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# RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières

(Author)

## Azerbaijan: nine jailed women journalists report sexual abuse as detainees handed roses for International Women's Day

On International Women's Rights Day, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) warns of the plight of nine women journalists imprisoned in Azerbaijan, including three correspondents for Meydan TV, an Azerbaijani media outlet based in Berlin, who have recently suffered physical and psychological violence as well as gender-based and sexual threats while behind bars. These abuses are not isolated incidents, they are part of a gendered strategy of repression aimed at humiliating, intimidating and silencing those who investigate and publish.

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Every year, on 8 March, while the world celebrates women's rights, roses are handed out to women detainees in Azerbaijani prisons — a gesture that rings hollow for women journalists reporting rape threats and sexist humiliation from behind bars. On 18 February, around ten guards, including men, burst into the cell of three *Meydan TV* reporters at the pretrial detention centre in Baku, the Azerbaijani capital, ostensibly to conduct an inspection. They forced open the toilet door, where they found **Aysel Umudova**.

In [their letter](#) recounting the incident, the journalists wrote that **Hayala Agayeva** sustained visible injuries to her right hand and left wrist during the altercation. The deputy prison director, Javid Gulaliyev, reportedly raised his fist a few centimetres from **Aytaj Tapdyg's** face, threatening to hit her. After eyeing the three women up and down with a lewd gaze, he allegedly said, "My sperm is everywhere," in a statement that the journalists likened to a rape threat. Two days later, at a court hearing, the

judge refused one of their lawyers access to surveillance camera footage that may have documented the scene.

*“When detention becomes a space for sexual intimidation and domination, it is used as a weapon to silence those who inform the public. The gendered dimension of these abuses is not incidental, it is part of a deliberate strategy of humiliation and dissuasion designed to strike these journalists at their core and send a chilling message to all women who might want to investigate, report and speak out. RSF calls for the immediate and unconditional release of the nine women journalists held in Azerbaijan, the opening of independent and transparent investigations into the alleged violence – serious violations of the Azerbaijani Constitution and international law – and the prosecution of all those responsible.*

Jeanne Cavelier

Head of RSF’s Eastern Europe and Central Asia Desk

The violence reported two weeks ago by the [Meydan TV journalists](#) is part of a series of [allegations](#) documented in recent months. In a letter published in December, Aysel Umudova said she had been subjected to sexual harassment and ill-treatment during her arrest and transfer to a detention centre a year earlier. She notably described “unwanted physical contact” imposed by a police officer in the vehicle, an experience which has left her with psychological scars.

Former *Voice of America* (VOA) journalist **Ulviyya (Ali) Guliyeva** also says she was beaten and threatened with rape in police custody on 6 May 2025 in an attempt to blackmail her into handing over the passwords to her electronic devices. At the penitentiary complex in the city of Lankaran — where several [women journalists from Abzas Media](#) have been [transferred](#) — credible allegations indicate that the prison director physically assaulted a detainee on 24 January 2026. Against this backdrop, [families fear for the safety](#) of the imprisoned journalists amid persistent suspicions of impunity within the prison system.

“Nine women — ranging in age from their mid-twenties to their early fifties — are sitting in Azerbaijani prisons for the work they did as reporters. Silencing women journalists has become a particular focus and rising trend in Azerbaijan amid the ongoing media crackdown,” said Subhan Hasanli, a human rights lawyer. In a society where patriarchal norms already restrict women’s place in public life, the weaponisation of sexist defamation, sexual threats and violence behind bars aims to crush not only individuals but also the very idea that women have a place in investigative journalism.

Despite being locked up, several of these reporters, [such as Sevinj Vagifgizi](#), continue to document and tell the public about [detention conditions](#) and the treatment of prisoners in Azerbaijan, turning their confinement into an act of professional resistance.

RSF regularly updates [a gallery of profiles of the media professionals currently imprisoned](#) in the country.

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| Austrian Red Cross    | Wiedner Hauptstraße | Contact                |
| Austrian Centre for   | 32, 1041 Wien       | Imprint & Disclaimer   |
| Country of Origin and | T +43 1 589 00 583  | F.A.Q.                 |
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