

# Freedom of expression, access to information and the practice of journalism in Central America: a view from the protagonists

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## **Freedom of expression, access to information and the practice of journalism in Central America: a view from the protagonists**

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The information contained in this document is the result of a survey among 340 journalists in Central America and should not be taken as an official position of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

# Introduction

In order to contribute to the development of effective strategies and actions to protect freedom of expression and the practice of journalism in Central America, this field study was carried out using quantitative and qualitative criteria. In the first case, a questionnaire was designed to be answered online. In the second, 12 discussion groups were held, 2 with journalists from each country of the Isthmus.

The questionnaire provides an approximation of the current situation of protection measures for journalists in the region, especially in the cases of women and community journalists. It also provides ample information on the restrictions and

threats that journalists currently face, the most common forms of pressure and intimidation, as well as the actors that promote actions against the profession.

The relevance of the survey is also that it reflects the vision of the protagonists themselves, since it sought to cover relevant groups of professionals in each country.

Finally, it identifies the challenges and opportunities for the implementation of new efficient mechanisms, both preventive and protective, in view of the vulnerabilities that Central American journalists currently face.

# Background

The rights to freedom of expression and free exercise of journalism, as well as the right of the population to be informed, seem to have regressed in Central America in recent years. Journalists and social communicators reported facing harassment, denunciations, aggressions of different kinds, arbitrary detentions, cyber-attacks and harassment. According to Amnesty International, from February 2021 to February 2022, 4 journalists were murdered in the region, while hundreds live in an atmosphere of uncertainty due to criminalization, including by high-ranking state officials, strong polarization, corruption and organized crime.

According to the movement Journalists and Independent Communicators of Nicaragua -PCIN-, the government of that country has forced the exile of more than 120 information professionals from 2018 to date. Fourteen radio stations and four television channels were shut down and there is de facto censorship that prevents the broadcasting of independent news and opinion programs. In Guatemala, the survey describes an increasingly restrictive climate for the practice of journalism, persecution and harassment against journalists and independent media, through criminal complaints and unsubstantiated arrest warrants, has increased. The arrest of journalist Jose Ruben Zamora, on July 30, 2022, stands out, which has increased the threat of legal proceedings against other communicators in that country, as a way of repressing the dissemination of opinions and information contrary to the prevailing political regime. In Honduras, an atmosphere of violence and harassment towards journalists is reported

to be more than latent, confirmed by the murder of Edwin Josué Andino, on October 10, 2022. In the last two decades, 90 journalists have been murdered and laws that criminalize them persist.

In El Salvador, according to information from the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), the list of journalists exiled due to criminal persecution already reaches a dozen, some of them have already initiated processes to request asylum in other countries. Recently, reforms to the Penal Code were approved which foresee penalties of up to 15 years in prison against journalists who report on the actions of gangs. In addition to the above, at the beginning of 2022, it was revealed that at least 30 journalists and media employees were subjected to espionage through the Pegasus software.

Costa Rican journalists also reported to be going through difficult times in the exercise of their profession, the controversial messages from the government to journalists have generated a climate of uncertainty, and today there are fears of espionage and restrictions on access to sources of information. Finally, the situation in Panama last year, in which several journalists denounced having been threatened with libel and defamation lawsuits, has awakened insecurity for the free exercise of journalism in that country, with similar characteristics to its peers in the region.

The anxiety that prevails in the practice of journalism in Central America affects more strongly the community press, which suffers additional vulnerabilities to those of

private journalists. Likewise, female journalists are more affected by psychological, family and sexual harassment due to their condition as women.

Against this backdrop, information professionals in the region are unprotected and more vulnerable than ever. This situation makes national and international mechanisms for the protection of journalists even more relevant today, which is why this study examines the subject in depth.

# Effectiveness of measures and mechanisms in the countries that have implemented them

The mechanisms of denunciation, forums, penal or legal tools, as well as organizations for the protection of journalists are not foreign to Central American press societies, but in spite of their existence in some of the countries of the region, they seem to have failed in terms of their effectiveness, operability, or their application.

Meanwhile, the international entities that watch over the free broadcasting of thought and the rights of free expression have fallen short, both in capacity and scope, in the face of attacks on the press, which now use new forms of harassment, due to the impact of the digital era and social networks. In this introduction, we summarize the cases in the region.

## **Costa Rica**

The Costa Rican Assembly approved this year the General Law on Access to Public Information and Transparency, with the purpose of promoting and guaranteeing transparency of public officials, as well as regulating access to information held by the State, ensuring transparency and a more critical and active citizen participation around public management.

The Law recognizes the right of any individual or legal entity to request public information and access it free of charge.

Thus, both State bodies and companies that manage State funds or public services are obliged to provide the press with the requested information. However, the law does not apply to the Legislative and Judicial branches. This last point is seen as the setback of the law, as it leaves a loose end by denying the right to know judicial processes of public interest, affecting at the same time the free exercise of journalism. It also opens the door to the judicialization of the press, as already occurs in other countries of the region. Journalists' groups have called for a review and amendments to this body of law which, far from protecting the exercise of their profession, obstructs and contaminates it.

## **Guatemala**

Under Agreement 69-2019, of November 26, 2019, the Prosecutor's Office for Crimes against Journalists was created in Guatemala, with the objective of being in charge of knowing, investigating and criminally prosecuting crimes that, at the national level, are committed against journalists, when these are aimed at limiting their human rights in the exercise of their functions. These may be an act of intimidation, harassment or retaliation for their activity.

However, the work of this Prosecutor's Office has been questioned by those surveyed because the first of its

articles establishes that when the prosecutors determine that the motive of the crime is not proven to be a consequence of the journalistic work, the complaints will be referred to other prosecutors' offices, which generates discretionality. Its operation depends on the criteria and credibility of the prosecutors, who are not currently recognized as impartial.

In Guatemala there is no mechanism for the protection of journalists; the institution of the Human Rights Ombudsman once played a relevant role, but it generates mistrust. It is recognized that support to confront threats comes primarily from civil society organizations and to some extent from the Association of Journalists of Guatemala -APG-.

### **Honduras**

In May 2015, the Protection System for Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators and Justice Operators was created in Honduras, accompanied by the General Directorate of the Protection System, with the function of receiving protection requests, creating protection plans for people at risk and coordinating actions to execute these plans. It incorporates in its articles the granting of police or military protection to victims, panic buttons, security cameras, motion and illumination systems for homes, video intercoms, escorts and armored vehicles, among others.

Currently, their economic and technical resources are scarce. The change of government, the massive dismissals, which included the director of the aforementioned system, as well as structural changes, put its operation in jeopardy, to the point that organizations such as Reporters without Borders (RSF) made public their rejection of the actions taken.

### **El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama**

In El Salvador, training and orientation for the defense of journalists is an option for their protection. The main source of aggressions according to the most recent report of the Association of Journalists of El Salvador -APES- are the high officials of the Executive. Journalists reported receiving support from APES, social entities and the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas.

Meanwhile in Nicaragua, it is noted that the judicial system has abdicated its obligation to investigate, prosecute and condemn crimes against independent journalism. The denunciations reported by journalists point to the subordination of the judiciary and the prosecutor's office to the executive power, from where, according to denunciations by human rights organizations, the attacks on journalists originate. Protection mechanisms are informal and depend on the support of colleagues, especially those who are already in exile.

In Panama, trade and academic associations reported that they are seeking support and resources to develop effective protection strategies and have denounced a climate of harassment against journalists in the context of social mobilizations.

With this background, which serves as a basis for the findings of the quantitative and qualitative exercise, the need to develop mechanisms, systems or tools that can prevent, in a sustainable, effective and independent manner, the various forms of threats and attacks against the integrity of journalists is clearly perceived; not only because of the relevance of the informative role they play in society, but also as fundamental elements to guarantee democratic systems.



# On the situation of the profession

It is reported that the strategies of polarization, fear, criminalization and discrediting of the press by the region's governments, business elites, drug trafficking and other criminal groups prevail in the current environment in Central America. At times, the dividing line between the aforementioned groups becomes blurred and appears to be more like a web of intertwined and mutually reinforcing links and interests. Using various means, the idea that the press is "an enemy" to be defended against and controlled is gradually implanted.

This idea is perceived as the seed of the polarization that exists to varying degrees and is easily propagated by social networks, which, fed with simple messages, appeal to people's emotions and promote the division between

groups: government vs. press, sympathetic media vs. critical media, citizens vs. press. Rationality and complex arguments give way to the simplification of ideas, thus motivating verbal violence, provoking division, polemic and stereotyped visions of the other. From Guatemala to Nicaragua, fear and mistrust of the powers that be and of the constituted powers prevails.

Thus, the journalistic profession feels victim of a series of planned and systematized actions, created with the purpose of discrediting, weakening and questioning its work, mission and intentions, but also to silence it using various tactics to instill fear and uncertainty, promoting its vulnerability and limiting the citizens' right to access the truth.

# **Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis**

This study systematizes what has been described and reported from the voice of the profession itself, by means of a survey in which 340 Central American journalists participated (Annex I), reinforced with 12 discussion groups in which 60 journalism professionals expressed their opinions (Annex II). This document also includes the perceptions of the journalists who participated in the seminar held on November 28 and 29, 2022 in Panama City, where the findings of the survey and the focus groups were discussed.

According to information derived from the survey, on a scale in which 1 implies the absence of respect for freedom of expression and 10 the total respect, the ratings range from 1 to 5, i.e., they move from a scenario of neutrality to the absolute lack of respect. Similarly, the institutions that, in the opinion of the participants, have the greatest impact on journalism are, in order of importance, the Executive, the Legislature, the Prosecutor's Office, illegal actors, the Judiciary and municipalities.

In countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, there is a process of alignment and loss of autonomy of the public powers, to the detriment of the system of democratic controls and guarantees.

Community media and journalists deserve special attention, as they are the ones who have suffered the most from these offenses and are in a situation of greater

defenselessness. 53.6% of those interviewed in the quantitative study indicated that they were victims of harassment by State agents.

Finally, it is necessary to pay attention to the impacts generated by the pandemic, both from the financial point of view, as well as in the establishment of new work modalities that affect the performance and independence of the journalistic exercise.

### **Forms of intimidation**

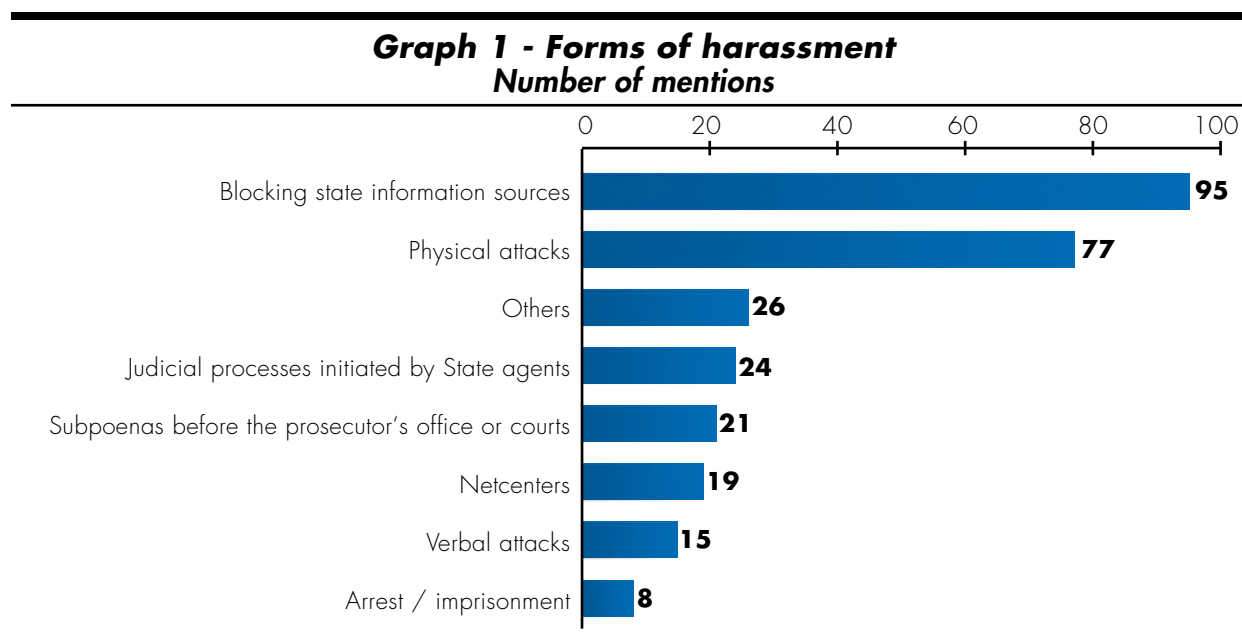
The discussion groups and the seminar held in Panama made it possible to delve deeper into the types of intimidation suffered by journalists. Table 1 summarizes them and makes it possible to establish coincidences and divergences among the six countries, as well as to note the levels of degradation of the climate of freedom of the press and freedom of expression:

**Table 1**  
**Forms of Intimidation**

<b>Forms of Intimidation</b>	<b>GUA</b>	<b>ELS</b>	<b>HON</b>	<b>NIC</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>PAN</b>
Financial strangulation	X	X	X	X	X	X
Digital harassment	X	X	X	X	X	X
Espionage		X		X		
Misuse of criminal law/ judicial institutions	X	X	X	X		
Limited access to public information sources	X	X	X	X		X
Legal frameworks and or restrictive legal reforms		X	X	X		
Criminal Complaints	X	X		X		X
Arbitrary Detentions	X			X		
Physical and verbal aggressions	X	X	X	X	X	X

These ways of exerting pressure on journalists and harassment mechanisms coincided with the response options included in the opinion survey, whose scale can be seen in **Graph 1**.

bot farms, in order to expand their reach and give a false idea of viralization, instilling fear and, on some occasions, succeeding in silencing dissonant voices. 89.4% of those consulted in the quantitative study affirms



The focus groups showed that the forms of intimidation common to the six Central American countries are financial stifling and digital harassment. In the survey, 78.5% of participants were of the opinion that the private sector also uses advertising as a pressure mechanism to avoid publications against their interests.

Although financial stifling has long been one of the instruments most used by the elites, both political and economic, to reward sympathetic media and punish critics, its incidence in a post-pandemic environment becomes even more relevant, as the financial impact was felt more strongly on companies and journalists.

In the case of digital harassment, social networks have become widely used channels to simplify reality and create a climate of opinion that favors certain political interests. The people who manage anonymous accounts establish nodes where messages attacking journalists are distributed and replicated.

These delegitimization and harassment campaigns are often financed with public resources that support troll or

that governments have unofficial platforms (netcenters, trolls) to disqualify digital publications and opinions that are not in line with the official line; and 70.6% indicate that there have been direct blocks on digital information platforms that they consider adverse.

However, messages through networks are not the only way to inhibit freedom of the press and freedom of expression. 74.4% of respondents say that the State limits these rights in the digital environment and in traditional media; and 62.9% state that there are regulations that affect freedom of the press and generate aggravated sanctions.

On occasion, hostile messages disseminated through social networks lead to confrontations and physical aggression. This has been reported mainly in relation to El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

In countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, this has taken a more serious turn, as the profession denounces acts of espionage, through the use of Pegasus software, with which intrusions have been made in electronic devices to access personal or professional information that is

**Another form of  
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subsequently used against them. It was in the focus groups of these two countries where this type of harassment was most emphasized, and 72.6% of respondents endorsed it.

Another form of intimidation identified had to do with the improper use of criminal law and spurious denunciations that affect the profession in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. In this regard, several interviewees pointed out that the laws on violence against women have been used to intimidate and punish the work of journalists. Faced with this form of censorship, which affects male journalists, women journalists have taken on the responsibility of carrying out and signing their names to certain investigative work in order to evade the limitations imposed by this improper use of laws for the protection of women. In the case of Nicaragua, summoning journalists to the prosecutor's office for questioning has been used as a form of intimidation. In other cases, these have been unfounded accusations. This was reported in the case of sports journalist Miguel Mendoza, sentenced on 8/02/2022 to nine years in prison for his criticism of the Nicaraguan government on social networks. Mendoza was charged with conspiracy to commit undermining national integrity.

According to the survey, other crimes used to criminalize the union are: defamation, slander and libel, collusion, money laundering, theft and illicit association. The survey shows that 77.1% of participants point out the existence of provisions from the State, tending to increase criminal charges for defamation, slander and insult.

It is relevant to point out that, according to the findings of the study, vulnerability increases in contexts in which the division and autonomy of powers is diluted and institutions act biased and arbitrarily. In complicity with power groups

rooted in governments and society, the rights of defense, due process, objectivity and impartiality in the application of justice are violated.

Restrictive legal reforms, aimed at hindering and criminalizing the work of the press, have been reported especially in El Salvador and constantly since the establishment of the State of Emergency, approved by the Legislative Assembly in March 2022 and renewed 16 times at the time of finalizing this report.

According to those interviewed, the aforementioned provision limits citizens' rights and has served as a basis for restricting the right to information on the use of public resources, accountability of government decisions and the human rights situation of those apprehended. Participants in the country's focus groups emphasized that recent reforms to the Penal Code legalize espionage and penalties for disclosing information considered confidential by the government.

In the case of Nicaragua, there is no reference to reforms, but rather to the approval of new legal frameworks such as the Cybercrime Law, approved in October 2020, which empowers the government to initiate legal proceedings for conspiracy and for disseminating news it considers false. The Law for the Regulation of Foreign Agents, which limits any international support to the country, affecting the guild and the media and the Amnesty Law, which benefits with impunity those responsible for repressing the social protests of 2018.

In parallel to these laws, there has been an increase in arbitrary arrests of citizens and journalists, who remain detained without judicial guarantees and in conditions that violate their human integrity and dignity. The fear of being captured leads to an exodus of journalists, who now have to work from exile.

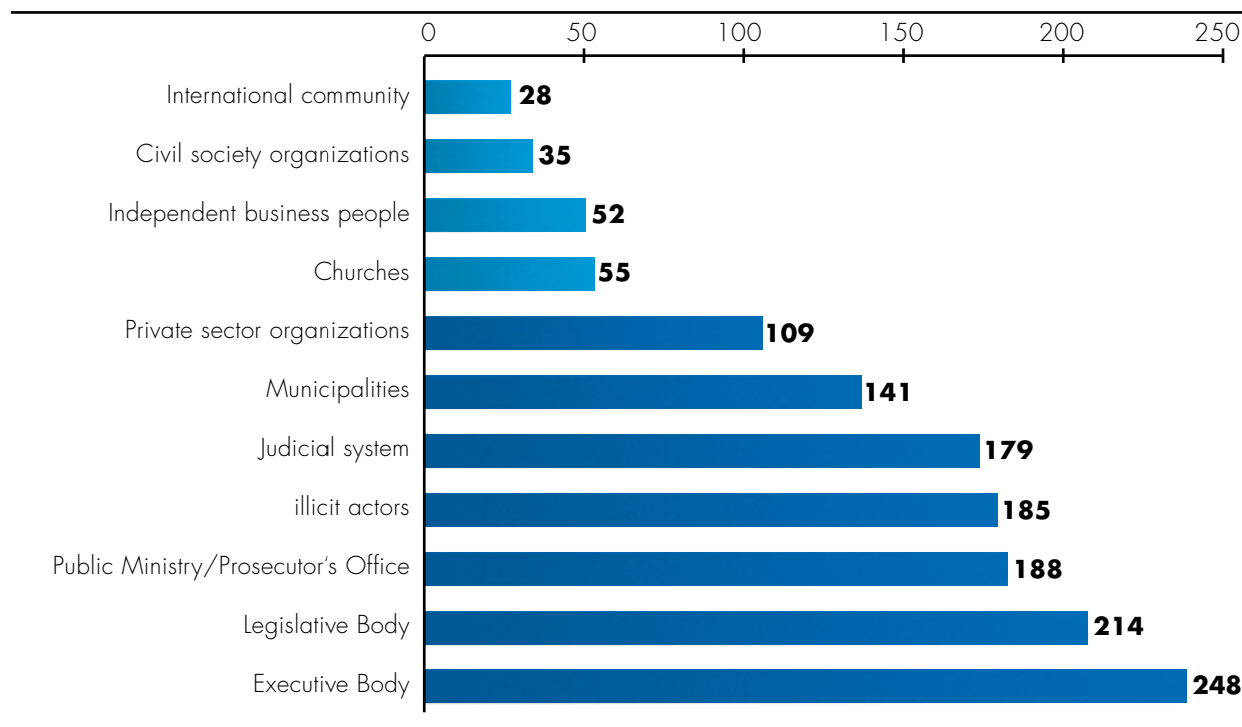
The quantitative opinion study reports that 93.2% of those surveyed affirmed that State actors restrict or deny access to official information sources to journalists critical of the State's position; and 82.2% affirmed that the State limits access to information. However, in the focus groups, the most recurrent mentions of this form of blocking were registered in the groups from Honduras and Panama. 71.8% of those surveyed believe that private sector actors are also an important source of restrictions on the practice of journalism.

The study, in its qualitative and quantitative components, would indicate that officials in Central America share the idea that they have no obligation to provide information to the press and based on this, they deny information, restrict access to press conferences, which are increasingly rare, and when there are press conferences, they limit the number of questions to be asked. Instead, they disseminate messages through social networks, distribute press releases and show openness only with media aligned with their interests.

**State officials in Central America  
share the idea that they have no obligation  
to provide information to the press**

in addition to suffering attacks and restrictions for their work, in most cases they are attacked and threatened because they are women, and in the case of community journalists, due to the limited presence of government

**Graph 2 - Main actors who harass or attack  
Number of mentions**



**Women and community  
journalists**

The survey conducted throughout this research, as well as the discussion groups, emphasized the need to provide greater protection to women journalists and departmental/provincial and community journalists. This special attention is due to the fact that in the current context of journalistic practice, both groups present different and deeper-rooted vulnerabilities. In the case of women journalists, it is mainly due to the fact that,

authorities in rural areas and the increasingly widespread control of the territory by organized crime and drug trafficking networks, especially in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

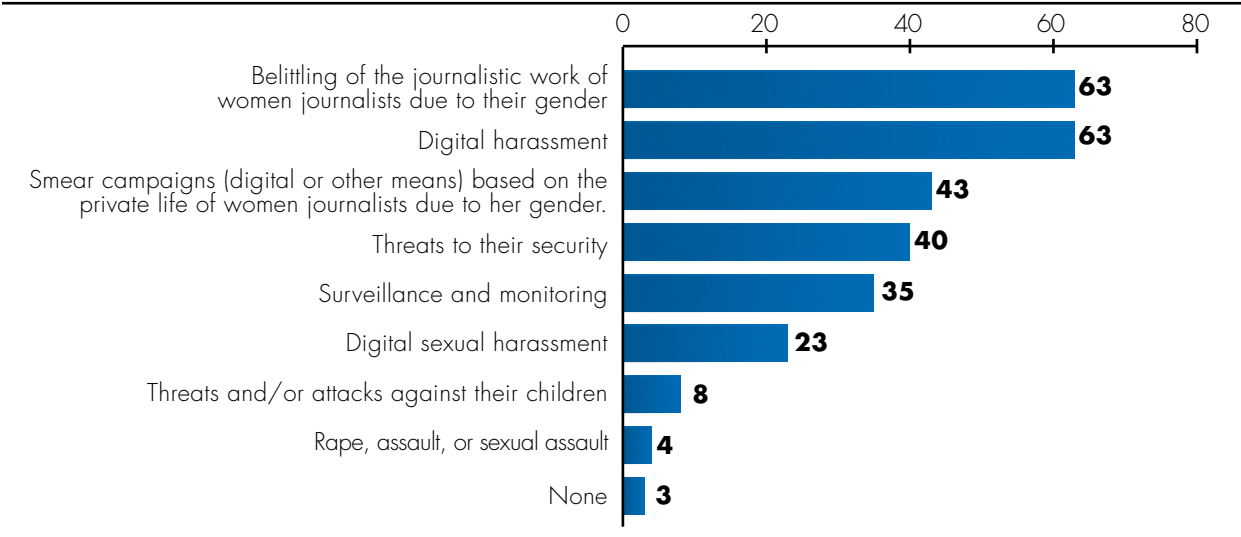
According to data from the survey, the most recurrent aggression against women journalists is the belittling of their informative work due to their status as women and digital harassment. However, in the verbalizations of the focus groups, threats to their physical integrity and

sexual harassment were the most mentioned, possibly because in the discussions specific and sometimes personal cases were exemplified.

Digital harassment stands out, both in the discussions and in the survey, as a new form of attack on women journalists, with the aim of intimidating and silencing them.

In the focus groups, the community press identified itself as a silenced group. For the most part, these journalists are totally unprotected because they carry out their work independently, without the backing of companies or formal organizations. This weakness makes them easy prey for harassment and persecution, to the extent that they perceive their profession as clandestine. This leads to self-censorship and silence, according to the journalists participating in the discussion groups.

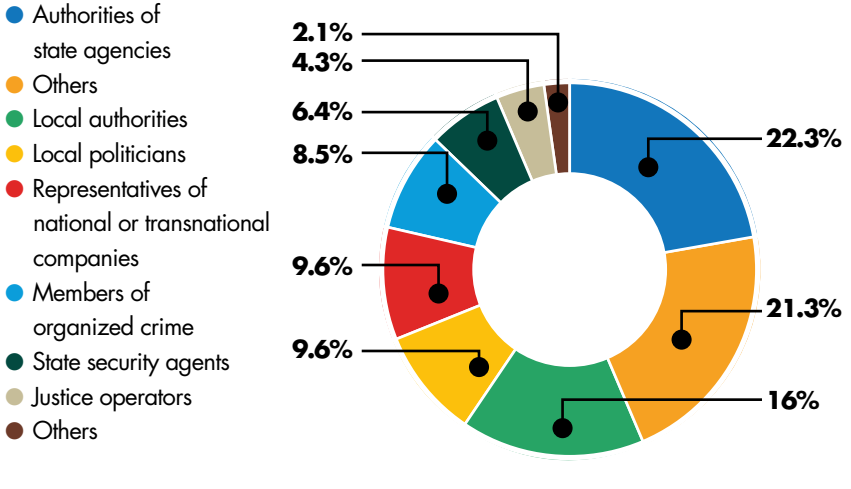
**Graph 3- Female journalists, type of aggressions**  
**Number of mentions**



As for those responsible for the violations, 22% of the people interviewed pointed to local authorities as the main aggressors.

Both in the groups and in the interviews, there is coincidence in pointing to State institutions as relevant aggressors. The survey shows 16% for these actors. As shown in Graph 4, it is worth noting that women journalists already identify organized crime as an aggressor group, with 2.1%, considering that these actors normally play more than one role in society.

**Graph 4**  
**Responsible for attacks on women journalists**



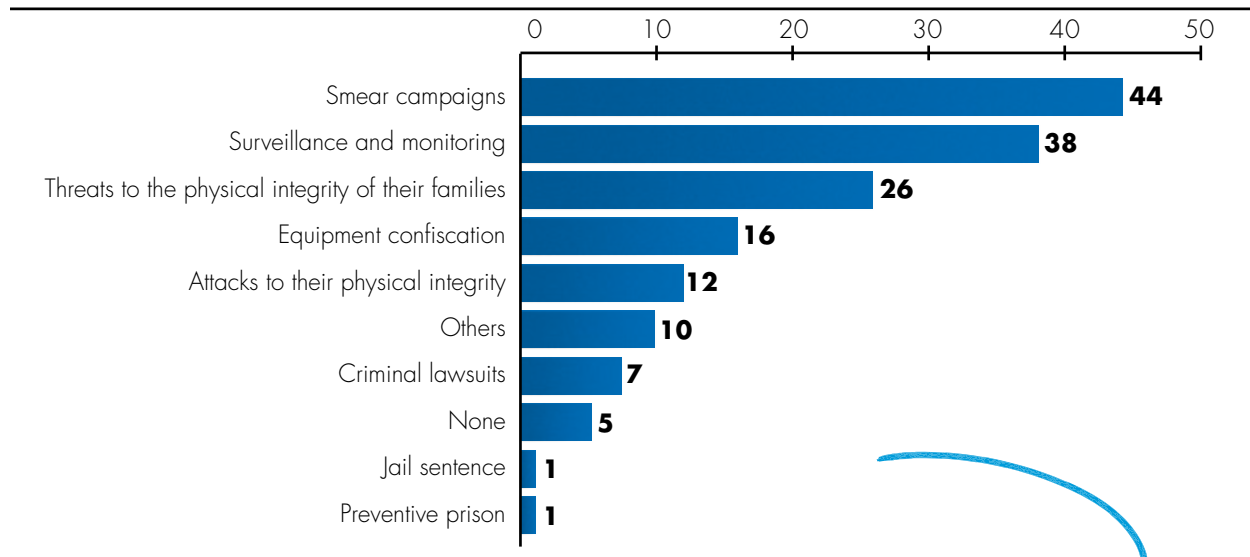
In the survey, 82 mentions were made that confirm the above-mentioned verbalizations. Discredit (44) and persecution (38) are the most recurrent types of aggression, which coincides with the opinions of the discussion groups.

It is worth mentioning that in this group, threats to their physical integrity and that of their families are perceived as forms of aggression, which generates very strong

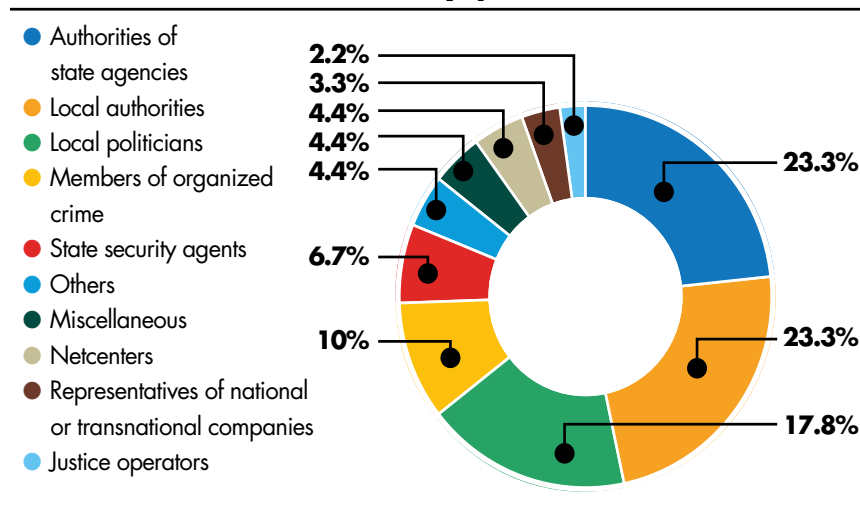
pressures. Likewise, in the survey, judicial harassment such as lawsuits, convictions, preventive imprisonment and jail already appear with a considerable level of importance.

Those responsible for the pressures identified by community journalists are the authorities of state agencies and local authorities, which together represent 46% of the results. This is followed by politicians with 17.8%, and then organized

**Graph 5 - Community journalists, types of aggressions they receive**  
Number of mentions



**Graph 6**  
**Responsible for attacks on community journalists**




*In the survey, 82 mentions were made that confirm the above-mentioned verbalizations. Discredit (44) and persecution (38) are the most recurrent types of aggression, which coincides with the opinions of the discussion groups.*



crime actors with 10%. The latter, according to the perceptions of the focus groups, is due to the fact that in rural or departmental areas there is more impunity surrounding the issue.

These findings, both in the cases of women and community journalism, seek to contribute to the formulation of criteria, initiatives or minimum mechanisms of special protection in favor of both groups of journalists, who, as can be seen in this study, are not only more vulnerable to aggressions, but also work in more adverse environments.

***The limitation and closure of sources of information is both a form of intimidation and a consequence of actions promoted by the political power.***



### ***Impact on journalistic work***

The following table compares the impact that the situation described above has had on the performance of the press in the six Central American countries, according to the interviews:

**Table 2**  
**Main impacts**

<b><i>Impacts</i></b>	<b><i>GUA</i></b>	<b><i>ELS</i></b>	<b><i>HON</i></b>	<b><i>NIC</i></b>	<b><i>CR</i></b>	<b><i>PAN</i></b>
Self-censorship	X	X	X		X	
Closure and/or limited access to sources of information	X	X			X	
Deterioration of journalistic quality			X		X	X
Journalism on the verge of extinction				X		
Difficulty in recruiting personnel	X	X				
Political militancy	X	X		X		
Economic damages for legal costs						X

The limitation and closure of sources of information is both a form of intimidation and a consequence of actions promoted by the political power. In the case of Costa Rica, reluctance on the part of the Executive Branch to open spaces for communication has been identified, for which it resorts to a series of measures that promote unidirectional communication and close the possibility of delving into matters of public interest. The processes of requesting information become complex, thus affecting the criterion of timeliness that characterizes the informative notes, in addition to affecting their balance and veracity.

Self-censorship is a common reaction, with the exception of Nicaragua and Panama, where the profession indicates that they do not refrain from publishing their work or expressing their opinion for fear of the consequences. In the case of Nicaragua, it should be reiterated that a good number of journalists work from abroad and this allows them a certain freedom of action. Those who still remain in the country indicate that they have learned to manage risk situations.

The case of Panama has different connotations since, as will be seen below, journalists say they have found support from international organizations to mitigate and resolve these situations.

In relation to the impact caused by the financial stranglehold mentioned in Table 2, it is inferred that it led to layoffs, closures, salary reductions and accelerated the transition to digital editions and remote work. Another consequence mentioned is that it discouraged the impulse to become professional in exchange for opting for political militancy. It also favored showbiz journalism and sensationalist reports and produced a kind of "mercenaryism", as the same respondents described it, which puts economic objectives before informative ones.

therefore, prone to fake news and 280-character messages.

In addition to the effects described above, it emerges that the legal costs derived from complaints against the media and journalists imply a significant economic impact when journalistic companies assume the defense of their staff, or worse, when they have to assume it individually.

This scenario is unattractive for recruiting a new generation of professionals interested and willing to practice responsible journalism, both informative and investigative, as there is a growing perception that it is a difficult, high-risk and economically unprofitable path.

**The analytics of social network accounts, such as reach, number of impressions and cost per click, become relevant over the actions of control or opinion formation.**

**State institutions and non-governmental entities they turn to**

The following table summarizes the entities to which journalists turn for protection and support in each of the Central American countries.

All this deteriorates the quality of journalistic practice. As an aggravating factor, what is disclosed in government and government-related media is seen as propaganda: 89.4% of the participants in the opinion poll affirmed that the State uses the media to favor the government’s vision.

The analytics of social network accounts, such as reach, number of impressions and cost per click, become relevant over the actions of control or opinion formation. It is a difficult balance to maintain, because on the one hand, the media must fulfill their role in democracy and, on the other hand, they must take care of their survival as companies. This is complemented by an increasingly “infocated” public, unable to process all the communicational stimuli in its environment and,

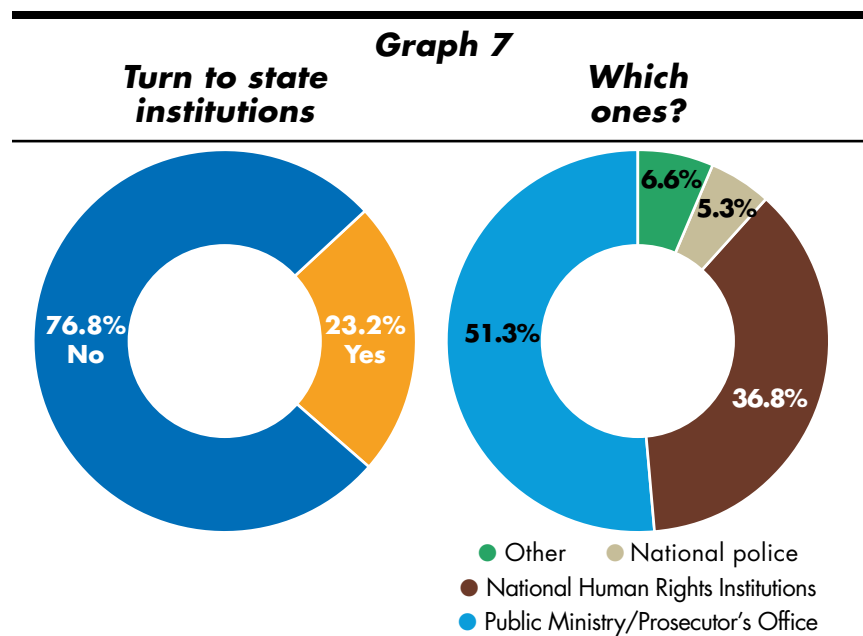
As can be seen, distrust of public institutions prevails in the groups consulted, with the exception of Costa Rica,

**Table 3  
Mechanisms used**

<b>Entities or mechanisms</b>	<b>GUA</b>	<b>ELS</b>	<b>HON</b>	<b>NIC</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>PAN</b>
Public Institutions					X	
National protection mechanism	N/A	N/A		N/A	N/A	N/A
Trade organizations		X			X	X
National civil organizations*	X	X	X	X	X	
Legal support organizations or networks			X	X		
International organizations	X					X
Informal support networks movements**	X	X			X	X
Exile	X		X	X		
* These can be either for the defense of human rights or specialized in freedom of expression and press. ** Those that do not have legal status and are activated on an emergency basis, to react to special situations.						

where there is still confidence in the functionality and impartiality of the institutions responsible for guaranteeing the human rights of the citizenry. In the discussion groups, 23.2% of participants indicated that they turn to state institutions to file complaints and only 12.4% affirmed that these institutions act efficiently.

***In the most critical cases, emergency funds are provided to support emigration and the asylum process in the destination country.***



This situation causes Central American journalists (with the exception of Panamanian journalists) to turn to civil organizations for the defense of human rights or the protection of journalists in situations of harassment. It is through these organizations that they file public complaints, receive legal support, advice, early attention (prevention), training and psychosocial care. In the most critical cases, emergency funds are provided to support emigration and the asylum process in the destination country.

**Table 4**  
**Supporting civil society organizations in each country**

Country	Organization	Type of support
Guatemala	Unidad de Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos (Udefegua) <a href="https://udefegua.org">https://udefegua.org</a>	Contributes to criminal investigation, legal accompaniment, counseling and guidance.
	Red Rompe el Miedo <a href="https://redrompeelmiedoguatemala.org">https://redrompeelmiedoguatemala.org</a>	Platform for early care, prevention, protection and security of the guild.
	Civitas <a href="https://www.redandi.info/guatemala/">https://www.redandi.info/guatemala/</a>	Media observatory, training, guidance and counseling.
El Salvador	Colectivo de Mujeres Periodistas <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ColectivaMujeresPeriodistas/">https://www.facebook.com/ColectivaMujeresPeriodistas/</a>	Public denunciations, legal support and psychosocial care.
	Colectivo de Mujeres Feministas <a href="https://colectivafeminista.org.sv">https://colectivafeminista.org.sv</a>	Complaints, advice and accompaniment.

Country	Organization	Type of support
Honduras	Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) <a href="https://noticias.uca.edu.sv/noticias/centro-para-la-proteccion-de-periodistas">https://noticias.uca.edu.sv/noticias/centro-para-la-proteccion-de-periodistas</a>	Training, risk management, stress management, and safety protocols.
	Cristosal <a href="https://cristosal.org/portada/">https://cristosal.org/portada/</a>	Litigation support, psychological support, training, monitoring of human rights violations, etc.
Nicaragua	C-LIBRE <a href="http://www.clibrehonduras.com/cl/">http://www.clibrehonduras.com/cl/</a>	Pronouncements, complaints, advice and support.
	Centro de Estudios de la Mujer <a href="http://www.cemh.org.hn">http://www.cemh.org.hn</a>	Accompaniment, counseling, sensitization, announcements and denunciations
	Comité de Familiares Detenidos y Desaparecidos de Honduras (COFADEH) <a href="http://www.cofadeh.org/html/historia/accion_educativa.html">http://www.cofadeh.org/html/historia/accion_educativa.html</a>	It provides training, public denunciations, campaigns, counseling and accompaniment.
Costa Rica	Periodistas y Comunicadores Independientes de Nicaragua (PCIN) <a href="https://pcinnicaragua.org">https://pcinnicaragua.org</a>	Training, guidance, counseling, accompaniment and support in the emigration process.
	Voces del Sur <a href="https://vocesdelsurunidas.org">https://vocesdelsurunidas.org</a>	Monitoring and reporting of attacks on freedom of expression.
Panamá	Departamento de Derecho Internacional Universidad de la Paz <a href="https://www.upeace.org">https://www.upeace.org</a>	Legal assistance, research and academic activities on freedom of the press.
	Punto y Aparte <a href="https://www.puntoyaparte-ca.com">https://www.puntoyaparte-ca.com</a>	Protection alliances, media site verification directory, to promote responsible journalism.
	N/D	

With the exception of Honduras, Central American countries do not have a national protection mechanism for journalists. In the opinion survey, only 26.8% responded affirmatively to this question. However, in Honduras the existing mechanism, according to those who responded to the survey and participated in the focus groups, “does not work” or “is diminished”.

In the case of Guatemala, the Office of the Prosecutor for Crimes against Journalists is recognized, however, it is not considered a resource for the protection of journalistic practice.

Costa Rica, El Salvador and Panama are the countries with active, reliable and solid professional organizations. In El Salvador, the Association of Journalists -APES- is described as an extremely dynamic and growing organization in terms of the number

of members. Secondly, the Asociación de Radios Participativas -Arpas- was mentioned.

In Costa Rica, the Professional Association of Journalists, at the time of this study, according to those surveyed, was not fulfilling its function satisfactorily. The elections for the renewal of the board of directors (held on November 3, 2022) led to the nomination of slates and civic actions aimed at ensuring a high level campaign and an adequate renewal of cadres. The participants in the discussion groups expressed their confidence that the renewal of the College’s directors will open an opportunity to improve protection actions.

In Panama, there are at least four organizations made up of journalists whose mission is to protect press freedom: the Forum of Journalists for Freedom of Expression and Information, the National College of

Journalists, the National Council of Journalism and the Broadcasting Council (Table 6).

In Guatemala there is the Guatemalan Chamber of Journalism -CGP- and the Association of Journalists of Guatemala -APG-. In the case of the former, it was pointed out that it is not representative and, regarding the latter, the participants in the focus groups indicated that they are not members of it. However, they recognized that it is the most active in making public pronouncements in defense of freedom of expression and the practice of journalism and valued the initiative to publish an annual report on the situation of journalism in Guatemala within the framework of the installation of the Journalists' Observatory.

In Honduras and Nicaragua it was reported that the profession is very divided and, consequently,

so are the professional associations. Mistrust prevails among them and they are perceived as aligned with the interests of the government. Nevertheless, it is in these two countries where there are support networks for legal advice and assistance and, in the case of Nicaragua, two professional networks have been established in exile.

In Honduras, a group of lawyers was formed to provide legal defense and advice, and in Nicaragua, an alliance was formed to seek alternative support with international human rights organizations and rapporteurs, such as the Center for Justice and International Law and the Human Rights Collective. Both initiatives lack a robust budget and broad geographic reach.

**Table 5**  
**Trade organizations**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Guatemala	Cámara Guatemalteca de Periodismo <a href="https://camaradepperiodismo.org">https://camaradepperiodismo.org</a>	To defend freedom of expression, the right of the population to be informed and free access to sources of information.
	Asociación de Periodistas de Guatemala <a href="https://lapg.negocio.site/?utm_source=gmb&amp;utm_medium=referral">https://lapg.negocio.site/?utm_source=gmb&amp;utm_medium=referral</a>	To ensure compliance with the Law on Broadcasting of Thought, freedom of information and access to sources of information.
El Salvador	Asociación de Periodistas de El Salvador <a href="https://apes.org.sv">https://apes.org.sv</a>	Unite journalists, train them for their professional development, social security conditions and self-sustainability. Watch over the defense of Freedom of Expression and the Right to Information.
	Asociación de Radios Participativas de El Salvador <a href="https://arpas.org.sv">https://arpas.org.sv</a>	Coordinate alternative and community media that promote the democratization of communication.
Honduras	Colegio de Periodistas de Honduras <a href="http://colegiodeperiodistasdehonduras.hn/wp/">http://colegiodeperiodistasdehonduras.hn/wp/</a>	To watch over the free professional practice, values, welfare, union and mutual help.
Nicaragua	Colegio de Periodistas de Nicaragua <a href="https://es-la.facebook.com/ColegioDePeriodistasDeNicaragua/">https://es-la.facebook.com/ColegioDePeriodistasDeNicaragua/</a>	Website disabled
Costa Rica	Colegio de Periodistas de Costa Rica <a href="https://www.colper.or.cr/app/cms/www/index.php">https://www.colper.or.cr/app/cms/www/index.php</a>	To support the practice of journalism, access to information, freedom of the press and the strengthening of democracy.
Panamá	Consejo Nacional de Periodismo <a href="https://www.sipiapa.org/notas/1210469-consejo-nacional-periodismo-cnp">https://www.sipiapa.org/notas/1210469-consejo-nacional-periodismo-cnp</a>	To defend freedom of expression and information and to promote journalistic excellence.

País	Organization	Purpose
Panamá	Consejo de Radiodifusión <a href="https://www.conep.org.pa/miembros_conep/asociacion-panamena-de-radiodifusion-apr/">https://www.conep.org.pa/miembros_conep/asociacion-panamena-de-radiodifusion-apr/</a>	Institutionally strengthen radio and TV associates, consolidate business unity.
	Forum de Periodistas por la Libertad de Expresión e Información <a href="https://www.forumdeperiodistas.org">https://www.forumdeperiodistas.org</a>	To encourage actions to guarantee the free exercise of journalism, freedom of expression and the right to information. National Journalism Award.

Regarding the option of resorting to international organizations, in Panama the guild indicated that it maintains good relations with friendly countries such as Canada, the Netherlands and the United States, from which it requests accompaniment at particularly important moments, in order to send messages to government authorities showing their support to the journalistic guild.

For situations in which legal support is required, they turn to *Free Press Unlimited*<sup>1</sup>, the Embassies of Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

In the Guatemalan case, it was reported that Free Press Unlimited and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD)<sup>2</sup> are integrating a network of independent journalists throughout the country, especially in the departments, with the intention of providing support and advice.

Informal support networks and emerging movements are also being tapped. Mention was made of the #NoNosCallaránGT movement (in Guatemala) and #Movete (in Costa Rica). The conjunctural articulations are particularly common for community and freelance journalism, which act in emergency situations to support each other, design security protocols and protection measures.

Recently, an organization was launched that encompasses journalists in the region, the Central American Network of Journalists, which intends to establish a safe evacuation system for threatened journalists, receive them in the countries that host them, provide legal defense, carry out advocacy, denunciation and lobbying actions, and strengthen collaborative journalism.

In the survey, 86.8% indicated that they have not had the need to leave the country; however, in the discussion groups, exile was mentioned as an option adopted in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua due to the lack of trust in justice sector institutions.

Finally, the groups spontaneously mentioned other measures they have adopted to protect themselves, which, in order, are the following:

1. Going to the media outlet with which they work.
2. Public denouncements, especially, through social networks.
3. Self-care.
4. Work on legal modifications that guarantee freedom of the press and freedom of expression.
5. To redouble efforts to ensure the quality of journalistic work.
6. To take actions from the academy, carrying out research on who are the people and institutions that most hinder information and make them public.
7. Use the Chapultepec Index of the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) as an instrument to make visible the evolution, scope and limitations of press freedom.

### ***International mechanisms for the protection of human rights***

The mention of multilateral international entities, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Organization of American States did not occur spontaneously as entities to which journalists usually turn.

1 [https://www.freepressunlimited.org.translate.google/en?\\_x\\_tr\\_sl=en&\\_x\\_tr\\_tl=es&\\_x\\_tr\\_hl=es-419&\\_x\\_tr\\_pto=sc](https://www.freepressunlimited.org.translate.google/en?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=es&_x_tr_hl=es-419&_x_tr_pto=sc)

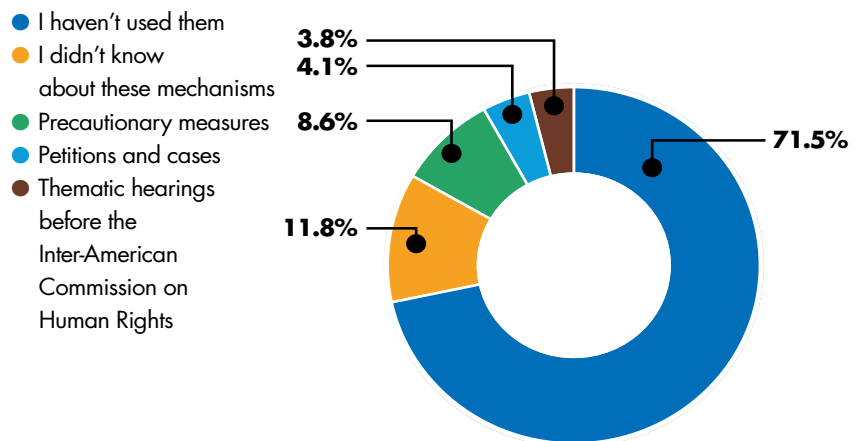
2 <https://centralamerica.nimd.org/nuestro-equipo/guatemala/>

In the opinion survey, 71.5% indicated that they had not had recourse to the Inter-American System and 77.9% had not used the United Nations (Graphs 8 and 9). Those who said they knew of them in the focus groups mentioned the IACHR; only in the case of Nicaragua, one participant mentioned the United Nations System. In the case of Panama, no cases of journalists dealt with by this body were recalled, although the country has taken precautionary measures on other issues.

Most of the participants said they did not know how the mechanisms mentioned above work, while others indicated that they had only heard about them superficially and, perhaps for that reason, do not see them as an option. They anticipate and indicate that their cases would probably not meet the requirements to be attended to by such instances.

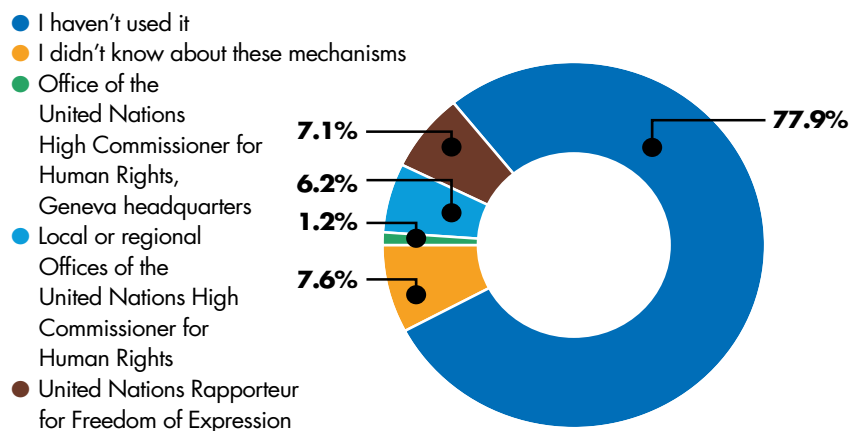
On the other hand, those who have had some direct experience or know of cases close to them, are of the

**Graph 8**  
**International mechanisms used**  
**Inter-American System**



*In the survey, 71.5% indicated that they had not resorted to the Inter-American System and 77.9% had not used the United Nations system.*

**Graph 9**  
**International mechanisms used**  
**United Nations System**



opinion that the resolution times of these international mechanisms are very long and that the sense of opportunity is fundamental to guarantee the physical integrity and life of individuals.

Furthermore, in the case of the IACHR mechanism, all national judicial remedies must be previously exhausted. They consider that this requirement is unfeasible, or at least not very effective in those cases in which governments show little democratic vocation and the justice systems have lost impartiality and independence, thus limiting the possibilities of facing fair trials. As shown in Table 4, in Costa Rica people turn to national justice institutions with the relative certainty that they will be subject to due process.

In addition to the above, those surveyed consider that if precautionary measures are granted, they are applied by the national authorities, who are said to be primarily

responsible for the threats and intimidation that give rise to the filing of complaints and, therefore, lack the political will to enforce them.

It is agreed that, although Central American countries appear in the periodic reports of the IACHR, in practice nothing changes, so that the international mechanisms are perceived with discouragement, disbelief and even anger.

### **Recommendations for improving protection mechanisms**

Given that the purpose of this work is to identify the demands and needs of journalists as expressed by them, below is an outline with the recommendations collected and identified by country, which seeks to guide towards concrete actions at a later date.

**Table 6:  
Summary of recommendations by country**

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>GUA</b>	<b>ELS</b>	<b>HON</b>	<b>NIC</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>PAN</b>
Improve the current protection systems, they must be reviewed and updated to respond to the new conditions.	X	X	X	X		
Establish dialogues or conciliations, exhaust domestic processes, and order precautionary measures to States accused of violating human rights.	X	X	X	X		
Improving response times to complaints received.	X	X	X	X	X	
Show a more determined and proactive attitude in the defense of freedom of the press and freedom of expression.	X		X	X		X
Disseminate existing guides and any type of informative material for the defense of citizens and journalists.	X	X	X			
Permanent information and communication campaigns on the protection mechanisms available in each country. They should also cover justice operators and not only journalists.	X	X	X			X
Campaigns aimed at citizens (media literacy processes) on their rights and duties regarding freedom of expression and information, and the role of the press in democracy.					X	X
Training for officials on their role as facilitators of information and guarantors of respect for human rights. Also on how to simplify access to information.						X



<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>GUA</b>	<b>ELS</b>	<b>HON</b>	<b>NIC</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>PAN</b>
Train journalists and other officials in human rights (police, prosecutors, judges, among others).			X			
Develop step-by-step guidelines or protocols on what to do in the event of being intimidated or criminalized.	X	X	X	X		
Preventive measures and security protocols that respond to the different risks and vulnerabilities affecting the press.	X		X		X	
Promote a sustainable and specialized network of lawyers for the defense of journalists and to provide legal advice.	X	X	X	X	X	X
Create national mechanisms for the protection of journalists.	X					
Motivate the union of the guild.	X	X	X			
Provide psychological support.				X	X	X
That international organizations manage support for journalists who have had to go into exile.				X	X	
Approach civil organizations that support journalists, as well as emerging movements, to make an inventory of ongoing initiatives and needs in order to establish priorities for coordinated action.	X	X			X	
International alliances of journalists that make it possible to visualize general problems of the profession and threats to free expression.	X	X	X		X	X
Promote collaborative journalism and strengthen community support networks to serve independent journalists or those working for small media outlets.	X	X	X			
Maintain permanent monitoring of the violations committed, issue alerts, pronouncements and communiqués.	X	X	X	X	X	X
Promote the training of a new generation of journalists in countries where the career has been discouraged.	X	X		X		
Provide training on creative and innovative forms of journalism, multimedia, among others.				X		

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# Annex I

## Technical data sheet for the survey

In order to develop the quantitative part of this study, a reference survey was elaborated, with a multiple choice format, in order to establish trends and parameters of perception, regarding the situation of freedom of expression in the region, free access to information and the mechanisms for journalists in Central America.

### Design and content

The format of the survey, multiple-choice and digital, included several segments that allow for the disaggregation of perceptions by country, gender, as well as by private and independent journalism. These blocks included the following topics:

1. General Information
2. Actors
3. Threats
4. Protection Mechanisms
5. Opportunities

An exclusive series for women journalists and one for community journalists was also added to delve into the particular problems faced by these groups.

### Filling out

To participate in the digital survey, journalists from traditional and digital, independent, private and community media in the countries involved were invited via e-mail.

### Response

A minimum goal of 30 responses from each participating country was established, with a final response of 340 questionnaires received. The result of participation was: in Guatemala 114 (33.5%); El Salvador 43 (12.6%); Honduras 65 (19.1%); Nicaragua 30 (8.8%); Costa Rica 56 (16.5%) and Panama 32 (9.4%).

It is important to note that participation was anonymous and, as part of the exercise, the confidentiality of individual results was guaranteed.

### Timing

The survey was open from Monday, September 26 to Friday, October 21, 2022.

# Annex II

## Focus group methodology

### General information

In order to develop the qualitative part of this study, 11 focus groups and one in-depth interview were conducted in virtual format, using the Google Meet platform. The groups were made up of journalists from all the countries in the region, disaggregated by country and gender. The invitation to participate in the groups was made by e-mail and WhatsApp, similar to the invitation to fill out the survey.

Participation Form	Amount
Female journalists:	31
Male journalists:	29
Community journalists:	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>

Participants by gender and country:			
	Women	Men	Total
<b>Guatemala:</b>	7	4	11
<b>El Salvador:</b>	5	2	7
<b>Honduras:</b>	4	10	14
<b>Nicaragua:</b>	9	5	14
<b>Costa Rica:</b>	4	5	9

**Panama:** One group with 4 female participants and one in-depth interview with a male journalist.

### Approximate duration of each session

1 hour and 15 minutes.

As was done for the exercise of filling out the survey, anonymity and total confidentiality of the conversation was guaranteed. Real-time notes were taken to document the discussion.

Discussion group schedule						
2022						
Date	10/11	11/11	13/12	14/12	17/11	18/11
Country	GUA	ELS	HON	NIC	CR	PAN
Hour						
10:00	Women	Women	Women	Women	Women	Women
1:15						
16:00						Men
17:15	Men	Men	Men	Men	Men	Interview

The results were presented and discussed at a face-to-face seminar held in Panama City on November 28 and 29, with participants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama.

# Annex III

## Focus Group Discussion Guide

### Protection of Journalists

#### **Introduction:**

Presentation of objectives, duration of the meeting, general indications. generales.

1. From your experience and compared to previous years, how do you evaluate the climate in your country for the practice of journalism?
2. Have you felt (or have you been) intimidated, harassed, attacked or censored in the exercise of your profession? If so, what types of intimidation (please briefly describe your case)?
3. If you have been a victim, what have you done in the face of such threats? And if not, do you know of any preventive and reactive measures that are effective in stopping or deterring this type of practice (do you denounce, do you rely on a union or other organization, do they work)?
4. Do you know or have you had recourse to international protection mechanisms such as the Inter-American System for the Protection of Human Rights or the United Nations? If so, do you think they work quickly and effectively?
5. What measures do you suggest to improve these protection mechanisms?
6. What other recommendations, both preventive and reactive, would you propose to reduce the risks in the practice of journalism?



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