



UNITED NATIONS  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER



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# Self-protection measures to respond to threats to journalists

## — WHO IS A JOURNALIST?

The term “journalist” refers to a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, media workers and support staff, as well as citizen journalists, bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print, on the internet or elsewhere.

**The work and functions of journalism**, which consist in documenting events, analysing issues, gathering facts, and processing data, to inform society on matters of public interest, **are ultimately the key to defining the term ‘journalist’, rather than simply the professional designation.**

“

*“We must redouble our efforts to support journalists, professional associations, civil society organizations – to bolster their knowledge of their own rights and of protection measures available to them”.*

**Volker Türk,**  
**United High Commissioner for Human Rights**

## JOURNALISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: NEXUS

The [Declaration on human rights defenders](#), adopted by the General Assembly in 1998, identifies human rights defenders as “individuals or groups who act to promote, protect or strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms through peaceful means”. [Human rights defenders](#) cover many fields. Some are environmentalists, artists, or health care workers. Others are lawyers, journalists, religious leaders, whistle-blowers, or students. They are all civil society actors. Like journalists, human rights defenders are identified by what they do rather than by their profession.

**Human rights defenders stand and speak up against human rights violations, injustice and discrimination, and some journalists do too. When journalists do so, they are also considered as human rights defenders.**



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## MAIN THREATS THAT CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND JOURNALISTS FACE NOWADAYS

### CONTINUUM OF THREATS TO CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS:

Civil society actors, including human rights defenders and journalists, increasingly face different types of threats and attacks on daily basis in the course of their work. Sometimes several threats or attacks happen simultaneously, or start in one form and lead to another (often more extreme ones) over time.



#### Exclusion & vilification

- Non-recognition/ de-legitimization of CSA
- Restrictions on CSA to access information, participate or express themselves
- Censorship
- Restricted freedom of movement or ban on travel
- Online and offline smear campaigns labelling civil society actors as ‘terrorists’, ‘extremist’, ‘anti-development’, ‘enemies of the state’, ‘traitors’, or as “promoting foreign values”
- Online and offline hate campaigns or incitement to violence
- Stigmatization, isolation and ostracization of CSAs, including by/within their own communities and families



#### Undue Restrictions

- Registration procedures based on discriminatory criteria
- Arbitrary scrutiny of internal governance matters
- (Foreign) funding restrictions or bans
- Interference with activities and participants
- Arbitrary limitations or cancellations of protests or gatherings
- Banning and confiscations of publications (e.g. gender/religious issues)
- Internet shutdowns and closing of websites/accounts
- Restrictions of movement or travel bans
- Loss of employment



#### Criminalization

- Arbitrary deprivation of nationality/confiscation of identity documents
- Forced closure of offices or establishments
- Arbitrary dissolution of CSO or associations
- Criminal sanctions for unregistered activities or de-registration
- Criminalization/prosecutions through oppressive and discriminatory laws (anti-terrorism, anti-defamation, anti-extremism, anti-corruption, NGO laws, etc.)
- Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)
- Excessive penalties, imprisonment, exorbitant fines, or death penalty
- (Arbitrary) arrest and detention
- (Prolonged) solitary confinement
- Unfair trial



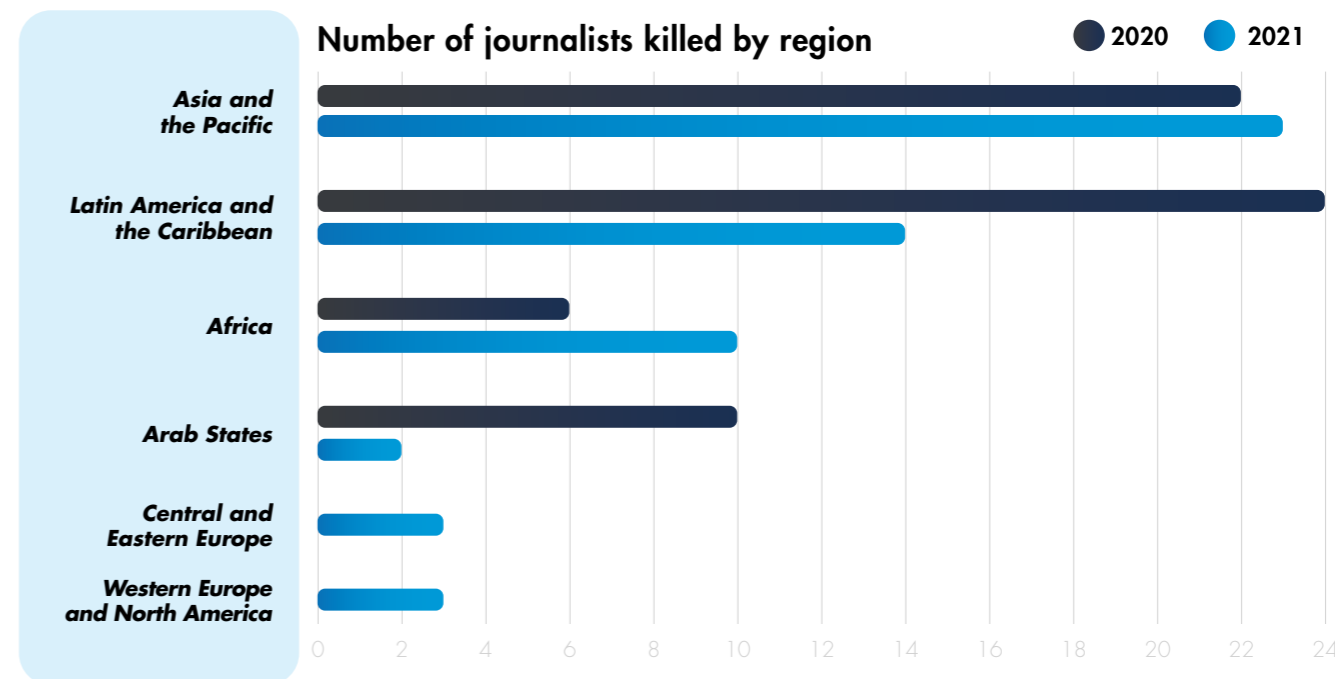
#### Threats & Violence

- Online & offline surveillance
- Harassment including regular interrogations and police visits
- Online & offline intimidation & attacks
- Different forms of threats including death or deportation threats
- Evictions from land/home
- Regular office/home raids and seizures or destructions of property or religious sites
- Physical attacks, assaults or gender or sexual-based violence targeting CSAs and their family members
- (Gendered) verbal abuse (online and offline) based on stereotypes of “appropriate behaviour” by women and men.
- Lack of access to legal representation and medical care in detention
- Torture or other degrading treatment
- Extrajudicial killings
- Enforced disappearances

## SPECIFIC THREATS TO THE JOURNALISTS:

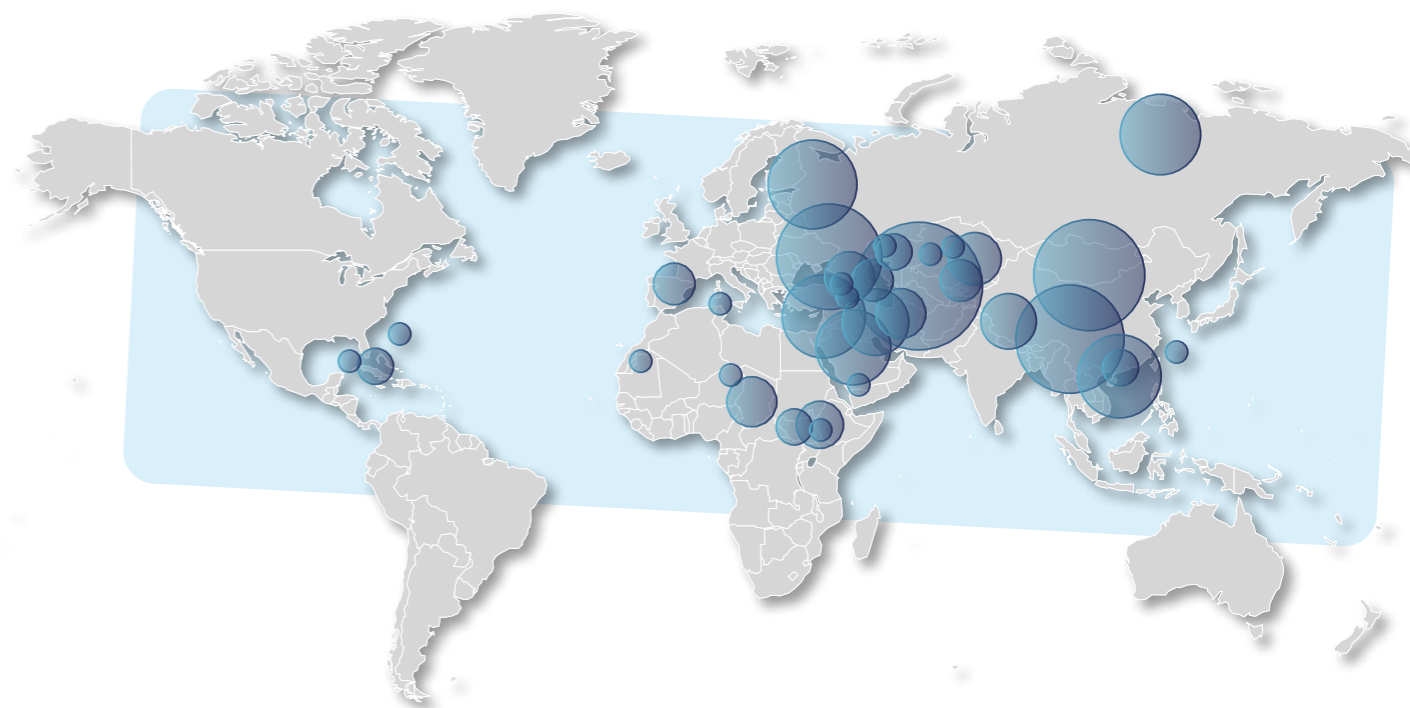
### PERSISTING KILLINGS OF JOURNALISTS AND IMPUNITY FOR IT

Journalists continue to be targeted because of their work. **In 2022, 86 were killed around the world, compared to 55 in 2021.** Beyond that increase, the **impunity** for these crimes remains of particular concern, with only **14 per cent** of cases of killed journalists over the past two decades considered **judicially resolved**.



### INCREASED NUMBER OF JOURNALISTS DETAINED

**At the end of 2022, a record high of 363 journalists had been imprisoned** compared to 248 journalists ten years earlier.



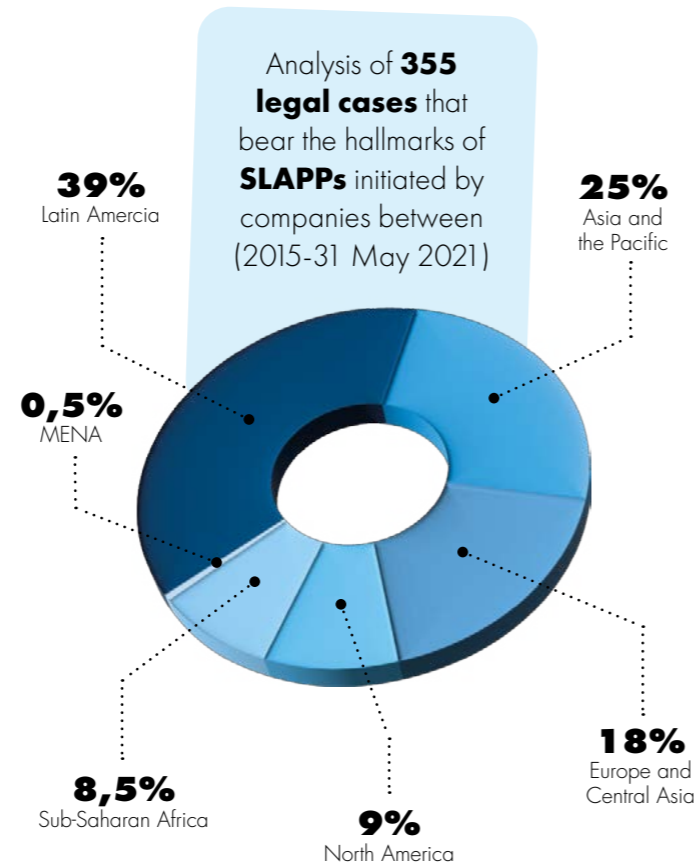


● **INCREASED LEGAL HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS**

Laws – from sedition to censorship – have long been used to punish journalists and suppress media freedom. That practice has been revived by some States with a new ferocity in the digital age. **The arsenal of legal weapons has broadened to include criminal cyber-libel, anti-terrorism, cybersecurity and fake news laws.** Additionally, libel, income tax or other financial investigations and vexatious and frivolous lawsuits, including **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**, are commonly used to harass and intimidate journalists or media outlets.

**Journalists are harassed and intimidated through legal proceedings**

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation are lawsuits used as a form of legal harassment to intimidate and restrict critical voices and free expression through expensive and time-consuming legal proceedings

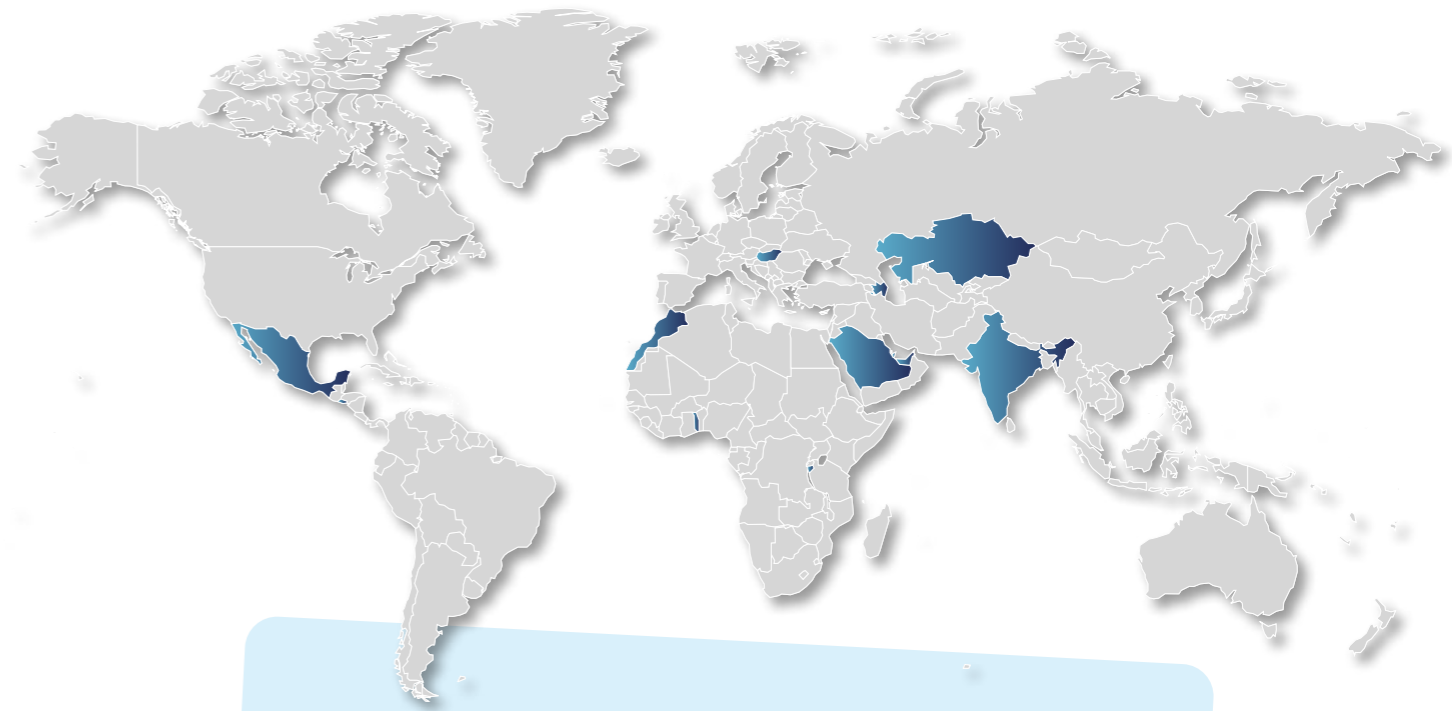


Photos by Unsplash: Alexei Maridashvili



● **JOURNALISTS INCREASINGLY UNDER SURVEILLANCE**

An increasing number of reports of States' unlawful use of **targeted surveillance technologies** against journalists and other members of civil society has emerged. These practices pose not only a grave threat to the safety and security of journalists around the world, but also to journalists' sources, colleagues, friends, and family.



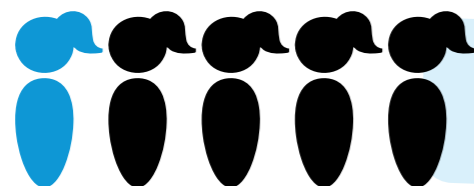
Between 2014 and 2021, **200+ journalists** were selected as targets of Pegasus spyware in at least 12 countries, including Azerbaijan, India, Morocco, El Salvador, Mexico, UAE, Hungary, Rwanda, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Togo

● **INCREASED HARASSMENT OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS**

The safety of women journalists has particularly taken a worrying trend, with a [2020 UNESCO/ICFI survey](#) finding that 73 per cent of the 635 women journalists interviewed reporting experience of some form of online violence. Further, 20 per cent of 596 women respondents reported having been attacked or abused off-line in connection with the online violence they had experienced.

Almost **3/4** of women journalists from a worldwide survey experienced **online violence**

Results of a global survey of 901 journalists (714 women journalists) from 125 countries in 2020



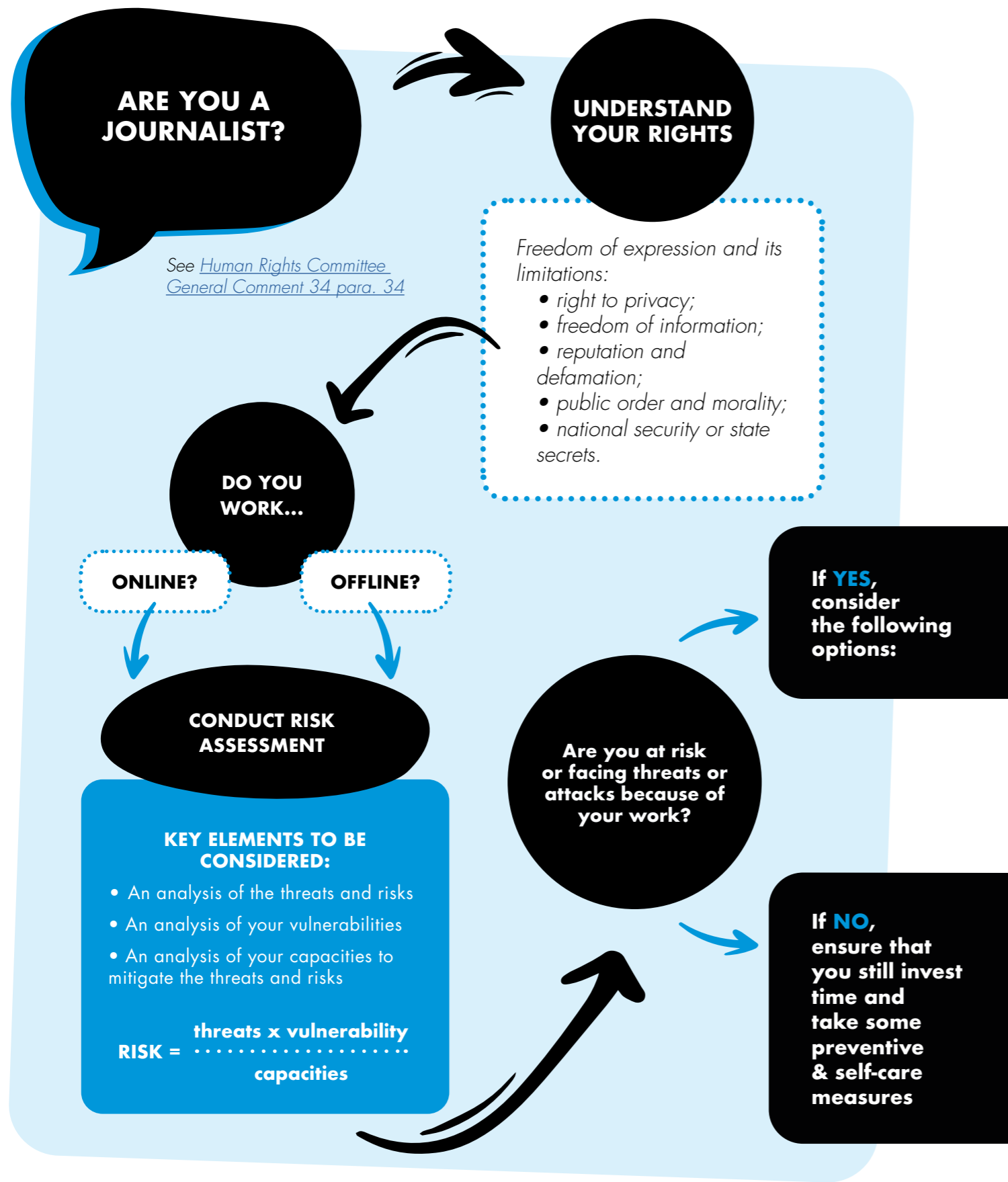
**1/5** of women have been attacked or abused off-line



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**SELF-PROTECTION STEP BY STEP/RISK ANALYSIS ASSESSMENTS**

In face of different threats and risks in journalists' work, the following flowchart illustrates a few quick tips on protection for the journalists.



**For best protection result, resort to several actions in parallel and get as much support as you can.**

- Local Police**  
**Relevant national authorities**  
Report the threat(s)/attack(s) to and file an official complaint. **Request for investigation** on the threat(s)/attack(s).
- National Protection Mechanisms or National Human Rights Commission**  
Seek help from national protection mechanisms if available. If not, reach out to national human rights commissions, **urge for their intervention** to raise concerns and for protection.
- Protection Networks**  
**Rapid Response Desks**  
**NGOs**  
Seek orientation, **legal or protection measures**, emergency grants/assistance, relocation & solidarity support, etc. If you decide to do **public advocacy** on your case, **get support from different networks and NGOs**.
- Social Media Platforms**  
Report online threat(s)/attack(s) for their actions. **Record their response(s) or action(s)**.
- Professional Media or Journalists Bodies**  
Report the case to them and **request the professional bodies to represent you** in case there was any legal harassment, or to raise concern on your behalf.
- Regional and International Human Rights mechanisms**  
Consider **submitting cases** to regional and international human rights mechanisms.
- United Nations**  
If you face reprisals/intimidation based on (attempted) cooperation with the UN, **CONTACT** [ohchr-reprisals@un.org](mailto:ohchr-reprisals@un.org).  
Even in the case where your case was not related to cooperation with the UN, you may still **CONTACT** your counterparts at the UN to report your case and ask for support/advice.
- Training**  
Find out available courses on **self-protection, digital security or online safety, international standards**; learn how to do a **risk assessment and build mitigation strategies**.
- Secure communication**  
If you work on **sensitive issues**, make sure to **communicate in a secure space or through encrypted channels** to protect your source(s) and yourself from surveillance online or offline. If you are unsure of your digital security, reach out to rapid response helpdesks that can run that **online security check** for you.
- Safety Net**  
Build **supportive community** around you; map out relevant protection service providers and establish contacts; prepare and keep a list of **emergency contacts handy** in case of need; where conditions allowed, **increase visibility** of your **profile** and build **advocacy** on your cases.

## SOME USEFUL RESOURCES

### For journalists at risk in general:

<https://safetyofjournalists.trust.org/>  
<https://cpj.org/journalist-safety-and-emergencies/>  
<https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/handbook-rsf.pdf>  
<https://www.journalistsindistress.org/>

### For reporters in high-risk environments:

[https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/safety\\_guide\\_2017.pdf](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/safety_guide_2017.pdf)

### For freelance journalists:

<https://rorypecktrust.org/freelance-resources/>

### For women journalists:

[https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/guidelines\\_EN\\_final.pdf](https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/guidelines_EN_final.pdf)

### On the digital security of journalists:

<https://onlineviolenceresponsehub.org/for-journalists#doxxed>  
<https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/meta-announces-digital-security-course>  
<https://www.facebook.com/formedia/mjp/journalist-safety-online> (FR)  
<https://www.accessnow.org/help/>



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