The Coalition For Women In Journalism (CFWIJ) is a global organization of support for women journalists. The CFWIJ pioneered mentorship for mid-career women journalists across several countries around the world and is the first organization to focus on the status of free press for women journalists. Our network of individuals and organizations brings together the experience and mentorship necessary to help female career journalists navigate the industry. Our goal is to help develop a strong mechanism where women journalists can work safely and thrive.

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In Canada, police aggression against journalists is on the rise. And women journalists are disproportionately on the front and centre of this development.

On Friday, November 19, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) arrested award-winning photojournalist and reporter Amber Bracken. She was reporting on the escalating situation at Gidimt’en camp in Wet’suwet’en territory from the ground. Amber’s arrest was the latest violation by the RCMP, who appears to have established a trend of blatant institutional overreach in the region.

At the center of the conflict is a multi-billion dollar natural gas project — touted as the largest private sector investment in Canadian history — and an assertion by Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs that no pipelines can be built through their traditional territory without their consent. The resulting conflict has led to unjustified arrests and police violence in the area for several months now.

The Coalition For Women In Journalism has routinely reported on disturbances related to the protests by indigenous people in the Wet’suwet’en territory as well as at Fairy Creek. However, over time it has become abundantly apparent that the Canadian police act with an air of impunity against citizens in the area as well as the civil rights afforded to them. They have also repeatedly encroached on the freedom of the press and the citizens’ right to information.
The first violation in the now escalating trend by the RCMP that we recorded dates back to February 2020, when Melissa Cox, an American journalist and documentary filmmaker, was arrested while documenting a protest by indigenous people in Gitxsan territory in New Hazelton. She was conditionally released after seven hours of detention.

The violations only continued to accelerate from that point onwards. A year later in February 2021, the RCMP harassed and attempted to intimidate journalist Brandi Morin when she visited the Unist’ot’en Healing Camp. Then too, it was Amber who was accompanying Brandi for the shoot of a series of reports. In response to the lawsuit filed by Brandi against the restriction of press, the RCMP submitted an affidavit, accusing her of lying about being prohibited from visiting the site despite there being video proof to the contrary.

As the protests in different areas regained momentum, so did the RCMP’s bullying tactics against journalists covering the conflicts between indigenous people and the Canadian authorities. On May 17, the RCMP temporarily restricted press access to the headwaters of Fairy Creek, and sent concerned journalists on a wild goose chase under pretences of bureaucratic formalities.
On May 19, Jen Osborne returned to the blockade, and the environment became increasingly contentious. The journalist reported to CFWIJ that the RCMP had granted access to advocacy journalists who were “particularly belligerent and problematic”, making the situation considerably more difficult for the other journalists present. The advocates were adamantly defending press freedom as a means of protest, but it inevitably interfered with the journalists trying to report on the blockade and the related arrests.

The RCMP kept all of the journalists for most of the day, at a distance. Jen disclosed that they were held back too far away to capture any decent footage or photographs. When asked to comment about the situation, Jen shared, “Media should expose corruption. It should not be a tool to be used by the corrupt. Although officers made an attempt to allow press access to the arrest events of May 19th, they did not work hard enough to accommodate our needs to report freely and fairly”.

According to the journalist, the RCMP made two forceful arrests on the morning of May 20, before the press arrived at the scene. Two hours later, the authorities extended a media invite as a feeble attempt at transparency. Jen believed this was a tactic used by the RCMP to control the narrative. “The RCMP is only allowing media access when the situation is stable and when our reporting can provide positive PR for their organization.”

On June 15, Jen again faced similar restrictions. She was prevented from covering the events at Fairy Creek. In a tweet, she claimed that she was denied access to ensure that the police brutality against protestors remains under wraps.
Amber, thus, is the latest victim of RCMP’s transgressions against journalists covering the police’s conduct toward indigenous people and protesters. Speaking to CFWIJ, her lawyer confirmed that 14 people, including Amber and fellow journalist Michael Toledano, were arrested from the site this past Friday. Both Amber and Toledano were charged with breaching the Coastal Gaslink injunction.

“RCMP crackdown on journalists has reached a crescendo. In the last year, journalists have been impeded, targeted and arrested by the authorities while covering some of the most critical stories in Canada,” said CFWIJ founder Kiran Nazish. “We are surprised that these violations continue. We highly condemn the arrest and charges against a respectable journalist like Amber Bracken, who has been diligently reporting on a story that affects the Canadian public. We see this arrest as a violation of freedom of press. We also see these violations against journalists as a breach of police responsibilities and demand the RCMP put a stop to this trend.”
The Coalition For Women In Journalism is appalled at the impunity with which the RCMP has been allowed to operate in Wet’suwét’en territory and at Fairy Creek. Their display of institutional violations, police brutality and bullying tactics is a threat to peace of the region as well as to Canada’s democratic principles at large. Not only should Amber and her colleagues be immediately released and the journalists be given access to report on the conflict, state authorities should also hold those running RCMP operations in the area to account. The police system cannot be allowed to run amok to protect corporate interests over environmental and civil rights. That would only be to the detriment of the political culture of the country as well as the safety of this planet. Canadian authorities owe an answer, not only to the press community at large, but also to indigenous communities and environmental activists around the world for what they are letting happen.