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ARTICLE

Confronting Gender-Based Violence: Attacks on Women's Organizations in Central America

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Abstract

Women's rights organizations in Central America have been key actors in promoting women's right to a life free of violence and advocating for reproductive rights and other social and economic protections for women and girls. Yet throughout Central America, these organizations have experienced myriad attacks in recent years. In this article, we examine attacks on women's rights organizations in four Central American countries: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Although there are important distinctions among the regimes of these four countries, across all of them, setbacks for women have occurred in contexts characterized by increased militarization, autocratic governance, the incursion of conservative religious ideologies in government policies, and the spread of dangerous misinformation that discredits women's organizations' efforts. Within these regimes, women's organizations have been subjected to intimidation, physical violence, legal threats, and digital harassment. Our analysis identifies patterns in these attacks, showing similarities and differences across the four countries during various temporal moments. To do so, we draw on twenty-nine interviews with twenty-eight women activists, academics, and human rights defenders in the region as well as a compilation of newspaper articles, social media, and independent reports documenting attacks on women's rights leaders and organizations in the four countries. Efforts to dismantle the work of women's organizations and committed feminists in Central America provide a window into the gendered dimensions of authoritarian practices in the region.

Keywords: gender-based violence; Central America; women's activism

Resumen

Las organizaciones de mujeres en Centroamérica han sido actores clave en promover el derecho a una vida libre de violencia para las mujeres, y en abogar por los derechos reproductivos y otras protecciones sociales y económicas para mujeres y niñas. Sin embargo, en toda la región estas organizaciones han experimentado múltiples ataques en los últimos años, tales como intimidación, violencia física, amenazas legales y acoso digital. En este artículo examinamos estos ataques en cuatro países centroamericanos: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador y Nicaragua. Aunque hay distinciones importantes entre los cuatro sistemas de gobierno, en los cuatro países vemos retrocesos en los derechos de las mujeres, que han ocurrido en contextos caracterizados por mayor militarización, prácticas autocráticas, la incursión de ideologías conservadoras religiosas en políticas gubernamentales y propagación de información errónea peligrosa. Para este estudio, nos basamos en

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veintinueve entrevistas con veintiocho mujeres activistas, académicas y defensoras de derechos humanos en la región, además de una compilación de artículos de los periódicos, medios sociales y reportajes independientes que documentan ataques contra líderes y organizaciones de mujeres en los cuatro países. Los esfuerzos para desmontar el trabajo de las organizaciones de mujeres y feministas en Centroamérica ofrecen una ventana hacia las dimensiones de género de las prácticas autoritarias en la región.

Palabras clave: violencia de género; Centroamérica; activismo de las mujeres

In this article, we examine attacks on women's organizations in four Central American countries (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua) characterized by "authoritarian practices" (Glasius 2023). Although these might be categorized as "hybrid regimes" or as "competitive authoritarianism," we find it more theoretically fruitful to conceptualize them under the more capacious umbrella of "autocratization." This latter term highlights commonalities in these regimes' efforts to weaken checks and balances, undermine independent media, and suppress dissent (Glasius 2023). Our analysis examines how authoritarian practices in these four countries have affected earlier gains made by women's organizations, focusing on the kinds of attacks they have experienced and how these vary across sociopolitical contexts. Attacks on women's organizations matter because they underscore women's ongoing vulnerability to political and interpersonal forms of violence, as well as a reduction in their access to essential resources and services. Although there are important distinctions between these four regimes, with each evolving over time, in all four countries, setbacks for women have occurred in increasingly illiberal, undemocratic contexts characterized by increased militarization, autocratic governance, the incursion of conservative religious ideologies in government policies, and the spread of dangerous misinformation that discredits women's efforts. Each of these factors is present to varying degrees in the countries in which attacks on women's rights organizations occur. In this article, we analyze the specific strategies Central American governments have used to try to shut down women's organizations due to the challenge they present to the harmful familyism ideologies and authoritarian and militaristic practices that characterize the region's regimes. Efforts to dismantle the work of women's organizations and committed feminists in Central America provide a window into the gendered dimensions of the varying manifestations of authoritarian practices in the region.

The case of Central American countries is empirically and theoretically instructive; the region occupies a central place in knowledge production about violence against women (Sagot 2008; Mora et al. 2024). After the military dictatorships in the region fell and the civil conflicts ended, the region did not develop democracies like those in post-dictatorship South America. A confluence of historical and structural factors hindered the process, and Central America (except for Costa Rica) emerged from the crises with limited democracies and elements of the old dictatorships in place. Silencing the opposition through violence and threats, for instance, was as much a tactic of the old dictatorships as it is of the reemergent autocratic and autocratizing regimes in the region today. It is a common denominator across the four countries, despite their slightly different records of democratic development, and irrespective of the regimes' ideological orientations (Del Real and Menjívar 2024).[1] While acknowledging the distinct political paths of each country and the timing of pivotal moments in their history, we underscore a key shared characteristic: how autocratic practices target women's access to rights and safety by suppressing women's organizations. Yet we also recognize that these regimes change over time—some may intensify their authoritarian control, adopt new repressive tactics, and

[1] See *The Global State of Democracy 2024* (https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/publications) for slight variation across indicators of democratic governance in the four countries.

adapt existing ones—at different points in their histories. Our analysis captures these four regimes at a specific historical juncture when they exhibit similar patterns of authoritarian practices that impact women's lives through the organizations that defend them. Although each country has witnessed moments in which certain components of liberal democracies were present, like competitive elections, civil rights and liberties, and broad civic participation, each has also had these processes stifled by illiberal regimes that took advantage of weak economies, corrupt institutions, and/or widespread crime to consolidate power and suppress dissent. These processes have been further enabled by new surveillance technologies and digital tools, which autocratizing regimes have used to adapt their violent tactics to a new era. Given the variation in how intensely and when authoritarian practices emerged in each country, the Central American context provides rich terrain for theorizing the gendered aspects of autocratic governance, revealed by a consistent pattern of silencing women's voices. To capture this complexity, we examine these cases through the framework of authoritarian practices or "autocratization" (Glasius 2023). In doing so, we also offer conceptual refinement to autocratization by adopting a gender lens that reveals similarities and differences in autocratic strategies used to weaken or dismantle perceived enemies, such as feminist organizations, across Central American cases.

This article is organized as follows. We begin with a conceptual discussion of political repression and its connection to women activists and organizations. Next, we provide a brief overview of the Central American political landscape today, focusing on the gendered elements of autocratization in the region and its impacts on women's organizations. After describing the methods and data, we present our empirical findings, which reveal patterns across the region. Physical, political, and legal attacks have been employed against academics, researchers, reporters, and leaders of women's rights organizations across Central America, but there are also particularities in how these attacks unfold in each case, which we highlight. In Honduras, the military is a key actor, for example, while in El Salvador digital attacks are more prominent. We conclude with reflections on what the Central American case can contribute to scholarship on authoritarian practices and on the ongoing illiberal threats to women's lives worldwide. As Roggeband and Krizsán (2019, 4) observe, "Women's rights are particularly vulnerable in fragile and nascent democracies where such rights have been more recently established and where the space of civil society actors to defend them is limited and even shrinking." This article responds to their call for further research on the gendered aspects and implications of illiberal governance.

Women's organizations and political repression in Latin America

Women's organizations have been a driving political force in Latin America throughout the twentieth century (Safa 1990; Alvarez 1990; Bayard de Volo 2001). Through mobilizing against dictatorships and participating in revolutionary movements and efforts to democratize the region, women's organizations have been a catalyst for numerous social and political changes (Friedman 2009). As in other parts of the world (Htun and Weldon 2012), women's organizations in Latin America also have successfully advocated for important legal reforms addressing violence against women, working both inside and outside the state (Roggeband 2016). Importantly, women's mobilization in Latin America has consistently derived from a deep understanding of the connections between state-sanctioned violence against women and intimate forms of abuse within the home (see also Enloe 2013).

Although Latin American women have made substantial political, institutional, and legal gains over the past several decades, they also have faced new and ongoing forms of political repression from both state and nonstate actors. Here, we agree with Earl and

Braithwaite (2022) in conceptualizing political repression as "actions or policies that curtail or constrain any form of political engagement" that challenges "social, cultural, and/or political power" (Earl 2011, 262). Scholars have developed two main explanations for the political repression of women: One proposes that such repression is a reaction to women's gains in power and status; the other highlights women's more vulnerable social location as enabling enduring forms of repression that are not necessarily connected to any specific threat but rather result from the ongoing impunity with which crimes against women are treated (Henderson 2004). These explanations are not incompatible; violence against women in politics, for example, can be linked to the advancement of women's political influence within state institutions (Restrepo Sanín 2022). And the violent repression of women activists defending land rights in rural Indigenous communities, like Berta Cáceres in Honduras, while often tied to perceived threats to economic elites, has arguably remained commonplace precisely because of these women's already structurally vulnerable position.

Political repression, however, is itself a gendered phenomenon; that is, although some forms of repression are used rather indiscriminately (e.g., detentions, disappearances, torture), other forms of repression (e.g., sexual and sexualized violence and harassment) are disproportionately employed against women (Enloe 2023; Henderson 2004, 1032). Moreover, although "hard" forms of repression, such as detentions and physical violence, tend to receive more attention, "soft" repression, or "the mobilization of nonviolent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas" (Ferree 2005), or less visible manifestations of violence, also occur in the form of ridicule, normalization of abuse, and stigma, for example (Menjívar 2011). Fallon et al. (2018) build on Ferree's (2005) framework by identifying two specific mechanisms of state repression against women activists: the mobilization of state resources used to silence activists, and counterframing techniques intended to stigmatize activists and their goals (Fallon et al. 2018). In many authoritarian contexts, such tactics are linked to regimes' alliances with conservative religious movements which seek to discredit feminist goals and promote ideologies that prioritize families at the cost of women's rights.

Research on violence against women in politics has illuminated other techniques used to silence and/or delegitimize individuals or groups who challenge the political status quo. One of the most commonly used tools to undermine women's political work involves false accusations of corruption or other violations of the law (Restrepo Sanín 2022). Using law and legal tools as a form of repression against women elected officials and/or organizations is a powerful strategy for "constructing the lawfulness and morality of protestors and movements" (Earl and Braithwaite 2022, 238). In Central America, this has manifested in the criminalization of protest, tightening restrictions on NGOs and civil society organizations, and new forms of surveillance. Significantly, the content of these attacks, as Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016, 136) point out in the case of violence against women in politics, "often relies on gendered scripts, focusing on women's bodies and their traditional social roles—primarily as mothers and wives—to deny or undercut women's competence in the political sphere." Thus, political attacks (physical and psychological) on women are attacks on their identity as women, their bodies, and their sexuality; this holds not only for female elected officials but also for many women activists in Central America as well, whose experiences we analyze in this article.

Gendered dimensions of authoritarian practices in Central America

Autocratic practices have expanded globally in recent years. Scholars employ various frameworks to categorize the resulting hybrid regimes—systems that retain some democratic elements while displaying authoritarian characteristics, often weaponizing

democratic tools for autocratic ends. These frameworks include competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2020) and democratic authoritarianism (Brancati 2014). However, Central American countries (except for Costa Rica) never fully consolidated as representative liberal democracies, remaining hybrid regimes throughout the so-called postconflict period. Consequently, applying a single conceptual label to the region's recent political developments would be both misleading and imprecise. We view Central America as marked by a continuation of a syncretic form of "democratic authoritarianism" (Brancati 2014) where leaders consolidate power through varying combinations of legal maneuvers, populist rhetoric and policies, electoral processes, and outright political violence and threats—a pattern observed elsewhere globally, regardless of a regime's ideological stance (Del Real and Menjívar 2024). The broader concept of authoritarian practices (Glasius 2023) therefore better captures regional variation while allowing us to analyze shared gendered dimensions across contexts.

Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were emerging from civil wars and generalized political conflicts that deposed long lines of dictatorships when their current political regression started. During the so-called post-conflict period, these societies have experienced more violence than during the armed conflicts (Menjívar 2011). Their fragile, nascent semidemocracies were barely established, and their economies remained heavily dependent on fluctuations in the international market for the agricultural exports they produced (Pleites 2022), making them more susceptible to new forces such as narcotrafficking. Peace accords were signed, and the fighting ended, but the fundamental power arrangement (i.e., the composition of the military, economic, and political elite) did not change (Blitzer 2024); thus, inequalities deepened (Menjívar 2006). New actors and conditions, such as the expansion of drug trafficking and accompanying criminal violence, resulting from a lack of economic opportunities, were layered on existing shaky grounds to create a volatile context in which new authoritarians were able to (re)emerge and thrive, often with the implicit or explicit support of the US government (such as the US-supported coup in Honduras in 2009).

Although many significant changes in the geopolitical context have occurred over the last fifty years, the repressive tactics employed by current Central American regimes retain some continuities with the past.[2] During the Cold War, for example, Central American dictatorial regimes targeted left-leaning political groups accused of being pawns of the Soviets or Communist insurgents who would undo their society's way of life and expel the church. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the focus shifted toward reducing "threats to citizen security," particularly violent crime and the threat of terrorism. In the name of deterring terrorism and gang violence, today's authoritarians in the region have resurrected the repressive tactics of former military regimes (Menjívar 2021), imprisoning political opponents, subverting constitutional rights, sending critics into exile, and persecuting human rights defenders (Del Real and Menjívar 2024). As during the military regimes, these strategies have been used against anyone perceived to be an enemy or a critic, such as civil society organizations, women's rights groups, news outlets, and political rivals. These groups have also been framed as contributors to instability, crime, and violence, and therefore are seen as a threat to the nation (Lungo Rodríguez 2022).

In this context, women activists and organizations have experienced particular threats and attacks that point to the gendered elements of these regimes' autocratic practices (Díaz Reyes 2021). Specifically, efforts to undermine women's lives and rights within Central America are enabled by powerful alliances between conservative religious groups and state actors who have embraced family ideologies to justify a "backlash" against the

[2] These continuities are part of the reason we chose not to use the term *democratic backsliding*, which implies a certain degree of weakening of institutionalized democratic norms and processes (Bermeo 2016; Waldner and Lust 2018).

supposed threat posed by "gender ideology" in the region (Neumann 2024; Menjívar and Diossa-Jiménez 2023; Corredor 2019; O'Brien and Walsh 2020). This backlash has included not only rollbacks to essential legal protections in reproductive rights (Viterna and Guardado Bautista 2017) and violence against women (Neumann 2022) but also sustained efforts to weaken the collective power and voice of women's organizations in the region through physical, legal, and online attacks. Together, these conditions have exacerbated impunity for crimes against women while also reversing earlier gains made possible by women's organizations. In the next section we highlight some of these achievements before turning to our analysis of more recent attacks on women activists and organizations.

Achievements of women's organizations in Central America

Women in Central America have a long history of organizing at the national and regional levels to advance their social, political, and economic rights (Alvarez et al. 2003; Cuadra and Jiménez 2010). Their efforts gained momentum during the 1990s with the global recognition of "women's rights as human rights" and the ratification of the 1994 Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women. In the "post-conflict" era, women's organizations in the region engaged in many strategies to advance women's rights, including service provision, political and legal advocacy, media outreach and education, and data collection and monitoring. Below, we briefly discuss each.

Service provision

Long before any legal mechanisms existed to protect women from violence, women's organizations across Central America were actively engaged in providing direct services to women affected by such violence. In Guatemala, for example, El Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres (GGM) began in 1988 as a self-help organization for women. One of GGM's earliest initiatives was the formation of temporary shelters for women victims of gender-based violence; it also developed a model of comprehensive attention and care for women survivors. In the early 2000s, GGM's model was recognized and adopted by several Guatemalan institutions working with women victims, including the police, prosecutors, and courts, as well as the President's Intrafamily Violence Prevention Program (Beck 2022). In El Salvador, one of the first autonomous women's organizations to emerge in the early 1990s was the Asociación de Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida (Las Dignas). Las Dignas has provided direct services for women victims of violence, such as legal accompaniment and psychological counseling, as well as community education about gender-based violence. Similar strategies were employed in Nicaragua, where, beginning in the early 1990s, grassroots *colectivos de mujeres* affiliated with La Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia (Women's Network Against Violence) organized educational campaigns to inform the public about gender-based violence and later created shelters for women victims, provided material assistance, as well as psychological and legal counseling (Delgado 2003).

Political and legal advocacy

Another key strategy employed by Central American women's organizations is political and legal advocacy to create and strengthen violence-against-women laws, to develop and fund specialized institutions that serve women and girls, and to advance reproductive rights (Prieto-Carrón et al. 2007). For example, in Nicaragua, the Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia (RMCV) successfully advocated for the passage of Nicaragua's first domestic

violence law in 1992 (Ellsberg et al. 1997), as well as the later establishment of specialized women's police stations in 1997 (Jubb et al. 2008). Feminist organizations were also instrumental in the 2012 passage of Law 779, which criminalized femicide, expanded the legal definition of violence against women, and established special prosecutors and courts to hear gender-based violence cases (Neumann 2018).

Similar legal advances occurred in Guatemala and Honduras through the advocacy efforts of women's organizations, including the GGM, La Red de la No Violencia Contra la Mujer, and Alianza Política Sector de Mujeres (APSM), who successfully advocated for the passage of Decreto 22-2008, the Ley Contra el Femicidio y Otras Formas de Violencia Contra la Mujer in 2008 (Beck 2022; see also Monzón 2024). In Honduras, two key legal victories won by the Centro de Derechos de Mujeres, alongside other organizations, were Decreto 132-1997, the Ley Contra la Violencia Doméstica (1997), and Decreto 34-2000, the Ley de Igualdad de Oportunidades de la Mujer (2000), which established a minimum electoral quota of 30 percent. These organizations were also instrumental in the creation of the Instituto Nacional de la Mujer (National Women's Institute) and Juzgados Especiales para la Violencia Doméstica (Specialized Courts for Domestic Violence), as well as municipal Women's Offices throughout the country. Likewise, in El Salvador, Las Dignas worked with Ser Mujer and ORMUSA to advocate for the passage of the country's first law against domestic violence, the Ley Contra la Violencia Intrafamiliar (1996), and later, the 2012 passage of Ley Especial Integral para una Vida Libre de Violencia, which included the codification of feminicide as a crime, under President Mauricio Funes. Salvadoran women's organizations also advocated for comprehensive services for women, which contributed to the Funes government's creation of Ciudad Mujer, where women could access multiple government services in one place.

Central American women's organizations' political and legal advocacy has also included an unwavering defense of women's reproductive rights. In Honduras, women's organizations like Centro de Estudios de la Mujer and Somos Muchas advocated (albeit unsuccessfully) for a change to the penal code to allow abortion under specific circumstances in 2016–2018 (Herrera 2021). In Nicaragua, a local chapter of the regional network Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD) formed in 2007 to advocate for the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls. CDD-Nicaragua, along with other prominent feminist organizations like La Corriente and Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres, organized protests against Nicaragua's draconian antiabortion law as well as educational outreach about sexual and reproductive health.

A similar coalition (including Colectivo Feminista and the Centro de Derechos Reproductivos) in El Salvador has challenged the country's legal ban on abortion through street-level activism as well as through legal mobilization efforts (Peñas-Defago 2018). Although the ban remains in effect, women's groups have raised awareness of its dire effects on women who suffer miscarriages or stillbirths, many of whom have been sentenced to decades in prison (Viterna and Guardado Bautista 2017).

Media outreach and education

In all four countries, women's organizations have developed magazines, radio programs, and other creative forms of print (and later digital) materials to share feminist ideas and build public awareness about gender-based violence. In Honduras, the country's first feminist radio program, *Tiempo de hablar* (Time to Talk), began in 1996 (Centro de Derechos de Mujeres, n.d.). In Guatemala, the first feminist radio program, *Voces de mujeres*, began in 1993 (Monzón 2024). In Nicaragua, the feminist organization La Corriente published a magazine called *Malabares* and for eight years hosted a weekly radio show called *Cuerpos sin vergüenzas,* focusing on women's rights and gender-based violence (Pérez Miranda 2021).

Women's organizations in El Salvador have historically employed similar education and community outreach strategies, with particular emphasis on social media campaigns around reproductive rights. In 2014, these organizations launched an international campaign called "Nos Faltan Las 17" demanding the release of seventeen imprisoned women with sentences of over forty years following obstetric emergencies that terminated their pregnancies. Beyond raising global awareness of the flagrant violations of human rights these women had experienced through a dedicated website, hashtags (#NosFaltanLas17 and #BringHomeLas17), and an online petition, a coalition of women's organizations pursued legal action, submitting pardon requests for all seventeen women to the National Assembly. They argued that many of their legal rights had been violated, including the presumption of innocence and protections against gender discrimination (Viterna and Guardado Bautista 2017). As a result of this multipronged campaign, several of these women were released from prison (EFE 2021).

Data collection, monitoring, and analysis

Another key strategy women's organizations across Central America have employed is the collection, compilation, analysis, and public dissemination of data on the lives of women and girls. In Honduras, the Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM) founded the Observatorio de Derechos Humanos de Las Mujeres (ODH, women's human rights observatory) in the mid-1990s, which conducts an ongoing media-monitoring project to track the number of women's violent deaths. ODH also has produced comprehensive reports on the state of women's rights in Honduras, as well as in-depth studies of women's disappearances, access to justice, labor conditions, and reproductive health. Moreover, in the early 2000s, the Observatorio Nacional de Violencia (ONV) was founded under the auspices of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH). For over two decades, the ONV has systematically compiled information about feminicides and various other forms of violence against women and girls. This evidence proved instrumental in advocacy campaigns that led to the codification of femicide in Honduras's penal code in 2013.

Yet in recent years, roughly beginning in the 2010s, these advances in women's well-being and rights that women's organizations had fought for were undone or undermined by the rise of autocracy and militarization in the region (Mejía Rivera 2024), combined with the infiltration of conservative religious ideologies into state agencies and institutions (Menjívar and Neumann forthcoming; Miklos 2015). Strategic alliances with conservative religious groups have enabled Central American leaders to infuse laws and policies with family-centric ideologies that have undermined the rights of women and girls throughout the region. This includes rollbacks to women's reproductive rights and laws related to violence against women, as well as direct attacks on women's organizations that defend these rights and seek to educate and inform society about these issues. The challenges these organizations face are compounded, to varying degrees in each context, by the criminalization of NGOs, bans on public protest, the closure of independent media, and the dissemination of misinformation about them and their work. The remainder of this paper examines these attacks in greater detail, identifying similarities and differences across the region.

Data and methods

This article is based on interviews with women's leaders, complemented by reports and social media analyses, to examine the organizations' on-the-ground activities and the

threats to women's rights defenders and organizations in the four countries we focus on.[3] In-depth interviews provide context for the women's work, while social media analyses offer an overview of patterns of attacks across the four countries, highlighting how the same strategies may be used slightly differently across the region. Rather than attempting to include all attacks during the analysis period, we stopped collecting cases when we reached saturation—when additional cases did not yield new information. Thus, although our data do not include all attacks on women's organizations committed during our analysis period, the empirical data we present from qualitative interviews and digital analysis provide important insights into the kinds of threats women's organizations face daily in autocratic contexts.

We conducted twenty-nine interviews with twenty-eight women leaders in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua—women's rights defenders, leaders of organizations, communication specialists and journalists, researchers, lawyers, academics, and public intellectuals. Interviews were conducted via Zoom between 2021 and 2024. In snowball fashion, through initial contacts, our group of participants grew. All were conducted in Spanish, lasted approximately one hour each (often longer), and were later transcribed. Only the portions used in this article were translated into English. Interviews covered only the women's already public work and perspectives at the time of the interview; no personal information about the women's lives was included in the interviews and their quotes in this article are consistent with their other public declarations. Thus, real names are included in this article with participants' consent. We analyzed these interviews inductively; thus, the arguments we present here emerged from our study participants' voices, thinking, and explanations.

We also gathered and analyzed reports concerning attacks on women's rights leaders in the four countries, culled from Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, organizations' reports, mainstream newspapers, and the digital newspaper *El Faro* between 2014 and 2023. A total of 113 cases were analyzed: 60 for Guatemala (47 unique), 17 for Honduras (15), 14 for El Salvador (12), and 22 for Nicaragua (20).[4] Cases culled from local newspapers were identified using search-term combinations that included the terms *feminista*, *organización de mujeres*, *violencia contra mujeres*, *ataques*, and *amenazas*; other cases were drawn directly from organizational reports, such as those published by IM-Defensoras. Below we analyze the patterns of harassment and intimidation on the part of authorities that we uncovered across the four countries. The strategies, in order of most to least common, are as follows: intimidation (seventy-four unique cases); exclusion from political spaces (seventeen); bodily harm (seventeen); incarceration (thirteen); seizure or destruction of property (eleven); exile or forced displacement (nine); removal of organization's legal status (eight); judicial action (six); blocked access to information (three).[5]

[3] We thank Leydy Diossa-Jiménez for important assistance in coordinating and conducting alongside Menjívar sixteen of the twenty-nine interviews, and Luiza Monetti for invaluable research assistance in collecting and analyzing social media reports.

[4] Unique cases represent distinct instances involving different women's rights defenders or groups. In some situations, the same defender or group might have faced multiple attacks (e.g., by different actors or repeated incidents for the same reason). The total count includes all these incidents, while the unique count avoids double counting when the same individual or group was targeted repeatedly.

[5] The distinction between unique cases aims to avoid overlap when multiple strategies were used in a single case. Each case was analyzed to determine what the "main" strategy or more significant effect was. If intimidation and bodily harm occurred together, this was counted once as a unique case rather than being tallied separately under both strategies. The numbers in parentheses reflect the totals across all countries for cases involving only that specific strategy.

Attacks on women's organizations across Central America

Independent of the intensity or recency of autocratic practices in each country, the most common type of attack across the four contexts is intimidation, by a wide margin (43 percent of cases). This strategy includes both physical intimidation attacks and online harassment, and it was most common in Guatemala (53 percent of cases) and El Salvador (60 percent of cases). Within this general pattern, there is some variation, which may be owing to the varying expressions of authoritarian practices in each country. Online intimidation tactics are common in Guatemala and El Salvador, with women journalists, feminist activists, and women's groups being repeatedly called criminals or "terrorists" on social media platforms and their work being linked to gang activity (or in support of). This association between women's rights and criminal behavior is sometimes accomplished by evoking narratives of past dictatorships or armed conflicts in which women activists are accused of having collaborated with guerrillas and enacted violence upon the population.

Institutional channels are also used to criminalize feminist activists; through this strategy, the defense of human rights (and specifically women's rights) is rendered not only illegitimate but also illegal, which limits the work defenders can do in the country. Criminal procedures against dissenting voices are then portrayed as a mere disciplinary (and constitutional) measure, with important variations. In Guatemala, this was most frequently done through fabricated corruption charges, formal complaints, and the consequent exclusion from public office and other political spaces. These complaints are used to criminalize and persecute individual women's rights activists and leaders of larger women's organizations. Conversely, in El Salvador, legal attacks focus on organizations in attempts to frame women's groups as corrupt. In the case of Nicaragua, the most common tactics since 2018 involve the stripping of the legal status of women's organizations and the arrest and/or forced exile of women's rights defenders. In Honduras, by contrast, women activists and organizations are far more likely to experience direct harassment and violence perpetuated by state and para-state actors rather than delegitimization via legal means. For example, according to IM-Defensoras (2024b), four out of every ten attacks registered during 2023 in Honduras were perpetrated by individuals connected to the state (public authorities at 23 percent and police and armed forces at 21 percent), followed by unknown aggressors, both in physical and virtual spaces (18 percent).

Below we examine how these patterns are reflected in the interviews we conducted with women journalists and activists. These interview data offer a window into the unique aspects of each country's context that shape the kinds of attacks women experience.

Intimidation and threats: Attacks on women's organizations in Guatemala

Under recent presidential administrations, women's rights became a low priority in Guatemala. The recent presidential administrations of Otto Pérez Molina (2012–2015), Jimmy Morales (2016–2020), and Alejandro Giammattei (2020–2024) were marked by rampant corruption and intentional efforts to undermine the separation of powers, particularly the judiciary (Pappier and Mattiace 2022), and erode freedom of the press (García and Cantú 2023). These developments, combined with the growing influence of conservative religious elites espousing familyism ideologies, had cascading effects on the work of women's organizations (Menjívar and Diossa-Jiménez 2023).

Our research uncovered multiple examples of how religious ideologies have been used to undermine and attack women's organizations and female communications professionals in Guatemala. For example, Dalila Vásquez, a community organizer and women's rights advocate, recounted how a legislator called a group of evangelical pastors to discuss Ley 5452, Ley de Desarrollo Económico de las Mujeres. Vásquez explained: "They just invented

that this law is about guaranteeing gender identity [but] in Guatemala we are Christians and gender identity is a sin . . . and therefore should not be permitted." In 2018, numerous reproductive rights activists were reported to the Public Ministry for their involvement in a protest on International Women's Day—accused by a prominent evangelical organization of "disrupting acts of worship" (UDEFEGUA 2018). In 2021, the headquarters of the Colectivo de Mujeres de Izabal and the Centro San Martín de Porres were raided. Their equipment was stolen, along with documents containing sensitive information (Monzón 2021).

The attacks on women activists and communication professionals in the public sphere are frequently connected to their presumed failure to abide by their socially expected roles as wives and mothers, demonstrating how gender ideologies inform these attacks. Such is the case of Lucía Escobar, a journalist and reporter who spoke with us from Mexico, from what she refers to as her "second exile." The first one happened when she had to abandon her home within Guatemala and move to another city; a few years later, for the same critical reporting in her work, she fled to Mexico. She explains how persecution affects women organizers, critics, and journalists who are targeted and forced into exile:

> The moment when [threats] touch their families is when [women] decide to go into exile. They know that touching the family is the breaking point; as a woman, one cannot endure anymore. And women [engaged in organizing and reporting] with children are criticized for putting them at risk. Those who go into exile and take their children with them are criticized, but those who leave their children behind are super criticized. There's always that double standard. No one asks male journalists, where are your children? Who is taking care of them while you go into exile? No one cares about the children of male journalists, but the whole world seems to be interested in who is taking care of the children of women journalists when they are doing their work.

These examples highlight the key common ideological underpinning of attacks on women's organizations across Central America, which are firmly rooted in narrow conceptualizations of women's "appropriate" roles in society. In Guatemala these attacks also take on racialized dimensions in the case of Indigenous women whose professional legitimacy is frequently called into question, according to our interviewees.

Police and military repression: Attacks on women's organizations in Honduras

Attacks on women's organizations in Honduras have been profoundly shaped by the 2009 military coup d'état ousting democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya. In the coup's aftermath, there was a notable uptick in police and military violence against human rights defenders and journalists perceived as a threat to the new post-coup government and the country's economic elite. In reflecting upon her experiences as a lawyer and *defensora* (defender) of women's rights, Vanessa Siliézar emphasized how terrifying it was to do the kind of work she was doing after the coup:

> For the *defensoras*, it was terrible, because I have been doing this for twenty years, imagine, a victim comes and tells me she's suffered violence, so I go with her to the court. But what happened in 2011? Now the aggressor wasn't a drunk or unemployed; it was an assassin or a *patrón* [boss]. Whoever takes on those kinds of cases is risking their life. So, we as *defensoras* started to be selective in the cases we took on, so as not to be killed. They started systematically killing lawyers and journalists. The year 2011 was like a year in hell. We all thought we were going to die, especially the *defensoras*,

> because we live in a country where we are few and everyone knows where we live and who we are.

Police and military aggression against women activists continued unabated throughout the post-coup era, becoming a consistent feature of President Juan Orlando Hernández's administration (2014–2022). In 2020 alone, IM-Defensoras (Initiativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos) documented sixteen instances of state violence against women's rights activists, including arbitrary detentions, harassment, intimidation, and kidnapping. In addition to the police and military's repeated attacks on women's organizations, under the Hernández regime, these attacks expanded to include legal maneuvers intended to further undermine the work of these groups. As Carmen Haydee López explained:

> There was a time when President Hernández began to attack the nongovernmental organizations, of course, because it was the nongovernmental organizations who made up the nucleus of the opposition, so he started to create a bunch of legal and administrative obstacles related to the legal status of nongovernmental organizations and began to remove their legal status. And obviously, the legal statuses that he began to remove and the sanctions that were put in place, the ones specifically impacted, were organizations that opposed the government, and among those, women's and feminist organizations.

Another critical moment for women activists in Honduras was in 2016 when Indigenous land rights activist Berta Cáceres was murdered. Cáceres had led a grassroots campaign to prevent a private energy company, DESA (Desarrollos Energéticos Sociedad Anónima), from building a hydroelectric dam on Lenca people's land. An investigation by the Honduran prosecutor's office later uncovered evidence that Cáceres's murder had been ordered by executives of DESA with close ties to the government, and several of the assassins were affiliated with the Honduran military. (The Honduran army provided security for DESA's project; Mackey and Eisner 2019). Honduran government officials participated in the subsequent efforts to frame Cáceres's death first as resulting from a burglary (allegedly in the course of stealing a bicycle), and later—perhaps a motive that would resonate with the public—as a "crime of passion" and altered evidence for the case (Mackey and Eisner 2019).

Cáceres's murder is just one of dozens of similar attacks by Honduran military/police on rural women activists fighting for land rights (IM-Defensoras 2024b), who also work to advance women's rights. In fact, between 2010 and 2023, IM-Defensoras estimates that at least 50 percent of the aggressions against women's human rights defenders were specifically aimed at land rights defenders, and 41 percent of the perpetrators of these attacks (most commonly threats or surveillance) were police, military, or other public authorities (IM-Defensoras 2024a). In 2024 alone, IM-Defensoras documented 2,735 attacks against at least ninety-six women defenders and eighteen organizations and groups defending human rights in Honduras. These attacks have contributed to an environment in which violence against women and girls (including feminicide) is increasingly normalized (Menjívar and Walsh 2017).

Legal attacks: Eliminating women's organizations in Nicaragua

Feminist organizations in Nicaragua are highly critical of the Ortega-Murillo regime and thus have been the targets of repeated government attacks since 2007 (Kampwirth 2008). However, the regime's use of legal mechanisms to weaken and/or eliminate organizations that defend women's rights has escalated dramatically since the April 2018 uprising, in

which many feminist groups took an active role. For example, in October 2020, Nicaragua passed what became known as the Foreign Agents Law.[6] Under this law, any person or entity receiving funding from abroad would have to register with the Interior Ministry as a "foreign agent." Failing to register would result in fines, the cancellation of their legal organizational status, and the confiscation of their property. In 2022, the regime passed another law prohibiting NGOs from using their organizational structure to "violate public order" or "promote destabilization campaigns" and allowing the government to confiscate their assets if their legal status is revoked due to violations of the law (Confidencial 2022).

Haydeé Castillo, a feminist leader with over thirty years of experience defending women's rights and opportunities in Nicaragua, was directly impacted by these legal processes. In 2022, an organization she founded, the Fundación para la Promoción y Desarrollo de las Mujeres y la Niñez "Blanca Aráuz" (FUNDEMUNI), was stripped of its legal status and later occupied by government forces (IM-Defensoras 2022). For Castillo, these actions were the culmination of a long strategy of "revenge" by Ortega-Murillo against the feminist movement for its advocacy and support for Ortega's stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez after she accused him of sexual abuse in the late 1990s. When Ortega regained power in 2007, "they started dismantling everything we had built for the rights of women," Castillo explained. First, women's organizations were slowly pushed out of key decision-making spaces. Then, as Ortega-Murillo further consolidated power, these efforts expanded to include rollbacks to gender-based violence laws and the closure of women's police stations (Neumann 2018). Following the 2018 protests, dozens of activists, including Castillo, were arrested and taken to the notorious prison El Chipote (Miranda Aburto 2022); she recounted her experience:

> When I was in prison, I was in Chipote, which was the dictator Somoza's prison, [it] is the same prison that Daniel and la Chayo (Rosario Murillo) use for us, look at the ironies of life . . . . We are the founders of the women's police stations, so when they take me to Chipote, those are the offices of *auxilio judicial* [judicial assistance], there's an office where they interrogated me, it's an office that said Comisaría de las Mujeres y la Niñez and so I say to the person interrogating me, why are you doing this, I don't know, and I say, well everything you see here, we founded, these projects that were for the rights of women, we believed in another Sandinismo, another revolution, not this, we did not fight for this, and when they're finally going to let me out, a government attorney says, "You are under investigation, you can't leave the country, you are being investigated for money laundering, and possession of arms of mass destruction [laughs] because of the anti-terrorist law."

After her release, Castillo fled the country. In remarks to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States in 2019, she described the pain of being forcibly exiled from her homeland: "Exile is really another prison. It's keeping you imprisoned in a prison outside of the country, a product of a decision made by the regime that badly governs your country. Exile hurts. Exile breaks down the social fabric of the territory. Exile divides" (Confidencial 2019). Nevertheless, she told us her work continues. "We haven't stopped working for one day. I'm here in exile, but I've always got my notebook, my agenda, my computer, here with my daughters, my work continues to be to denounce, monitor, advocate, to see how we can recover our country."

Martha Patricia Molina is a Nicaraguan human rights lawyer with extensive experience studying political corruption who has also been exiled from her own country. Molina explained how Nicaraguan laws have been used to criminalize activists like her:

[6] El Salvador passed a similar law in 2025.

> Beginning in late 2018, [the Nicaraguan government] began to elaborate and pass completely unconstitutional laws, and these laws have been used to criminalize people who fight for human rights. For example, if there is a sanction against a public official in my country, and if I applaud this, I can be labeled a traitor. If someone gives water to protestors, they can be labeled a terrorist. If I wear blue and white [the national colors], I can be labeled a terrorist. They are misusing legal terminology, categorizing me in Nicaragua as a terrorist, so now I am a nomad. I can't go back to Nicaragua.

Another law (Ley de Regulación de Agentes Extranjeros) declared all organizations that received international funding as "foreign agents" subject to constant government monitoring, forcing many nonprofits to shut their doors. New laws related to money laundering have also been used to detain and prosecute Ortega-Murillo's political opponents, including many feminist and human rights leaders.

Attacks on women's groups impact not only the women directly involved in those organizations but also all the women who rely on their support when facing situations of violence. Maria Teresa Blandón is a feminist sociologist and director of the regional program La Corriente, whose work for the last thirty years has focused on reducing gender-based violence and promoting sexual and reproductive rights in Nicaragua. In May 2022, the Ortega-Murillo government stripped La Corriente of its legal status under the Foreign Agents Law discussed earlier (Confidencial 2022). Blandón emphasized how important the physical presence, accompaniment, and legal knowledge of women's organizations was as a check against state misconduct, and how their absence has enabled rampant impunity and revictimization of women. Blandón explained, "When you look at what is happening with machista violence, the state prohibited women's organizations, *defensoras*, from accompanying the victims, and [women] have been revictimized by police, by prosecutors, by judges, we have seen rampant arbitrariness, authoritarianism, and machismo, of course, embedded in public institutions." Blandón's comments echo what Neumann (2017) found in her research regarding the importance of feminist organizations in defending women's legal rights in cases of intimate partner violence.

Digital harassment: Attacks on women activists and organizations in El Salvador

Under the Bukele regime (2019–present), attacks on women activists and organizations in El Salvador have expanded substantially. Many of these attacks take place in the digital realm via social media (see also Pennacchio 2025). Women's organizations—as well as individual activists—have experienced ongoing efforts by pro-government influencers and trolls to discredit their work, monitor their activities, ransack their offices, surveil their communications and their homes, and use that information as the basis for threats and intimidation against women and their families. These attacks have been systematically documented by local and regional human rights organizations (Cristosal 2024; IM-Defensoras 2024b).

For example, IM-Defensoras (2024b) documented 755 aggressions against human rights defenders in El Salvador each month of March alone in the years between 2020 and 2023. According to their research, most of these attacks (94 percent) occurred via social media against women activists and organizations involved in the struggle for women's rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights. A 2024 Cristosal report noted that organizations whose work focuses on women's and LGBTQ+ rights were especially likely to feel that their work was being censured.

Women's organizations in El Salvador (as in other parts of the region) have been demonized as affiliated with gangs and/or as threats to public security. Moreover, most digital harassment against these civil society organizations has been committed by pro-

government social media influencers (Cristosal 2024). This is hardly surprising given the fact that President Bukele himself has promoted, often through social media, false and damaging narratives about women's organizations and other human rights groups in El Salvador. As Roxana Delgado explained:

> There has been a persecution against human rights defenders and against women's organizations to criminalize them . . . . The Twitter president [Bukele], for example, mentioning two names of organizations, saying they are corrupt, thieves, stealing money . . . and they [officials] have come to their door, to their offices and have ransacked machines with all the information they had there.

As Delgado's comments show, attacks in the digital realm do not stay there. Often the resulting stigma and public revealing of personal information enable physical threats or other forms of intimidation by the state or pro-government actors. Wendy Fernández described, for example, how a march she attended in 2021 was infiltrated by individuals seeking to discredit the organizations involved:

> A group of people arrived who were not part of the organizations, and during the march this group of people began to do acts of vandalism, they started to destroy private property, and in the media, of course, it was sold like women, feminists, or social organizations, that we had gone to the streets to destroy private property, to commit acts of vandalism [but] I saw in that march . . . hundreds of citizens concerned with the actions of the government and the direction of the country, I saw entire families marching, I saw people who clearly it was the first time they had gone to the streets to protest, and the atmosphere was . . . *muy bonito todo* . . . I remember next to me there were elderly people walking with canes, adolescents with their parents, but they discredited it with all the strategies they utilized!

This strategy of infiltrating protest has been documented by IM-Defensoras (2024a) as well, which noted that during one recent protest, "there were YouTubers and people affiliated with [Bukele's] party Nuevas Ideas taking pictures and maintaining an intimidating presence against the participants, as well as a drone overhead . . . [and] misogynistic comments that discredited the protesters for being women."

Infiltrating protests is one way that the regime and its allies aim to discredit women's organizations by constructing a narrative that blames feminists for whatever violence befalls them. As Roxana Delgado explained:

> There was a campaign to say, look, the feminists destroyed property, there's still this narrative of the witch, which is really an important symbolic narrative because you know that the first thing that you have to create to eliminate the other is hate against them, so there is a culture of hate against feminists, against women defenders on social media. We have seen it, for example, even the [US] embassy said, 'but look, it's just social media, right, what's the big deal?' No, there are messages that are so strong, like what you need is to be raped collectively, [like] I hope you burn like the monuments burned.

The state's complicity in digital and physical harassment against women's organizations and activists has contributed to a climate in which such attacks have become increasingly common. In 2024, IM-Defensoras documented a total of 628 attacks on women defenders and organizations or groups that defend human rights in El Salvador, a 200 percent increase over 2023 (IM-Defensoras 2024b). The ubiquity of these attacks demonstrates the kind of "high-risk feminism" (Zulver 2016) women's organizations are engaged in.

Discussion and conclusion

The Central American cases on which we have focused highlight an important aspect of authoritarian practices (Glasius 2023)—its gendered dimensions as seen through attacks on women's organizations. The four countries present varying degrees of intensity and timing of adoption (or resurgence) of authoritarian practices, with Nicaragua having a full-fledged and longer trend. Although El Salvador has quickly moved in an autocratic direction, President Bukele was elected in free elections. Guatemala and Honduras are more likely to be classified as hybrid regimes. For the purposes of this analysis, we have underscored the common thread of authoritarian practices across these cases, which have flourished in the region in its so-called post-conflict limited democracies.

This general context of autocratization in Central America is ripe for assaults on women's rights and well-being. To summarize, there are three key strategies used in the region to attack and silence women's rights defenders. The first encompasses acts of stigmatization and harassment, both in person and online. The second pertains to the improper use of the legal system, and sometimes other government agencies, to "institutionalize" and legitimize the persecution of feminist actors. The third involves physical violence or the threat thereof. These attacks occur at both the individual and collective levels. Attacks on individual activists focus on harassment and intimidation intended to discredit their character as women and mothers, while attacks on organizations focus on preventing them from engaging in collective activities like demonstrations or community outreach by rescinding their legal status or seizing their property.

These attacks vary depending on the intensity and time frame chosen for analysis; for example, in Nicaragua, attacks on feminist organizations prior to 2018 mainly consisted of threats and intimidation and later shifted to physical violence, removal of organizational legal status, and forced exile. In Honduras, women we interviewed identified the peak of physical aggression by state actors, including the military, as occurring in the immediate aftermath of the 2009 coup, but the resulting strengthening of the military's role in governance has intensified threats to women's organizations and women's rights that continued throughout President Juan Orlando Hernández's time in office. In Guatemala, women we interviewed identified corruption within the justice system as one of the most significant threats to their work, as well as the lack of access to independent information, exacerbated by threats against independent Indigenous women journalists and organizations challenging longstanding power structures. Finally, in El Salvador, women's organizations have been increasingly targeted by online trolls in a context of rapid democratic decline. Across all four cases, however, these attacks have intensified due to powerful alliances between autocratic leaders (or those with autocratic tendencies) and conservative religious actors who seek to infuse familyism ideologies across spheres of life. These regimes target women's organizations because, in autocratic contexts, women's rights and calls for gender justice are perceived to be inimical to autocratic goals. Indeed, throughout Central America, the term *gender* has become the shorthand used to delegitimize and attack anyone the establishment considers a threat to the country's "values" (Menjívar and Neumann forthcoming).

Although we find similarities in the kinds of attacks women's organizations are experiencing across Central America, the resulting harms are not distributed equally. Gender identity, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, among other social cleavages, can amplify the harms that women organizers experience as they fight for justice. Formal mechanisms for state accountability have been weakened, and in some cases (like Nicaragua), completely dismantled, leaving poor, Indigenous, and geographically isolated women increasingly vulnerable. Similarly, the capacity and strategies available to women's organizations to combat these harms vary across the region, and more comparative

research is needed on this topic. Autocratic practices vary in impact according to social position or identity, but research is needed to discern intersections with diverse feminist agendas, as some are more politically contested than others.

The broader impacts of autocratization processes in Central America are myriad, with repercussions extending well beyond the borders of these countries as women flee increasingly dangerous and perverse realities (Huerta 2021). When public activism, demands for justice, or critiques of the government and other state actors are labeled "subversive" or a "threat to the nation's security," it has a chilling effect on the ability of women's organizations to engage in any public activities—whether it be demonstrations, protests, or even community education meetings. Framing women's groups in this manner and "criminalizing" their work, as Lucía Escobar put it, sends a powerful message to silence those who advocate for women's rights, undervalues their lives, and makes others less willing to collaborate with these groups, thereby weakening their influence. Ultimately, it signals to all women that they are unprotected and potentially prey to nonstate actors and criminal networks, as even seeking justice can now be construed as a subversive act.

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