

## Executive Summary

### The Invisible Backpack: Challenges and Resilience of Female Central American Journalists in Exile

*Original: La mochila invisible: desafíos y resiliencias de periodistas centroamericanas en el exilio*

#### Purpose of the Study

The publication sheds light on the experiences of Central American female journalists who have been forced into exile for carrying out their journalistic work in authoritarian and under violent circumstances. Based on a literature review, testimonies from journalists from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and interviews with experts, the study analyzes how gender, journalism, and forced displacement intersect and create a triple vulnerability.

#### Which key aspects should readers take away from this publication?

1. The exile of Central American women journalists is not only a consequence of authoritarian tendencies or criminal activities, but also the result of deliberate strategies rooted in gender-based violence. Autocratic regimes weaponize patriarchal norms to target women who practice journalism, using misogyny and gendered intimidation as tools to silence them. They flee not just because of their work, but because they are women practicing journalism under patriarchal and repressive circumstances.
2. Violence does not end with leaving the country; in the host country, a new phase of violence, precarity, and exclusion coupled with gender inequality often begins. Journalists face discrimination, poverty, legal barriers, and a sense they have lost of their professional identity.
3. Exiled women journalists are not just victims, but also agents of change. Despite everything, they continue reporting, building networks, founding media outlets, documenting violence, and supporting others.
4. However, resilience is not an infinite resource. Without structural support, many are forced to abandon journalism or fall into precarity.
5. Current protection policies are insufficient and inadequate. An intersectional approach is needed that recognizes the specificity of their situation: gender + profession + exile.
6. Support must be comprehensive, sustainable, and gender sensitive. One-time support is not enough. Female journalists in exile need networks, funding, mental health and well-being support, legal status, and professional opportunities.

## Key findings

### 1. Structural and gender-based violence as a cause of exile

Women journalists face specific forms of violence that go beyond what their male colleagues experience and in many cases contribute to the decision to leave their country, including:

- Discrediting campaigns with misogynistic content – often via social media
- Threats of sexual and physical violence
- Digital harassment and surveillance
- Direct state repression, including sexual torture during detention

These attacks aim not only to silence their voices but to destroy their professional and personal identities.

### 2. Obstacles in host countries

Exile often doesn't solve their challenges, but rather marks the beginning of new ones:

- Slow and costly immigration procedures that hinder legal status and access to basic rights
- Economic precarity, forcing many to abandon journalism or work under informal conditions
- Limited access to physical and mental healthcare, especially in areas like gynecology and psychological support
- Emotional burden from family separation, particularly for mothers who feel isolation and guilt. This guilt is not only personal but socially constructed, rooted in gendered expectations that women are the primary caregivers and emotional anchors.
- Impact on professional identity. Aggressions aim to “kill their name,” forcing self-censorship and exclusion from the media ecosystem. Gender and ethnic discrimination further limit their professional reintegration, even in host countries.
- Interviewees spoke of a “mochila invisible” (the invisible backpack) to describe living in exile. Although this “backpack” is not visible, the women constantly feel like they are carrying emotional, psychological, and social burdens that shape their daily lives, decisions, and sense of identity.

### 3. Resilience and strategies for reconstruction

Despite these obstacles, exiled female journalists have developed multiple forms of resistance, showing that exile, while painful, can also be an opportunity for transformation and empowerment. The strategies identified are:

- Continuing to practice journalism as an act of dignity and resistance

- Creating support networks, both professional and feminist, that allow them to share resources, experiences, and emotional support
- Making the diaspora visible through collective actions, independent media, and advocacy
- Practicing self-care and professional reinvention, including the development of guides, protocols, and gender-focused workshops.

## Strategic recommendations

The report proposes concrete measures to improve the living and working conditions of exiled women journalists:

### 1. Intersectional approach in protection policies

**What it means:** Recognizing that exiled women journalists face overlapping forms of discrimination (based on gender, profession, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.).

**How to implement it:** Design migration and asylum policies that explicitly recognize gender-based violence as a valid cause for protection. Include specific criteria in journalist protection programs that consider family responsibilities, mental health, and professional context.

### 2. Gender perspective in all initiatives

**What it means:** Ensuring that all policies, programs, and resources address the specific needs of women.

**How to implement it:** Include childcare services in training or advocacy activities. Design safety protocols with a gender lens. Promote women's leadership in media and allied organizations.

### 3. Faster and fairer migration processes

**What it means:** Reducing the time, cost, and complexity of legalizing migration status, which causes stress and exclusion.

**How to implement it:** Establish agreements between governments and human rights organizations to facilitate access to asylum and refugee status. Create free legal support programs for journalists and their families. Prioritize cases involving women with children or those facing extreme risk.

### 4. Sustainable financial support for professional reintegration

**What it means:** Moving from one-time aid to long-term funding models that provide stability and supporting the professional reintegration and development of exiled journalists.

**How to  
implement it:**

Create dedicated funds for exiled women journalists with a gender-sensitive approach. Partner with donors to support journalism projects led by women in exile and projects that provide training in digital skills, media management, and female entrepreneurship. Support the creation of independent media outlets led by women. Include follow-up and mentorship components in financial assistance programs.

## 5. Strengthening support networks

**What it means:**

Building and reinforcing local and transnational networks that offer emotional, legal, and professional support.

**How to implement it:**

Support safe spaces and gatherings for exiled journalists in host countries, including the connection with mentors in host countries or international networks. Connect feminist networks with journalist associations to expand reach. Fund collaborative journalism initiatives with a regional and gender perspective.

## 6. Creation of digital protection platforms

**What it means:**

Documenting and making visible digital violence faced by women journalists.

**How to  
implement it:**

Develop secure platforms to report online harassment, defamation, and threats. Offer training in digital security and self-protection. Partner with tech companies to remove violent content and hold perpetrators accountable.

## 7. Specialized psychological support

**What it means:**

Addressing the emotional consequences of exile, violence, and uprooting.

**How to implement it:**

Fund mental health services with expertise in trauma and gender-based violence. Create safe spaces for sharing experiences and emotional support. Extend psychological care to dependent family members, especially children.

## About the Study

The study was published in 2025 by the Institute for Press and Freedom of Expression (IPLEX) in collaboration with DW Akademie. It is part of the “Casa para el Periodismo Libre” (House for Free Journalism) project, aiming at promoting safe spaces and supporting networks to ensure the free practice of journalism. It is part of DW Akademie’s global program “Space for Freedom”, which falls under the Hannah Arendt Initiative, promoted by the German Federal Foreign Office.