that Gannon and Niedringhaus faced more obstacles than their male colleagues to reach such impressive professional success.

Moreover, the current situation of Gannon and Niedringhaus, when compared to another recent journalism calamity,

provides insight into a fault-line piercing through our industry. Last month, Canadian photographer [Ali Mustafa](#), was killed in Syria. Unlike Gannon and Niedringhaus, Mustafa was a freelancer. In the wake of his death, his family in Toronto had to take out a \$20,000 loan to cover the cost of transporting his body home and for the funeral—a fact made public when Mustafa’s friends and colleagues [crowd-funded to help his family repay the debt](#).

There have been no kickstarter campaigns for the Niedringhaus or Gannon families. The Associated Press is covering the costs related to the shooting of their employees and I’m ashamed that I almost commended the AP for fulfilling its moral and legal obligations. Yet we’ve gotten to a point where, in the case of death or serious injury, [most of the reporters in conflict zones](#) can not expect financial assistance from the outlet profiting from his or her work—because we are independent journalists.

For those of you who haven’t seen the recent [press](#) about the news industry’s drastic cut-backs on foreign desks which has led to an increasingly reliance on independent journalists, particularly for war coverage, it boils down to this: 1) we are normally paid [outrageously low wages](#), 2) we are expected to use this income to cover the high cost of protecting ourselves. While some outlets offer minimal reporting expenses, few want to pay for what could save our lives ([safety trainings](#), equipment, hired security, private transport); 3) most of our clients don’t even ask whether we are prepared for conflict zone challenges. (Exceptions include the Christian Science Monitor which refuses to use reporting from a conflict zone unless the reporter has completed a safety course. They don’t, however, offer to pay for that training.)

The case of Gannon and Niedringhaus—in comparison to that of Mustafa—reminds us that the gap between the media industry’s responsibility for the care of staffers versus independent reporters persists even after tragedy strikes.

“We should be up in arms about this,” says Anna Therese Day, a freelancer who covers North Africa and the Middle East for places like The Daily Beast and Vice, “but mainly we’re not.” Day is a founding member of the [Frontline Freelance Registry](#), journalism’s first representative body created and run by freelancers. FFR [was established last year](#) to support freelancers, by providing us with a forum, organizational structure and critical mass to face the growing challenges of being an independent journalist in conflict regions. There are older organizations that strive to improve the safety of all journalists worldwide, such as [Reporters Without Borders](#) and the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#).

But, as Day points out, there is no organization that is taking on the broader battle. “We have a systemic problem,” she says, “this is about media industry that has devalued its labor-force and does not want to take responsibility for the majority of its workers.”

Just as there is little attention towards the institutional aspect of the vulnerability of independent journalists, so too is there minimal recognition of the fact that when we talk about “journalist safety” we are inordinately preoccupied with bombs and shootings. As Omar Vera, co-founder and co-editor of Bogota’s [El Turbi3n](#) newspaper, commented to me recently, “real safety isn’t just about gas masks and bullet-proof vests.” Safety, he says, is about ensuring the security of a reporter, from the time he or she starts a potentially dangerous assignment or investigation until after the story is published. “If you’re a Colombian journalist,” he explains, “you’re more likely to be killed in your living room than when you’re out in the field.”

There’s something else that’s been bugging me since Friday too: the statistics cited on the number of journalists [killed or injured or kidnapped or disappeared or imprisoned in recent years](#) don’t tell the whole story. That’s because foreign coverage (as consumed in the U.S. and Europe) is dependent on people who aren’t usually included in these official tallies: “fixers.” Fixers are local journalists or others with exceptional know-how upon whom we, the international press, rely. They arrange interviews, coordinate logistics, translation, and offer crucial background information and context that make our stories better. Normally they are invisible in the news you read or view daily. Occasionally, they get credit at the bottom or end of a piece, but that’s only in certain circumstances.

In addition to the lack of recognition (and little pay) for their work, fixers carry greater risk. Parachuters and foreign based correspondents always have the choice to leave if things get too dangerous; fixers rarely do. Our families are normally thousands of miles away, in calmer countries. Theirs are right there—vulnerable to abuse and threats in relation to the stories we hire them to work on. When fixers are killed or hurt in the line of duty, it's normally a side-note. They are not part of the “journalist” body count because, well, we don't recognize them as such.

This may be tangential to Friday's shooting in Afghanistan, but [from what I've read](#), Gannon and Niedringhaus seem like the type of people who'd want their situation to spark conversation and action to improve the working conditions of all of their colleagues.

Lastly, while writing this piece, I was reminded by trusted colleagues that now is a good time to voice support for conflict zone reporters who choose to leave that life. Women particularly get a lot of flack for giving up high profile reporting posts, such as those Niedringhaus and Gannon occupied, to return home. “If a war correspondent steps away from being a war correspondent, [we should not] question her motives or choices, particularly if you have never been in a conflict zone,” says Sue Dorfman, a DC based photographer and media strategist, adding that conflict zones can be domestic as well as international. “To honor the work of journalists... please do not make judgment calls when a journalist chooses a ‘less glamorous’ role when becoming a parent.”

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