INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE

15th Anniversary

2021 International Women of Courage Award Ceremony

15th Annual Secretary of State's IWOC Awards

March 8, 2021

United States Department of State

THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE AWARD

Now in its 15th year, the Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award honors women who have demonstrated extraordinary courage and leadership in advocating for social justice, human rights, gender equality, and the advance of women and girls, often at great person risk. It is the only Department of State award that pays tribute to outstanding women leaders worldwide. The awardees were chosen from nomination made by our embassies and consulates around the world. Since the award's creation in 2007, the United States has honored more than 155 women, from more than 75 countries.

Hosted by
Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State of the United States of America

Special Guest
First Lady Jill Biden

2021 Award Recipients

Maria Kalesnikava, *Belarus*
Phyoe Phyoe Aung, *Burma*
Maximilienne Chantal Ngo Mbe, *Cameroon*
Wang Yu, *China*
Mayerlis Angarita, *Colombia*
Julienne Lusenge, *Democratic Republic of the Congo*
Judge Erika Aifran, *Guatemala*
Shohreh Bayat, *Iran*
Muskan Khatun, *Nepal*
Zahra Mohamed Ahmed, *Somalia*
Sister Alicia Vacas Moro, *Spain*
Ranitha Gnanarajah, *Sri Lanka*
Canan Gullu, *Turkey*
Ana Rosario Contreras, *Venezuela*

Honorary Posthumous Group Award

Fatema Natasha Khalil, General Shamila Frough, Maryam Noorzad, Fatima Rajabi, Freshta, Malalai Maiwand, and Freshta Kohistani of *Afghanistan*

2021 SECRETARY OF STATE'S INTERNATIONAL WOMEN OF COURAGE AWARDEES

Maria Kalesnikava
Belarus

Ahead of the August 9, 2020, presidential election, Belarusian women emerged as a dominant political force and driver of societal change in Belarus due in no small part to Maria Kalesnikava. After authorities jailed or exiled the three most popular male opposition candidates, Kalesnikava and her partners mounted a historic and sustained challenge to the 26-year rule of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Kalesnikava continues to be the face of the opposition inside Belarus, courageously facing imprisonment in the aftermath of the disputed election. Despite her detention, Kalesnikava continues to keep the democratic movement alive inside Belarus and serves as a source of inspiration for all those seeking to win freedom for themselves and their countries.

Phyoe Phyoe Aung
Burma

An emerging leader who is likely to play a role in shaping the country in the next coming years Phyoe Phyoe Aung is the co-founder of the Wings Institute for Reconciliation, an organization that facilitates exchanges between the youth of different ethnic and religious groups. Her work promotes peacebuilding and reconciliation and enables a vital dialogue on federalism and transitional justice. She organized a 2015 protest march from Mandalay to Yangon that was violently suppressed by the Myanmar Police Force as it neared Yangon, and she and her husband were arrested and imprisoned. Aung was released in April 2016 after 13 months as part of a broad pardon of political prisoners facing court trials.

Maximilienne Chantal Ngo Mbe
Cameroon

Maximilienne C. Ngo Mbe has demonstrated extraordinary leadership, courage, and perseverance through adversity in promoting human rights in Cameroon and Central Africa. She has been an outspoken voice among civil society actors, often sacrificing her personal safety, in the push for a peaceful solution to the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. She has called for an end to human rights abuses committed by separatists and security forces in the Northwest and Southwest regions and by security forces in the Far North. Maximilienne has also spoken out against the increased constraints placed on civil society, journalists, and political opposition by the Government of Cameroon. Her commitment to promoting human rights has been unwavering despite the intimidation, threats, and assault she has endured.

Wang Yu
China

Wang Yu was one of the country's most prominent human rights lawyers until her arrest and imprisonment following China's nationwide persecution of lawyers and rights advocates during the "709 crackdown." She had taken on multiple politically sensitive cases, representing activists, scholars, Falun Gong practitioners, farmers, and petitioners in cases involving a wide array of issues, including women's and children's rights, and the rights to religion, freedom of expression, assembly, and association. She is now under an exit ban and has been harassed, threatened, searched, and physically assaulted by police since she began to take on rights abuse cases in 2011.

Mayerlis Angarita
Colombia

Mayerlis Angarita has courageously advanced peace and human rights in Colombia, often at great personal risk. Her work has improved the security, livelihoods, and resilience of countless women leaders, conflict victims, and her community. Finding healing in storytelling after her own mother was forcibly disappeared during Colombia's conflict, she founded the civil society organization "Narrate to Live," which now serves over 800 women victims of conflict. Additionally, after the most recent attempt on her life, she engaged the highest levels of the Colombian government to advance a comprehensive action plan to prevent violence against women leaders in her community. Her constructive engagement across 27 government entities, civil society, and the international community has been key to the plan's success and propelled it to become a model for human rights defender protection throughout Colombia.

Julienne Lusenge
Democratic Republic of the Congo

Since 1978, Julienne Lusenge has been the leading female activist in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) fighting against gender-based violence (GBV) and the promotion of the rights of women and girls in conflict situations. In 2000, she created Women's Solidarity for Peace and Integral Development, the DRC's foremost organization defending the rights of women and girls against impunity for GBV. Julienne's vocal testimony has contributed to the adoption of international agreements such as UN 1820, which recognizes sexual violence as a weapon of war. Julienne has touched the lives of millions of women across the DRC, harnessing the attention of the international community to acknowledge and act on the extent of sexual violence shattering DRC's communities.

Judge Erika Aifran
Guatemala

Judge Erika Lorena Aifan is a trial judge working in the High-Risk Criminal Court with responsibility for high-impact crimes. She has presided over high-profile corruption and war atrocity cases, leading to defamation and threats of violence against her. Despite these challenges, Judge Aifan persisted as a Guatemalan judge independent of political influence. She has demonstrated determination and fortitude in upholding the rule of law in Guatemala. Despite the strong opposition she has faced throughout her tenure, Judge Aifan has become an icon in Guatemala in the fight against corruption, efforts to increase transparency, and actions to improve independence in the justice sector.

Shohreh Bayat
Iran

When Shohreh Bayat boarded her flight on her way to the 2020 Women's Chess World Championship, she had no idea she might be seeing her native Iran for the last time. Shohreh, the first female Category A international chess arbiter in Asia was photographed at the Championship without her hijab visible, which is compulsory in Iran. Within 24 hours, the Iranian Chess Federation – which Shohreh had previously led – refused to guarantee Shohreh's safety if she returned to Iran without first apologizing. Fearing for her safety and unwilling to apologize for the incident, Shohreh made the heart-wrenching decision to seek refuge in the UK, leaving her husband – who lacked a UK visa – in Iran. In that moment, Shohreh chose to be a champion for women's rights rather than be cowed by the Iranian government's threats.

Muskan Khatun
Nepal

Muskan Khatun has been instrumental in bringing about new legislation criminalizing acid attacks and imposing strong penalties against perpetrators in Nepal. When Muskan was 15, she was critically injured in an acid attack after she rejected a boy's romantic propositions. With the help of a social worker, Muskan lobbied for stronger legal action against the perpetrators of acid attacks under duress of threats and the strong social stigma associated with acid attack victims. She went before a parliamentary committee, wrote a letter to Nepal's Prime Minister, and eventually met with him in person, to request a stronger law. Within a year of her attack, Nepal's President issued an ordinance with harsh penalties for acid attacks and regulations on the sale of acids, a testament to Muskan's significant advocacy.

Zahra Mohamed Ahmed
Somalia

For more than 20 years, Zahra Mohamed Ahmad has been at the forefront of defending human rights in Somalia, especially for its most vulnerable groups. As an accomplished lawyer, Zahra began providing legal aid, for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors, women on remand status, and women in pre-trial detention. Zahra is the founder of and legal advisor for the Somali Women Development Center, an organization that reports on human rights violations and cases of abuse; supports survivors through legal assistance; established Somalia's first free hotline service to combat SGBV; and operates one-stop centers for SGBV survivors, mobile legal clinics, family care centers, safe spaces for women and girls, and community child protection centers for internally displaced children.

Sister Alicia Vacas Moro
Spain

A registered nurse, Sister Alicia Vacas Moro ran a medical clinic in Egypt for eight years, helping 150 low-income patients a day treat their maladies. She then moved to the biblical town of Bethany to help an impoverished Bedouin community, especially women and children. She set up training programs for women that provided them with previously unavailable economic opportunities, and established kindergartens in Bedouin camps, providing an educational foundation for children. In an environment shaped by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Sister Alicia also assisted traumatized refugees and asylum seekers, a job she continues to perform on a larger scale in her current role as the regional coordinator for the Comboni Sisters in the Middle East. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck northern Italy, she flew to Italy to assist and treat fellow sister nuns, undeterred by extreme danger to herself.

Ranitha Gnanarajah
Sri Lanka

Ranitha Gnanarajah, a lawyer, continues to fight for and defend the rights of the marginalized and vulnerable communities in the country, despite threats and challenges by the state. Ranitha has dedicated her career to accountability and justice for victims of enforced disappearances and prisoners detained often for years without charge under Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act by providing free legal aid and related services. As an individual personally affected by the conflict and based on her extensive experience working with victims and their families, Ranitha has demonstrated tremendous passion and dedication to justice and accountability, especially for Sri Lanka's most vulnerable populations.

Canan Gullu
Turkey

Canan Gullu has been an activist and organizer for 31 years and is the president of the Turkish Federation of Women's Associations, an umbrella organization of women's NGOs; she leads186 branches and 52,500 members. Canan has been a steadfast champion of gender equality, working to promote women's participation in governance, labor force, and education. In 2007, the Turkish Federation of Women Associations established the first emergency hotline for victims of violence in Turkey, which continues its operations. Over the past two years, Canan launched an education and advocacy campaign focused on failures in the Turkish government's implementation since 2012 of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Canan's activism has been critical to educating the public about the convention and reinforcing the need to combat gender-based violence, which quelled some politicians' calls for Turkey's withdrawal.

Ana Rosario Contreras
Venezuela

As president of the Caracas Nurses' Association, Ana Rosario Contreras has been on the front lines in the fight for the rights of healthcare professionals, patients, and labor unions. Contreras' fierce activism has generated widespread support from the Venezuelan people and is at the center of the civil-political movement pushing for democratic change. In a climate where the government routinely jails, tortures, harasses, threatens, or restricts the movement of its opponents, Contreras defends citizens' rights at great personal risk. She has advocated for labor rights and has worked tirelessly to ensure that healthcare workers could receive a subsidy through Interim President Juan Guido's Health Heroes program.

HONORARY POSTHUMOUS GROUP AWARD

Fatema Natasha Khalil
Afghanistan

Fatema Natasha Khalil, an official with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission who was killed, along with her driver, in June 2020 by an IED in Kabul, on her way to her office.

General Sharmila Frough
Afghanistan

General Sharmila Frough, the head of the Gender Unit in the National Directorate of Security (NDS) was one of the longest-serving female NDS officers, having served as chief of the anti-kidnapping division and working undercover combating criminal networks. General Frough was assassinated in an IED explosion targeting her vehicle in March 2020 in Kabul.

Maryam Noorzad
Afghanistan

Maryam Noorzad, a midwife who served remote locations in Wardak and Bamyan provinces before working for Médecins Sans Frontières Kabul PD13 hospital. On May 12, 2020, three gunmen attacked the maternity ward of the hospital, but Maryam refused to leave her patient, who was in labor. Maryam, her patient, and the newborn baby were killed in the delivery suite.

Fatima Rajabi
Afghanistan

Fatima Rajabi, a 23-year-old police officer originally from Ghazni province and a member of the anti-narcotics division. She was traveling to her home village in Jaghori district in a civilian minibus in July 2020 when the Taliban stopped the vehicle and took her captive. Two weeks later, the Taliban killed her and sent her remains, which had gunshot wounds and signs of torture, to her family.

Freshta
Afghanistan

Freshta, daughter of Amir Mohamed, a 35-year-old prison guard with the Office of Prison Administration. She was walking from her residence in Kandahar City to a taxi on her way to work when she was murdered by an unknown gunman on October 25, 2020.

Malalai Maiwandi
Afghanistan

Malalai Maiwand, a reporter at Enikas Radio and TV, was shot and killed, along with her driver, by a gunman on December 10, 2020, in an attack on her vehicle in Jalalabad. Malalai was not the first in her family to be targeted. Five years earlier, her mother, an activist, was also killed by unknown gunmen.

Freshta Kohistani
Afghanistan

Freshta Kohistani, a 29-year-old women's rights and democracy activist, was assassinated by unknown gunmen near her home in Kapsia province on December 24, 2020. Kohistani regularly organized events advocating for women's rights in Afghanistan and used social media as a platform for her messaging.