Every day freelance journalists bring vital, under-reported stories to the world's attention - often at considerable personal risk. On International Women’s Day 2019, we want to highlight three inspiring women freelancers supported by RPT in different ways, from workshops to assistance grants to our Awards.

ROOPA GOGINENI - 2018 Rory Peck Award winner

An award-winning director and photographer from West Virginia, Roopa is now based in Nairobi and working on film projects in Sudan, Spain and India. Over the past eight years her work has focused on historical memory and life amid conflict across East Africa. Roopa’s films and photo stories have examined the narrative of genocide in Rwanda, investigated the origins of Somali piracy, and documented the historic Mau Mau case against the UK government for colonial-era abuses in Kenya. Most recently she reported a PBS Frontline podcast for kids about children living in Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya. Roopa’s award-winning short film about a satirical puppet show from Sudan was featured on The New York Times Op-Docs and won the News Features category at the 2018 Rory Peck Awards.

"Receiving the Rory Peck Award was a great honour. I still think about all of the work that was recognised that evening, and feel lucky to have met the journalists behind those stories. Connecting with commissioning editors was also valuable. Several of those conversations continued after the awards, and are turning into interesting work opportunities," Roopa said.

"For me, International Women’s Day is a time to reflect on representation in the industry, on who gets to tell stories and why. Most journalists working in areas of conflict are men, and we need to acknowledge what that means about the narratives coming from these places. As a woman, specifically a woman of colour, I face challenges, but am also afforded unique access and insight. For example, it’s harder for me to get an interview with a president, but I’m welcome in a henna salon. All of this has changed the focus of the stories I tell, I’d say for the better. On the commissioning side, a producer once told me that when she
rejects a pitch, women rarely pitch again, and men keep pitching. Commissioners and broadcasters need to do the work to welcome diversity and to seek out underrepresented voices. If not, everyone loses.”

SAMAR ABU ELOUF - assistance grant recipient

A freelance photojournalist from Gaza City, over the past eight years Samar has worked with many local and international platforms including Reuters. In 2009, she took a photography course while studying Business Administration and her passion for photography bloomed. Samar started borrowing cameras to document incidents in her city. Before long she began receiving many international awards and was able to buy equipment using prize money. At a time when the Gazan media and coverage was completely male-dominated, Samar says she defied tradition as one of the first women in Gaza to do such a job. In 2016, while covering conflict in Gaza, she had to resort to using a saucepan as a helmet and a plastic bag as a bullet-proof vest. RPT recently gave the freelancer a grant which went partly towards a laptop to replace Samar’s broken one and a zoom lens for her camera to help her avoid getting too close to high-risk areas, allowing her to continue working safely as a freelance journalist.

*In my line of work I have been suffering from a lack of equipment, but I think my professional life will be different following the assistance grant from the Rory Peck Trust. The Trust understood my need for this
support in order to protect myself while out covering a story, and I appreciate this with all my heart. I am so grateful for the Trust’s response and evaluation of the situation,” said Samar.

“On International Women’s Day that very much touches my heart, I remember many women’s stories that I reported and photographed that left a strong impact on me - whether through their inspiration, strength against challenges or through their patience for their losses and suffering under their circumstances. Many photographs stay with me on International Women’s Day, for I am proud of all the women in Gaza and all conflict countries coping with the challenges they face and bearing love and peace in their hearts.”

**OLGA VESNIANKA - Ukraine workshop participant**

![Olga presenting at RPT’s workshop for freelancers in Kyiv last Spring](image)

Ukrainian freelance journalist Olga Vesnianka has worked in the media more than 15 years, mostly for radio and television platforms - including Channel 5, Radio Liberty, Deutsche Welle and Hromadske Radio. Her work on countering sexism and promoting equal rights has been recognized in various competitions such as the European Media Neighbourhood Awards and 'Honour of Profession'. Olga is also co-founder of a campaign against sexism in the media: Povaha. She is currently focused on covering the stories of women living near the frontline in Donbas.

In April 2018, Olga attended RPT’s second five-day workshop in our two-year project to support independent journalism in Ukraine, funded by the United Nations Democracy Fund and run in partnership with Ukraine’s Institute of Mass Information (IMI).

“Since attending the workshop last Spring I know now always to do a thorough risk assessment when I’m preparing to go out in the field near a conflict zone,” she said. “I also make use of the grounding techniques that we learned for handling trauma as much as I possibly can. For me, International Women’s Day is a day all about solidarity. It highlights the importance of telling #HerStory.”