# SELF-CARE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID MANUAL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

BY

## MOVIMIENTO VINOTINTO

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# INDEX

# INTRODUCTION

This Psychological First Aid Manual (PAP) is the result of a project carried out between August and December 2024 in Venezuela, in a critical context marked by the so-called "Operation Tun Tun", which was implemented by the National Executive, where actions harmful to rights were carried out, aimed at repressing the critical opinions of civil society.

Operation Tun Tun" has not only been an attack against institutions and citizens, but has also generated an environment of fear and repression, particularly affecting members of civil society, including human rights defenders, journalists, union leaders and those who served as election monitors. These groups, fundamental to the defense of essential freedoms and rights, have been exposed to intense psychological harassment aimed at silencing their voices and delegitimizing their efforts for social and political change.

In this context, it became an urgent need to implement emotional support strategies to mitigate the psychological impact and emotional toll of these aggressions. In this sense, to provide strategies, practical and accessible techniques for those on the front line of human rights advocacy, as well as for their colleagues, family members and anyone involved in this area.

Through this resource, we hope to empower human rights defenders, providing them not only with emotional care techniques but also a space for reflection and solidarity in times of adversity. As we move forward, it is vital to remember that the emotional well-being of each individual is key to maintaining resilience and working to respect the fundamental rights of all citizens.

# OBJECTIVE OF THE MANUAL

**1.1 Objective of the manual**

The main objective of this manual is to provide Psychological First Aid (PFA) tools and strategies tailored to individuals affected by state harassment in Venezuela in order to mitigate the effects of psychological and emotional trauma. In a context where the government exercises oppressive control and uses psychological terror as a means of repression, this manual seeks to equip human rights defenders, journalists, union leaders and election monitors with practical skills to help them care for their emotional well-being and that of those around them.

**1.2 Importance of the manual**

The importance of this manual lies in its function as a vital resource in the midst of an environment marked by systematic repression. In a country where dissent is persecuted and individuals who stand up to power are subjected to psychological attacks, having a manual that offers strategies of containment and validation that foster both self-care and emotional support becomes essential. This resource not only provides relief and the least emotional toll, but also seeks to raise awareness of mental health as a fundamental aspect of the struggle for human rights.

**1.3 Target audience**
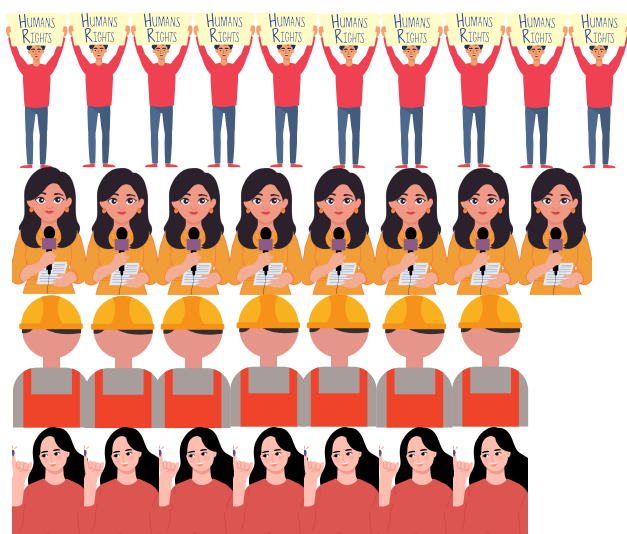


**HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS**

**JOURNALISTS**

**UNION LEADERS**

**ELECTION MONITORS**

# OBJECTIVE OF THE MANUAL

Regions where it was carried out

## Study to members of the SSO



The study was conducted in two regions, which, despite being neighboring states, have completely different realities. These are the states of Lara and Yaracuy. The development of events during this period, August or December 2024, was also completely different.

The indicators denote the alteration in the emotional health of the participants, members of civil society organizations, suggest a possible consequence of the state policy of psychological harassment, in the capacity for action of some specific members of the sectors chosen as the sample population.

# OBJECTIVE OF THE MANUAL

Time of execution

The study was conducted between August and December 2024, during the height of the so-called TUN TUN Operation in Venezuela.

| July | August | September |
|------|--------|-----------|
| October | November | December |
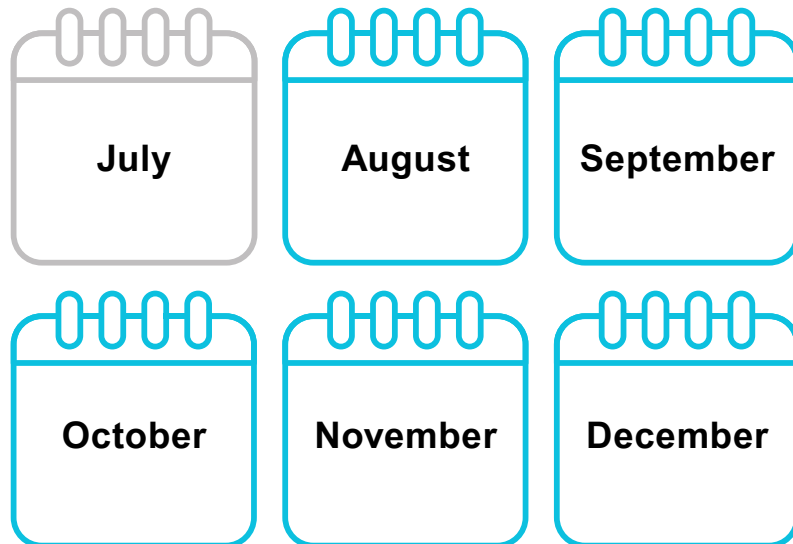
Age Range The highest concentration of participants is between 31 and 45 years old (10 people), followed by the 25-30 age group (9 people). This suggests that the project's target audience—human rights defenders, journalists, union leaders, and election monitors—is primarily comprised of experienced young adults who are active in the workplace and society. The lowest number of participants is at the extreme age groups, especially those over 60 (1 person) and young people aged 15-24 (5 people).

AGE OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROJECT
Human rights defenders, journalists
union leaders and election monitors
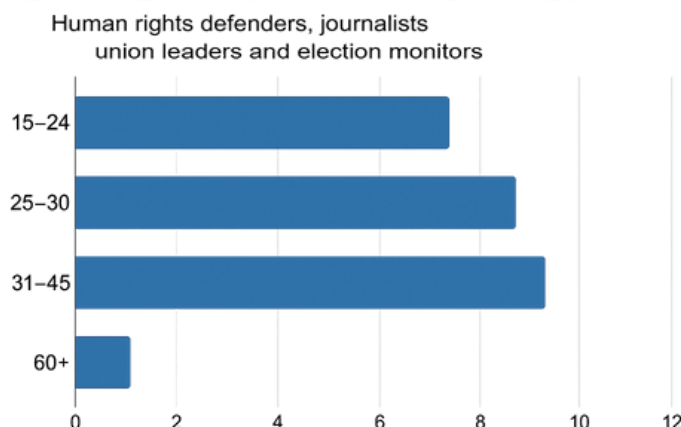
# CONTEXT AND NEED

## 2. Context and need

### 2.1 Human Rights Situation in Venezuela in 2024
In 2024, the human rights situation in Venezuela has further deteriorated, especially after the fraudulent electoral process of July 28, where the will of the people was clearly ignored. Following the elections, repression intensified under the so-called "Operation Tun Tun", a wave of massive persecution against political opponents, activists and citizens expressing dissent. This operation has not only involved arbitrary arrests, but also the use of physical torture and systematic psychological threats, creating a climate of fear that has subjected the population to a constant state of anguish, anxiety and hopelessness. In this context, the guarantee for the exercise of human rights is practically non-existent and the criminalization of protest and dissidence has become the norm, leading society to a collective paralysis in the face of tyranny and increasing the syndrome of learned hopelessness.

### 2.2 Psychological impact of human rights work
Human rights work in such a hostile environment generates a significant emotional impact on those who carry it out. Human rights defenders constantly face direct threats from State security forces, who act under the backing of a repressive legal framework that includes laws such as the "Law for the regularization of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in Venezuela is called the Law for the Control, Regularization, Performance and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and Non-Profit Social Organizations. Published in the Extraordinary Official Gazette No. 6.855 on November 15, 2024", designed to dismantle the work of organizations that defend fundamental rights. This institutional harassment causes additional stress, contributing to a sense of helplessness and vulnerability.
Many defenders experience symptoms of burnout, anxiety, and in some cases, more severe disorders, resulting in a deterioration of their mental health. In addition, as witnesses to human rights abuses and violations, they experience an emotional burden that can lead to desensitization or, on the contrary, a process of post-traumatic stress.

# CONTEXT AND NEED

**2.3 Specific vulnerabilities of defenders and civil society**

The psychological vulnerabilities of human rights defenders and civil society workers are multiple and diverse, generating a variety of cognitive, physical, and emotional reactions.

These are:

Confusion and disorientation

Difficulty in decision-making.

Trouble sleeping.

Disordered thoughts.

Isolation / Avoidance.

Concern about the situation

Dependency

Passivity / Guilt

Problems of concentration or from memory

Concern for details insignificant

Impulsivity

Conflicts relatives

# CONTEXT AND NEED

Participants expressed different types of reactions, among which we can mention:

**Tiredness or fatigue**
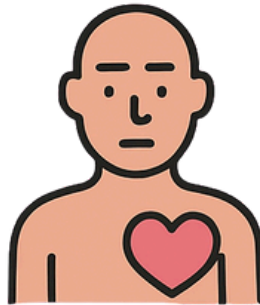
**Rapid heart rate**

**Physical assault**

**Hyperventilation**

**Shrinking throat**

**Hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli and hypervigilance**

**Change in appetite**

**Chest or stomach pain.**

**Worsening of chronic conditions: diabetes, high blood pressure**

# CONTEXT AND NEED

Similarly, participants expressed feeling different types of emotional reactions, among which we can mention:

Sadness and hopelessness
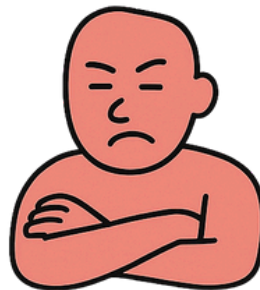
Irritability, anger and resentment.

Fear / Anxiety
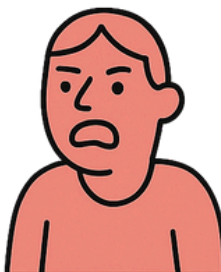
Unpredictable mood swings

Emotional sensitivity
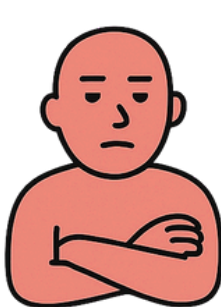
Despair

Emotional distancing

Low self-esteem / Depression

Understanding these vulnerable reactions is essential for developing effective support and self-care strategies, enabling human rights defenders and civil society to continue their crucial work in an increasingly adverse context.

## 3. Fundamentals of Psychological First Aid.
### 3.1. Definition of Psychological First Aid.

Psychological first aid (PFA) is a brief, emergency intervention provided to people who have experienced a stressful or traumatic event. Its objective is to reduce initial stress, provide emotional support, and promote adaptation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), PFA is a set of actions designed to offer immediate and practical help to those in need, ensuring a safe and supportive environment.

### 3.2. Objectives and basic principles of Psychological First Aid.

The objectives pursued by the PAPs according to Corral, E. & Gómez, F. (2009), are the following:
- Provide support, helping the person feel heard and understood, facilitating the expression of feelings and the ventilation of negative emotions such as fear, sadness, anxiety, or anger.
- Reduce mortality: by understanding that the stressful event can lead to violent situations, such as aggression toward others or oneself; taking appropriate action to prevent this (developing their informal support network, facilitating hospitalization, etc.)

### 3.3 Difference between Psychological First Aid and therapy.

| Aspect | Psychological First Aid (PFA) | Psychological Therapy |
|---|---|---|
| Objective | Provide immediate and practical support after a stressful or critical situation | Explore and treat long-term emotional problems |
| Duration | Intervención breve: horas o días, en momentos críticos | Continuous process: weeks, months or years, depending on the person |
| Training | It can be offered by trained personnel, even without being clinical professionals. | Requires specialized professional training (licensed psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists) |
| Intervention | It focuses on reducing immediate discomfort without dwelling on past experiences. | Delve into patterns, beliefs, emotions and traumas that affect mental health |

# PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID STRATEGIES

**4. Psychological First Aid Strategies.**
 Psychological first aid strategies are essential tools for providing effective support to individuals who have experienced traumatic or stressful events.

## 4.1 Active Listening
 It's a fundamental component of psychological first aid. It involves paying full attention to the person speaking, not only to their words, but also to their tone of voice, emotions, and body language. This step can take between 10 and 20 minutes. Knowing how to communicate with a distressed, anxious, or upset person is essential; in this state, the person may or may not want to tell you their story. Listening to this story can be of great help in calming the affected person, which is why it's essential to give them space to spontaneously share what's happening to them, but without pressure.

## 4.2 Emotional validation.
 Emotional validation is a fundamental process in interpersonal communication and various therapeutic modalities, especially Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). It refers to the recognition and acceptance of another person's (or one's own) internal emotional experience, including their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as understandable and valid in a given context, without immediately judging, criticizing, or attempting to change them.

## 4.3 Relaxation techniques.
 Relaxation techniques are useful tools to help people reduce anxiety and immediate stress. This step takes 10 minutes, although some people may need more time. It's worth noting that this and other steps can be applied whenever the person wants to receive them.

## 4.4 Appropriate problem-focused and immediate crisis management.
 Appropriate problem-centered management is defined by Canino (2019) as the strategy where "the individual intends to face the situation, seeking to solve the problem in a logical way by developing action plans, which allows managing internal and external demands" (p.4).

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# PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID STRATEGIES

Phases of a crisis:

I. Precipitating event: An event occurs that is perceived as threatening or overwhelming, causing significant stress in the person. Responses such as shock or denial.

II. Disorganized response: Disorganized behaviors ranging from grief to anxiety are displayed. It is an attempt to reestablish meaning in life.
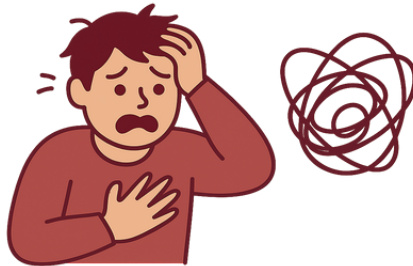
III. Explosion: Loss of control over emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Inappropriate and/or destructive behavior.

IV. Stabilization: The person begins to accept the situation; however, when recalling it, reactions occur, although not as extreme as in previous phases. The person is vulnerable to "exploding" again.

V. Adaptation: A reconciliation is reached between the event and the individual's current reality. Control of the situation is taken and the individual moves toward the future.

## 5. Needs Identification

Needs identification is a critical step in the process of providing psychological support. It involves recognizing and assessing people's emotions and situations in order to offer appropriate help. The subcategories of this process are described below:

## 5.1. Signs of emotional distress

| Observed Dimension | Key Signs | Psychosocial Involvement | Recommended Intervention |
|---|---|---|---|
| Behavior Changes | Isolation, irritability, aggressiveness, apathy | Possible attempt at disconnection or emotional overflow. | Establish safe spaces, encourage emotional expression, validate experiences. |
| Sleep Disorders | Insomnia, nightmares, hypersomnia | Sleep disorders reflect emotional imbalances or accumulated stress. | Relaxation techniques, sleep hygiene, emotional support. |
| Physical Changes | Persistent fatigue, weight changes, pain without medical cause | Emotional discomfort can manifest itself in the body as chronic physical burden. | Medical referral, breathing exercises, and body-emotion connection. |
| Verbal Expressions of Anguish | "I can't take it anymore," "I'm losing control," "I feel overwhelmed or desperate." | Verbal signs of emotional overflow and indications of psychosocial risk. | Active listening, emotional support, possible referral to specialized support. |

## 5.2 Risk Assessment

Risk assessment involves determining the level of danger a person faces, especially in crisis situations. This assessment may include:

- Identifying Suicidal Thoughts: Ask directly about thoughts of self-harm or suicide. It's crucial to address these topics sensitively and nonjudgmentally.
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## 5.3 Use of Self-Assessment Tools

Self-assessment tools are resources that allow people to reflect on their emotional and mental well-being. These tools may include:

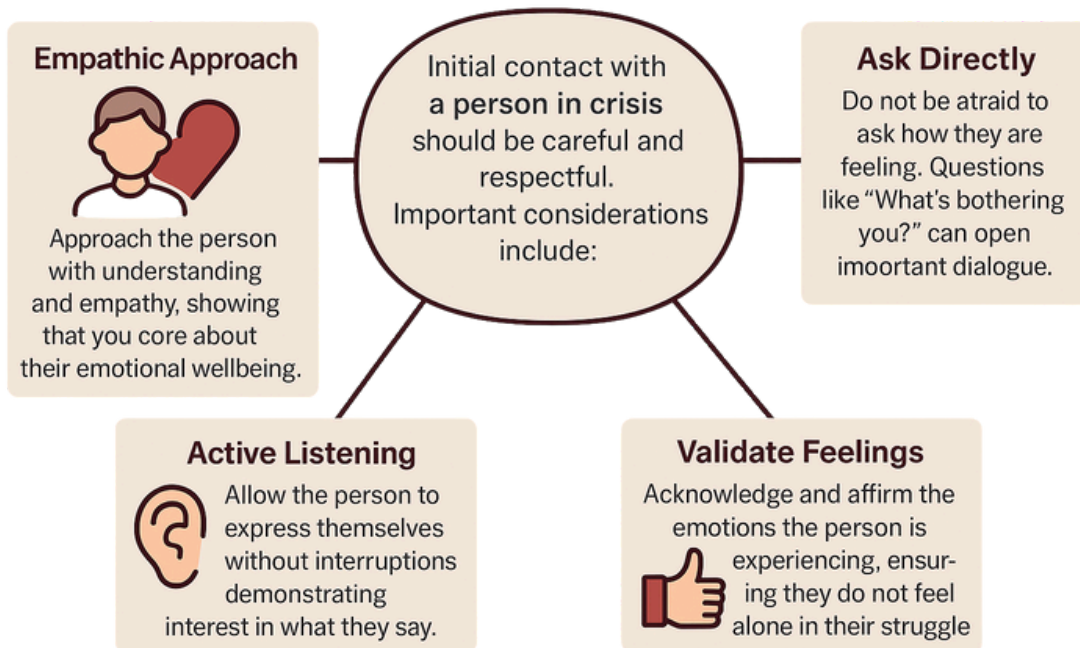| Component | Example / Tool | Main Purpose | Strategic Application | Expected Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Stress and Anxiety Questionnaires** | *Beck Anxiety Inventory*, *Perceived Stress Scale* | Measure emotional symptoms (anxiety, stress, depression) in a structured way | Periodic application to identify levels of discomfort and psychosocial risk. | Early awareness of emotional imbalance; basis for intervention or prevention. |
| **Emotional Diaries** | Written or digital daily record of emotions, thoughts, and events | Detect patterns, identify emotional triggers, and strengthen self-reflection | Daily or weekly use with guiding questions that encourage introspection and emotional recognition. | Improves self-awareness, emotional management, and reduces impulsive reactions. |
| **Wellness Apps** | Applications such as *Moodpath*, *Insight Timer*, *Headspace*, *Sanvello*, among others | Facilitate mood monitoring and promote emotional regulation practices | Accessible and standalone use with features such as mood alerts, guided meditation, and relaxation exercises. | Greater adherence to self-care, emotional autonomy, and reduction of daily stress. |

## 6. Practical Interventions

Practical interventions are crucial to addressing the needs of a person experiencing an emotional or psychological crisis. These interventions must be sensitive and appropriate to facilitate the individual's recovery and well-being. Each subcategory is detailed below:
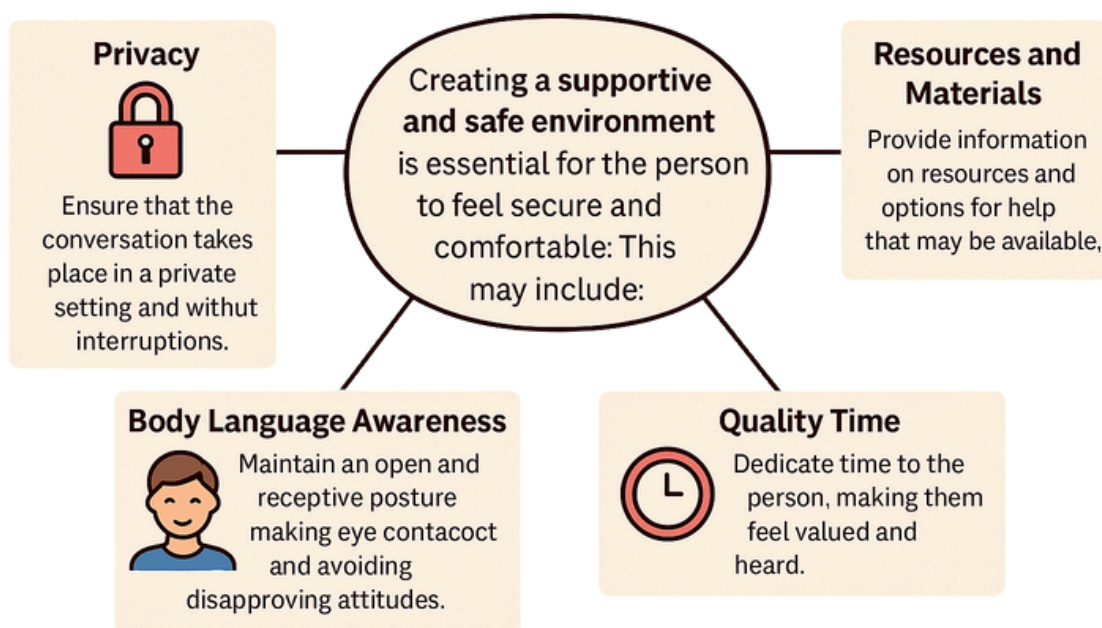
# PRACTICAL INTERVENTIONS

## 6.1 Initial Contact with the Affected Person

The first contact with a person in crisis should be careful and respectful. Important considerations include:



**Empathic Approach**
Approach the person with understanding and empathy, showing that you core about their emotional wellbeing.

Initial contact with **a person in crisis** should be careful and respectful. Important considerations include:

**Ask Directly**
Do not be atraid to ask how they are feeling. Questions like "What's bothering you?" can open imoortant dialogue.

**Active Listening**
Allow the person to express themselves without interruptions demonstrating interest in what they say.

**Validate Feelings**
Acknowledge and affirm the emotions the person is experiencing, ensuring they do not feel alone in their struggle

## 6.2 Establishing a Supportive Environment

Creating a welcoming and supportive environment is essential for the person to feel safe and comfortable. This may include:



**Privacy**
Ensure that the conversation takes place in a private setting and without interruptions.

Creating a **supportive and safe environment** is essential for the person to feel secure and comfortable: This may include:

**Resources and Materials**
Provide information on resources and options for help that may be available,

**Body Language Awareness**
Maintain an open and receptive posture making eye contacoct and avoiding disapproving attitudes.

**Quality Time**
Dedicate time to the person, making them feel valued and heard.

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## 6.3 Effective Communication

Communication is an essential component of any intervention. Some strategies include:

### Clarity

Use clear and simple language, avoiding technicismos that may confundir person.

### Efective communicatiion is an essential component in any strategies include:
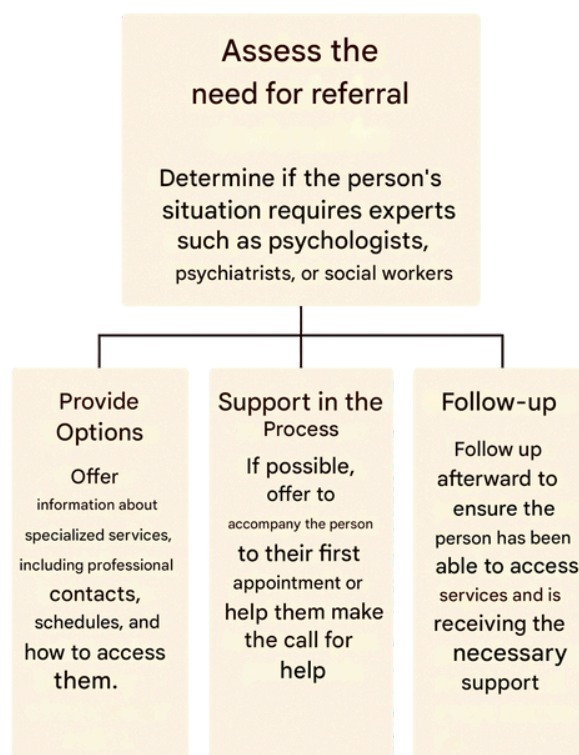
### Open-Ended Questions

Use open-ended questions that encourage the person to talk mre about their feelings and experiencics.

### Reflecting and Paraphrasing

Repeat what the person has said to show that you are listening and understanding their concerns.

### Positive Feedback

Celebrate their efforts to speak an seek help, reinforcing their confidence.

## 6.4 Referral to Specialized Services

In some cases, initial intervention may not be sufficient, and a referral to professional services may be necessary. Steps to follow include:

### Assess the need for referral

Determine if the person's situation requires experts such as psychologists, psychiatrists, or social workers

### Provide Options

Offer information about specialized services, including professional contacts, schedules, and how to access them.

### Support in the Process

If possible, offer to accompany the person to their first appointment or help them make the call for help

### Follow-up

Follow up afterward to ensure the person has been able to access services and is receiving the necessary support

## 7. Self-Care for Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Union Leaders, and Election Monitors

Self-care is essential for those working in high-stress and high-risk environments, such as human rights defenders, journalists, union leaders, and election monitors. Practicing self-care helps maintain mental, emotional, and physical health and prevent burnout and trauma. Below are helpful strategies and resources for this purpose.

### 7.1 Self-care strategies

Self-care involves taking intentional actions to care for yourself. Some strategies include:
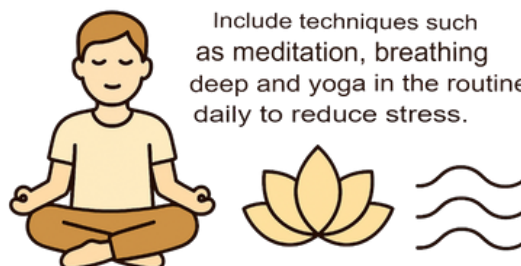
### Setting Limits

Define work and leisure schedules for ensuring that there is sufficient time to rest and recover.
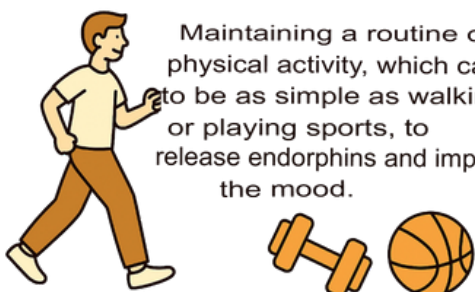
### Relaxation Practices

Include techniques such as meditation, breathing deep and yoga in the routine daily to reduce stress.

### Regular Exercise

Maintaining a routine of physical activity, which can to be as simple as walking or playing sports, to release endorphins and improve the mood.

### Healthy Eating

Consume a rich balanced diet in nutrients that support physical health and mental

**Social Connections**

To foster relationships with friends and family, and share experiences and feelings with people of trust

**Personal Diary**

Write about experiences and emotions for processing the lived and release tensions

## 7.2 Prevention of Wear and Trauma

-Psychological First Aid Training

-Professional Supervision and Support

-Strategic Digital Disconnection

-Promote Collective Care Networks

-Recognition of Achievements and Limits

- Resilience Development

## 7.3 Available Resources

There are numerous resources designed to support self-care and mental health for those working in high-risk fields. Some of these resources include:

# SELF-CARE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS, JOURNALISTS, UNION LEADERS, AND ELECTION MONITORS

## HELP LINES

Telephone services where you can talk with professionals in form mental health confidential

## TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Organizations that provide training in stress management, resilience and self-care for professionals in a situation of risk

TRAINING

## THERAPY AND COUNSELLING)

Access to psychologists or advisors who can offer individual therapy or group

## PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

Groups and forums where you can find colleagues and share resources, experiences, and self-care strategies

Self-care is an essential responsibility for those who defend human rights and work in high-risk areas. By implementing effective strategies and utilizing available resources, one can protect one's well-being while continuing the fight for justice and rights.
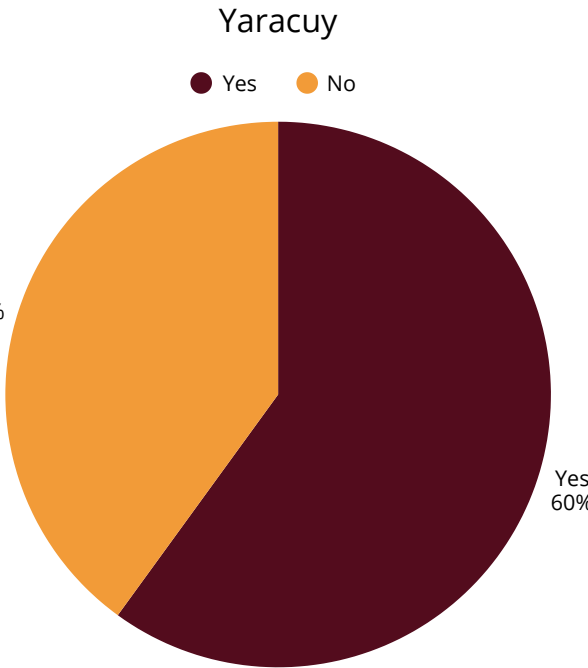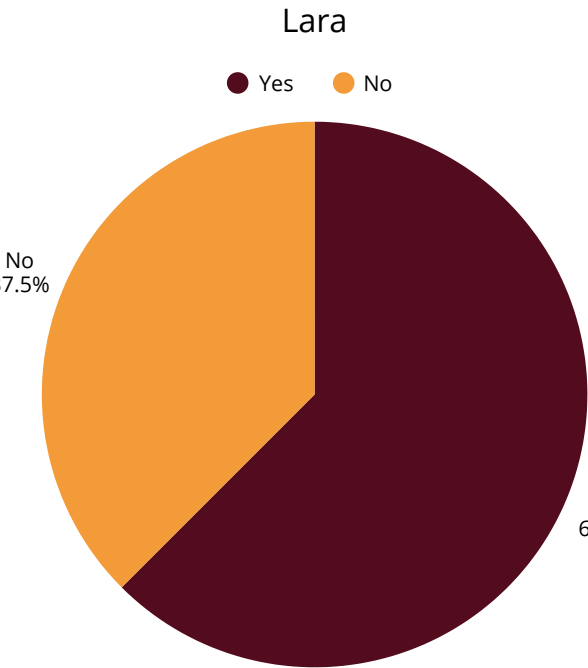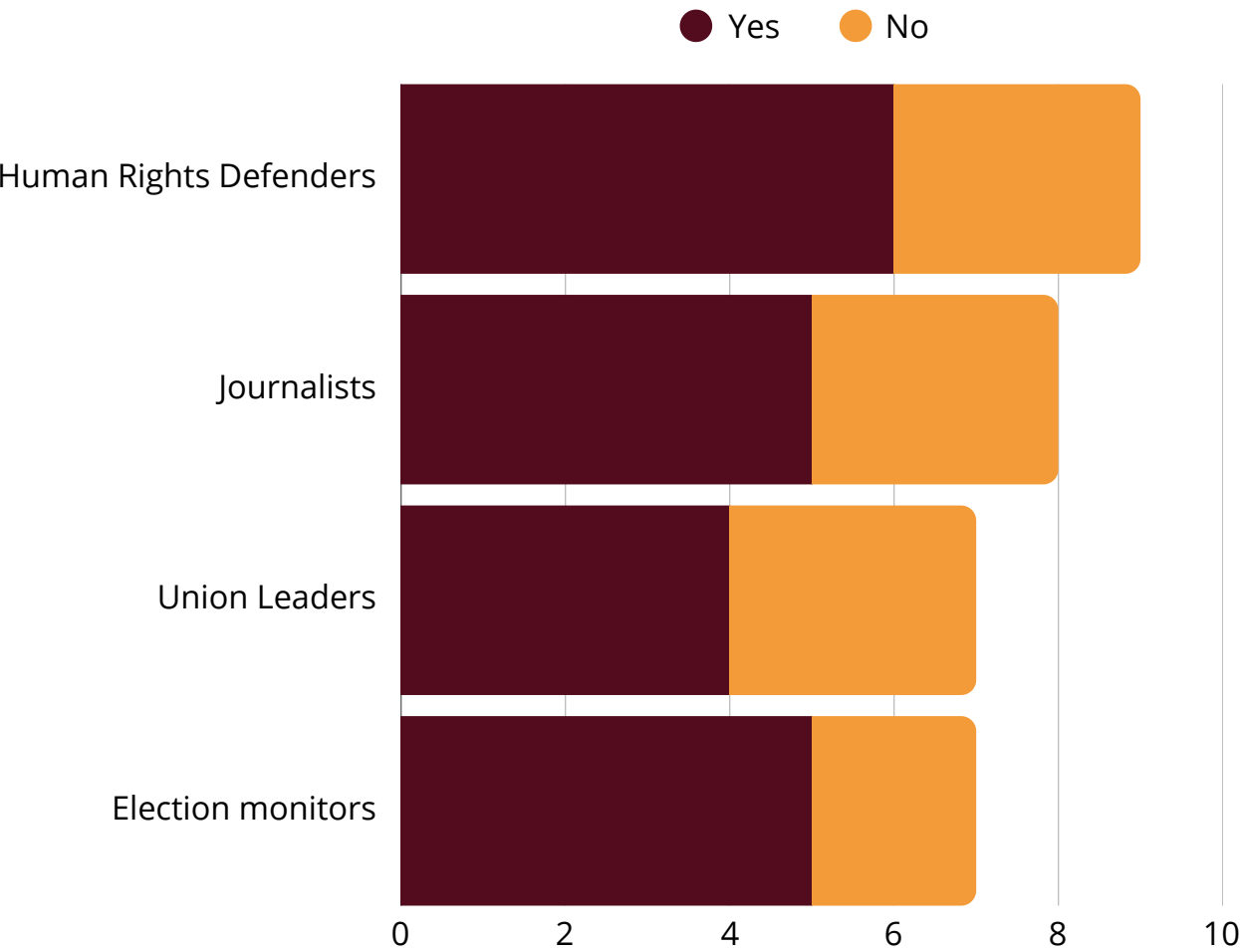
**8. Context on the challenges posed to members of civil society in the area of self-care for mental health.**

Between August and December 2024, this study was conducted in which 10 questions were asked to 31 members of Venezuelan civil society, specifically in the states of Lara and Yaracuy, to determine some indicators of how they felt about their mental health regarding the situation in the country, especially in the context of the so-called Operation Tun Tun.

**8.1. Results of group exercises in the states of Lara and Yaracuy**
*Q1. Are you feeling nervous about the current situation in Venezuela?*
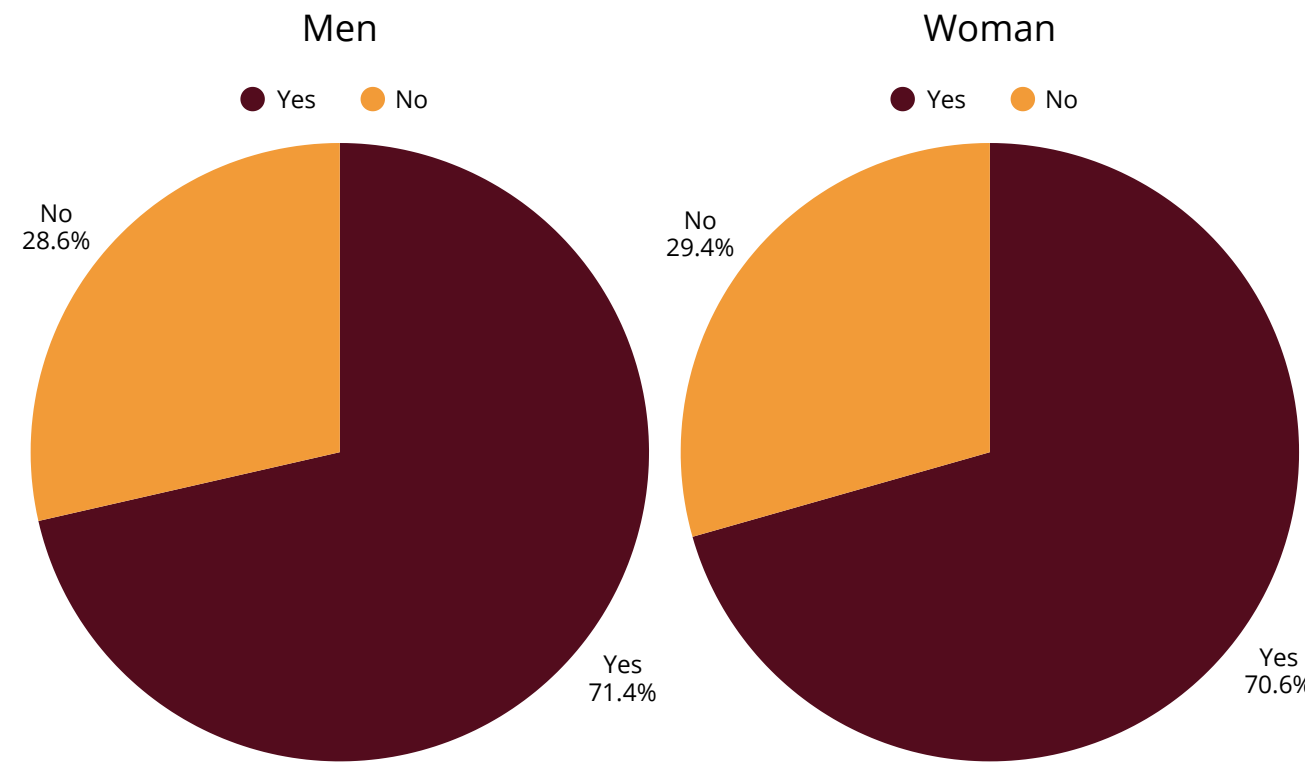
# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH



Yes    No

Human Rights Defenders

Journalists

Union Leaders

Election monitors

0    2    4    6    8    10

Lara

Yaracuy

Yes    No

Yes    No

No
37.5%

Yes
62.5%

No
40%

Yes
60%

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

*Q2. Do you often experience a feeling of restlessness or tension?*
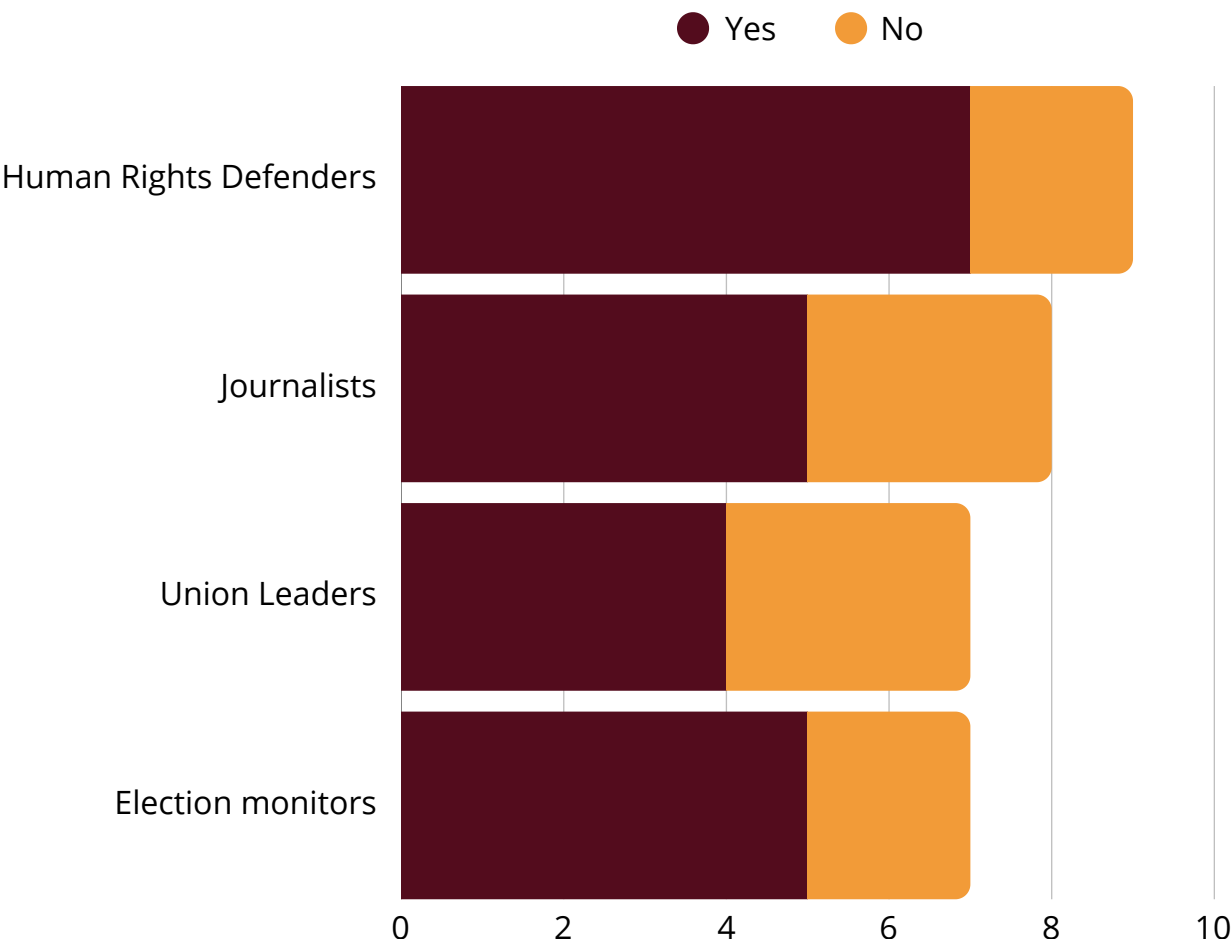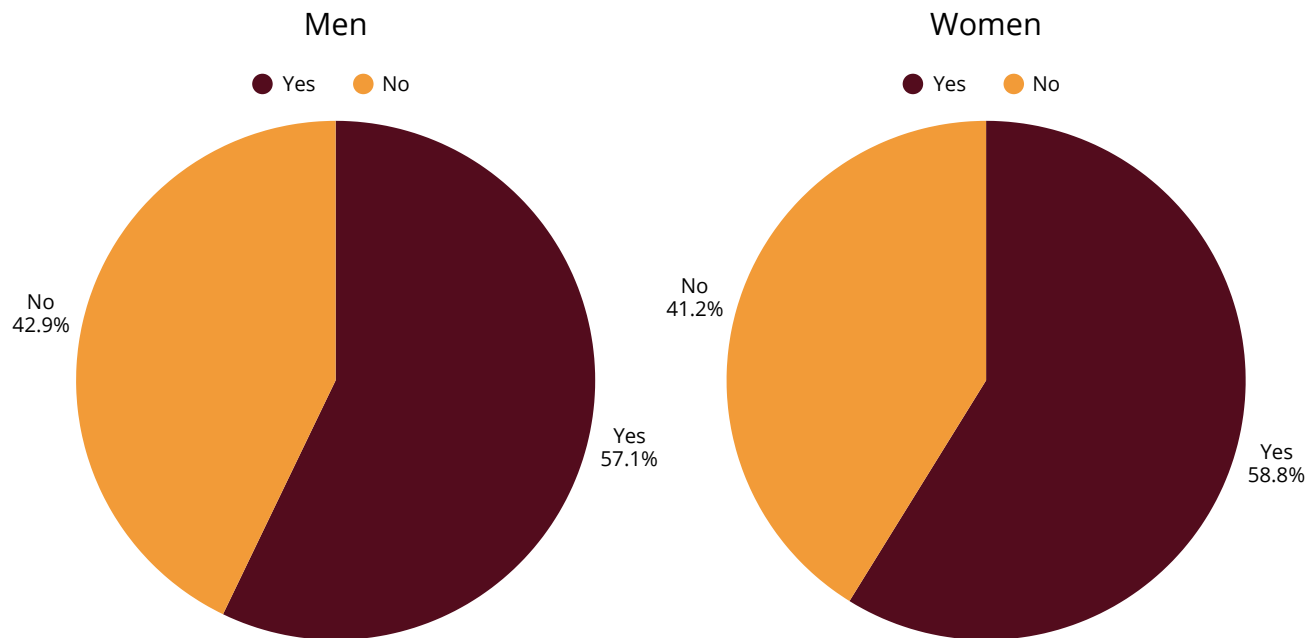


Men

- Yes
- No

No
42.9%

Yes
57.1%

Women

- Yes
- No

No
41.2%

Yes
58.8%

- Yes
- No

Human Rights Defenders
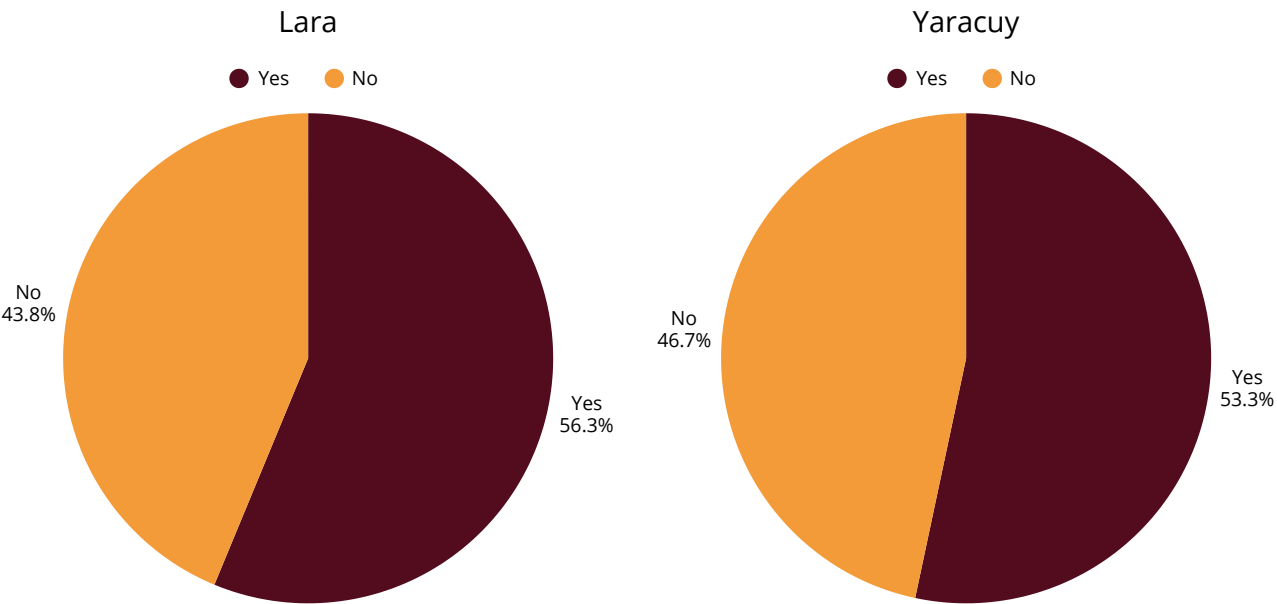
Journalists

Union Leaders

Election monitors

0   2   4   6   8   10

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## Lara

- Yes
- No

No 43.8%

Yes 56.3%

## Yaracuy

- Yes
- No

No 46.7%

Yes 53.3%

*Q3. Do you sometimes find it difficult to do the things you used to do before July 28th?*
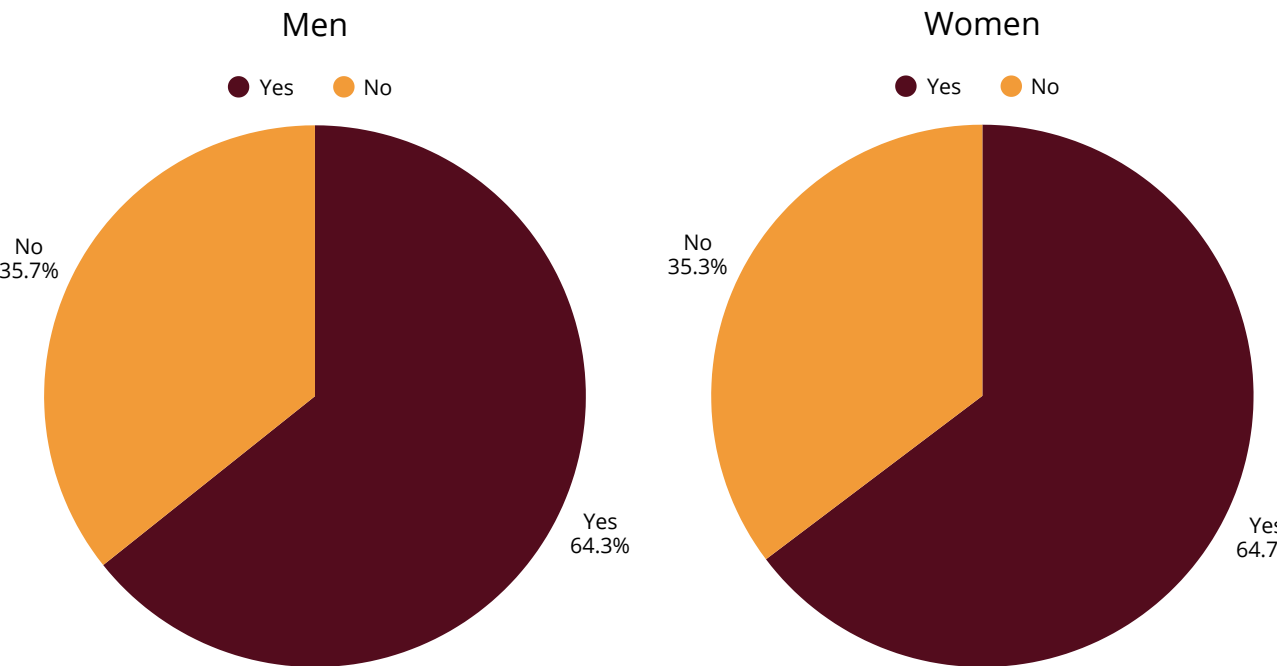
## Men

- Yes
- No

No 35.7%

Yes 64.3%

## Women

- Yes
- No

No 35.3%

Yes 64.7%

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH



Legend: Yes, No

Bar chart categories:
- Human Rights Defenders
- Journalists
- Union Leaders
- Election monitors

X-axis: 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10

### Lara

Legend: Yes, No

No 37.5%
Yes 62.5%

### Yaracuy

Legend: Yes, No

No 40%
Yes 60%
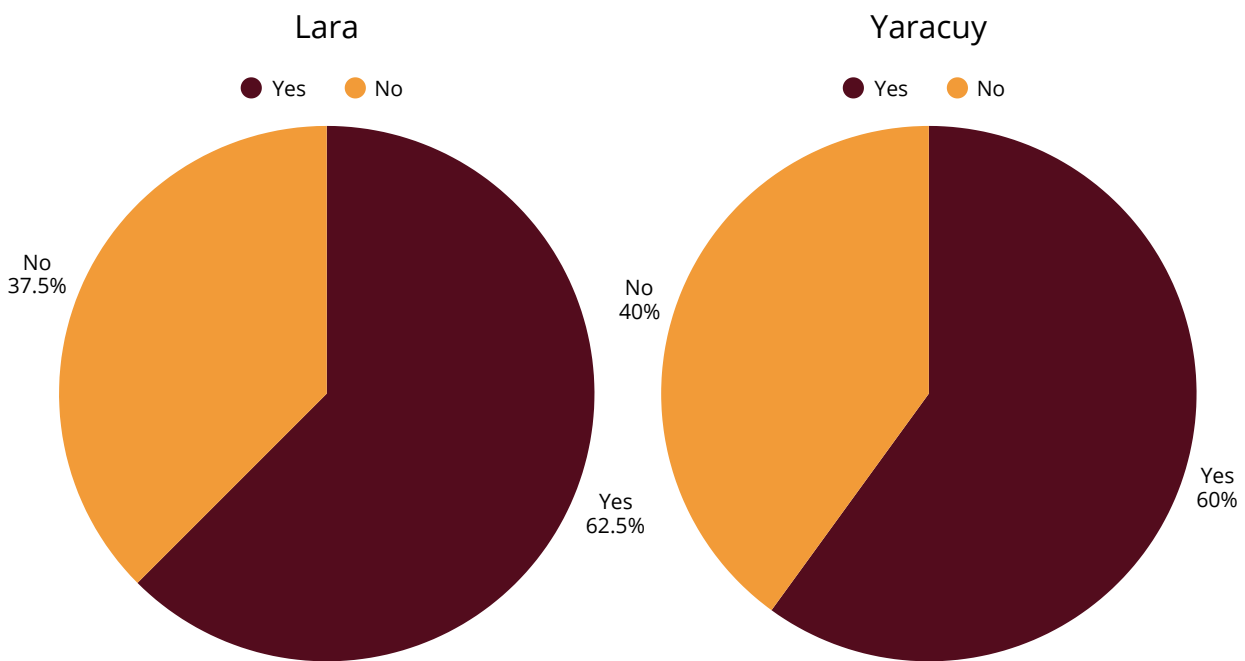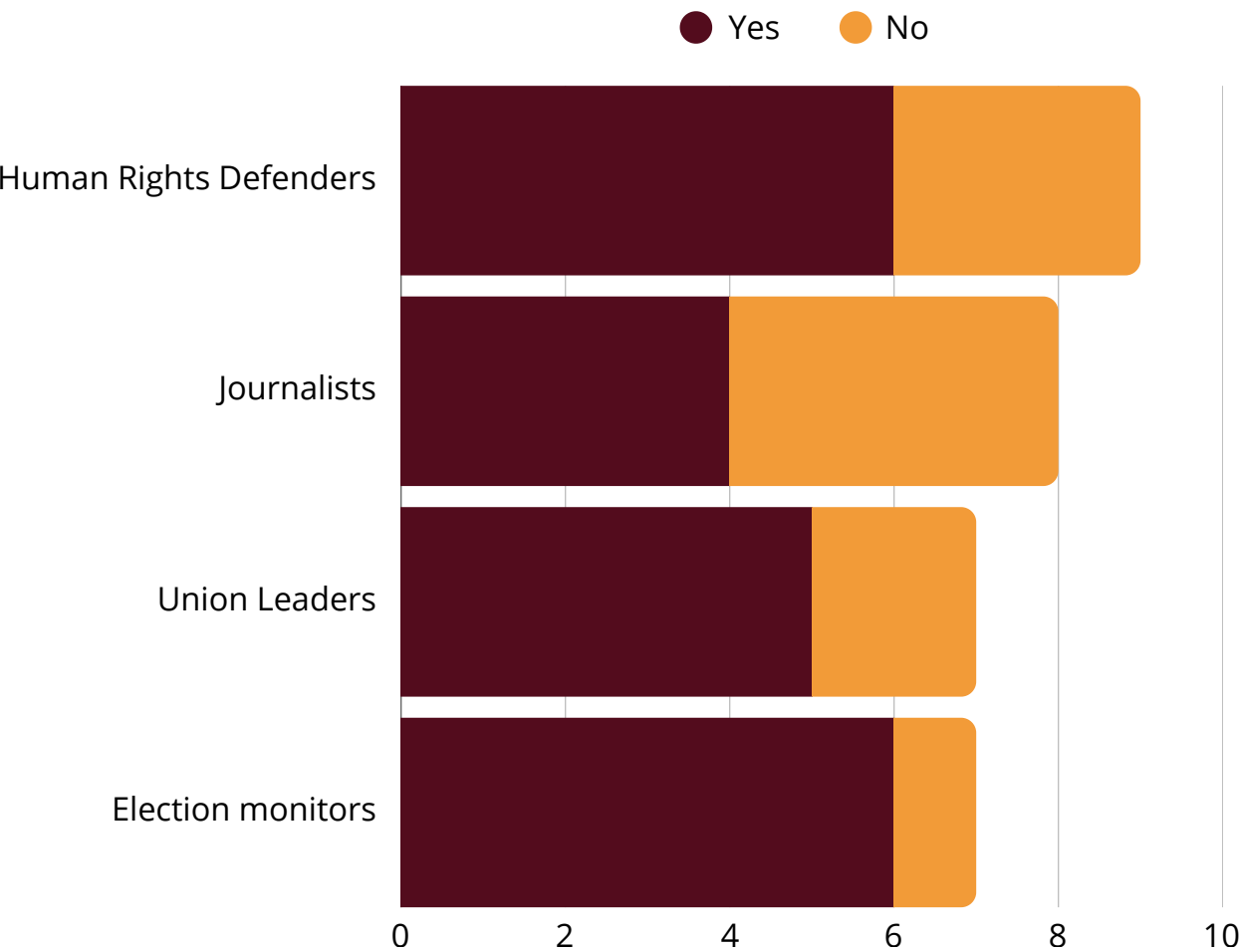
# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## *4. Have you had trouble concentrating on everyday activities?*
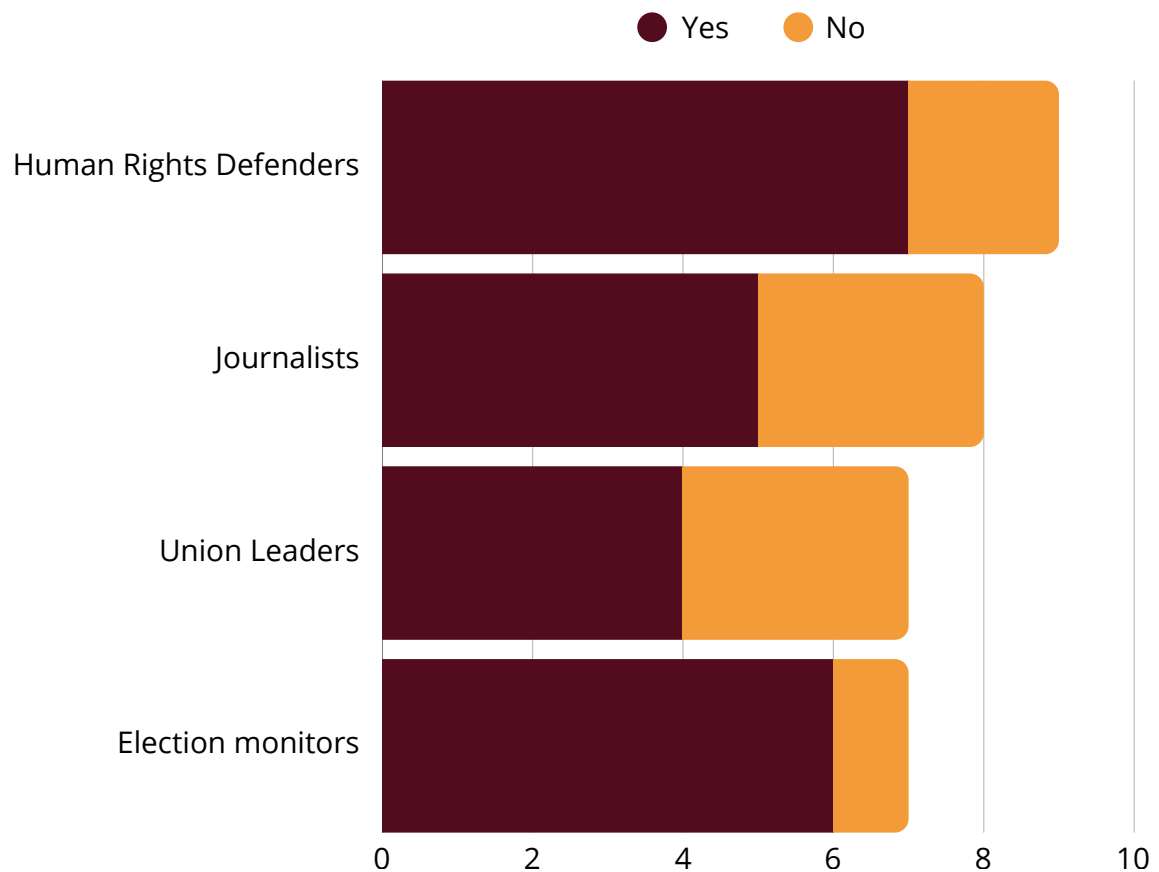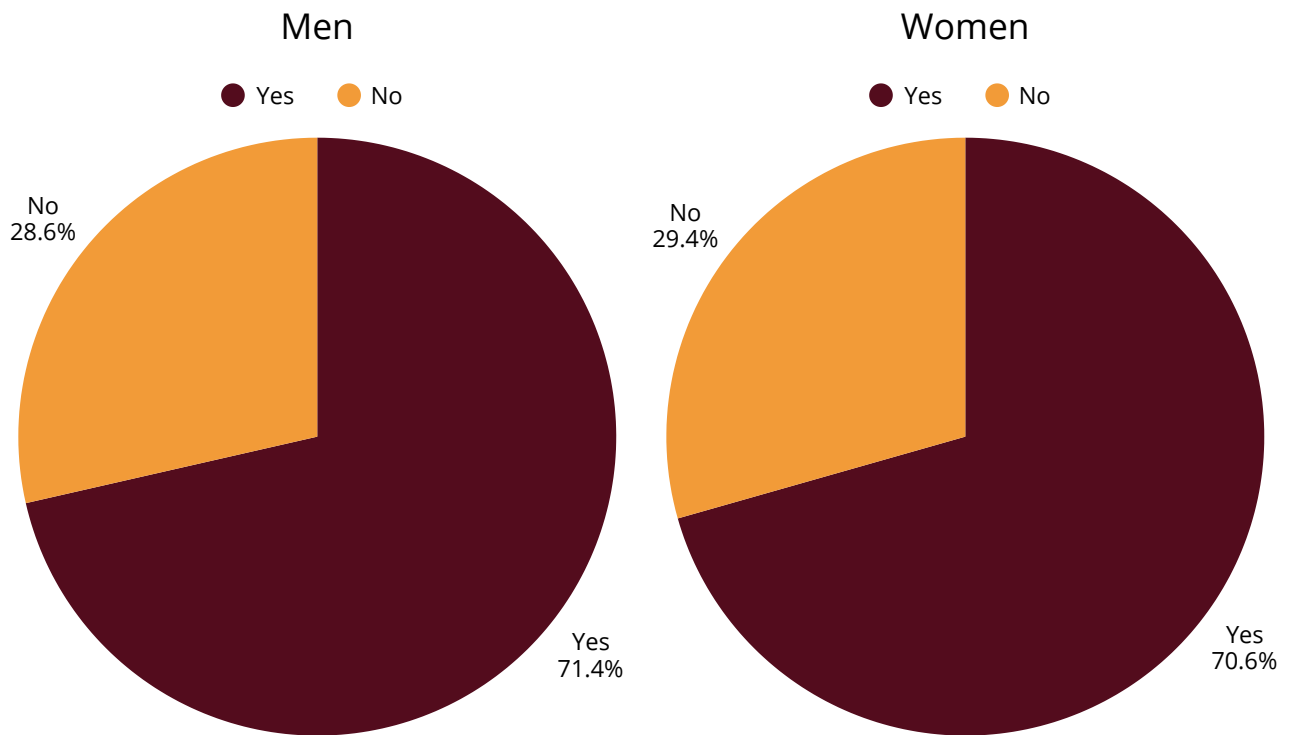


Men

● Yes   ● No

No
28.6%

Yes
71.4%

Women

● Yes   ● No

No
29.4%

Yes
70.6%



● Yes   ● No

Human Rights Defenders

Journalists

Union Leaders

Election monitors

0    2    4    6    8    10

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## Lara



Yes: Yes 68.8%
No 31.3%

## Yaracuy



Yes 66.7%
No 33.3%
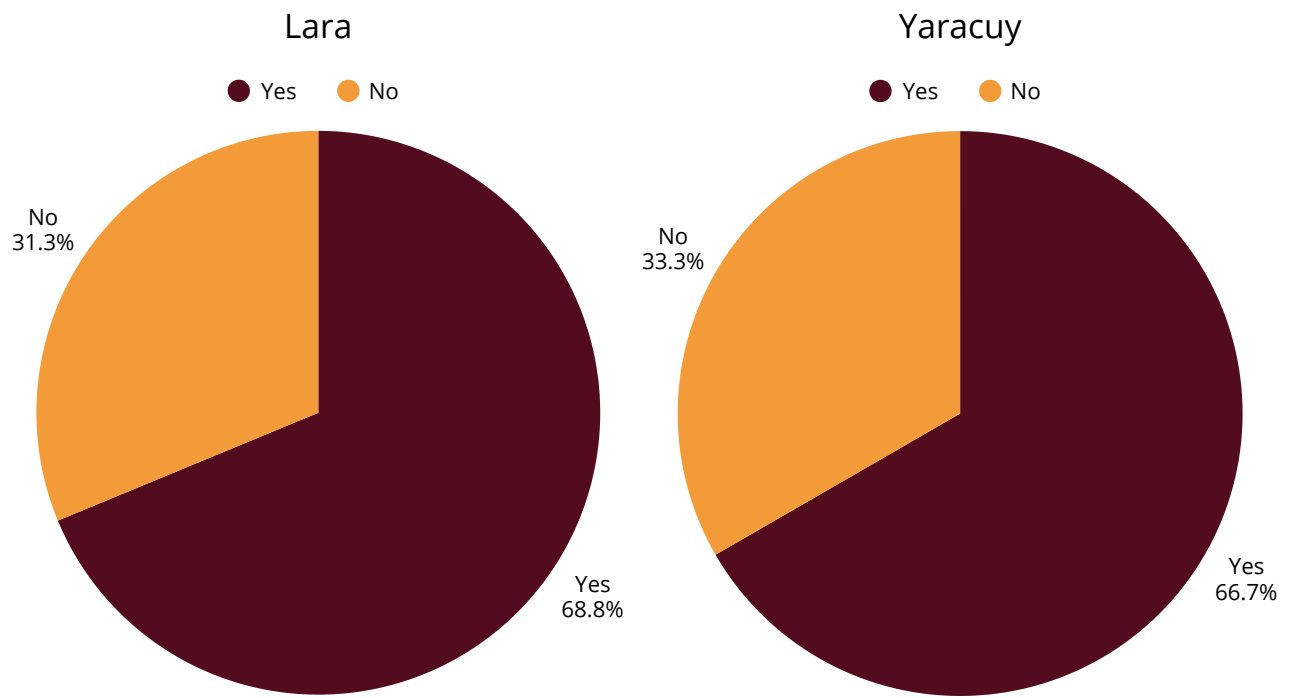
## Q5. Do you feel more exhausted than usual?
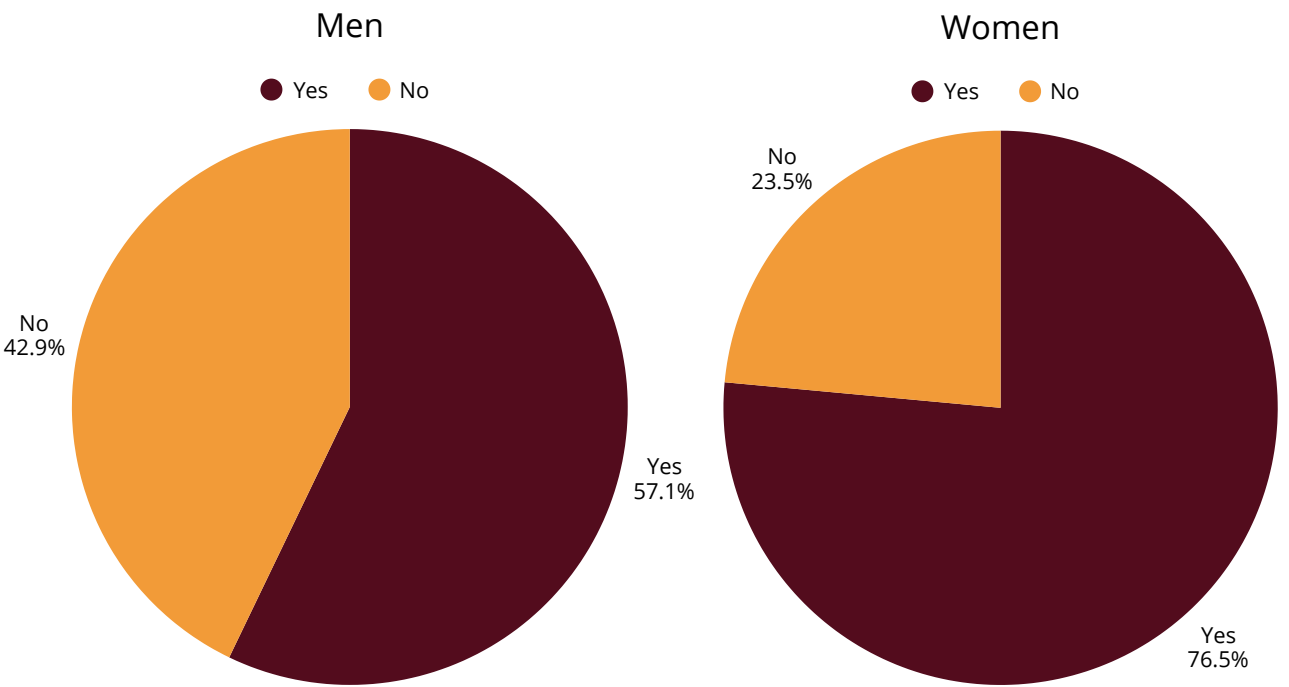
### Men



Yes 57.1%
No 42.9%

### Women



Yes 76.5%
No 23.5%

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH



Lara



Yaracuy
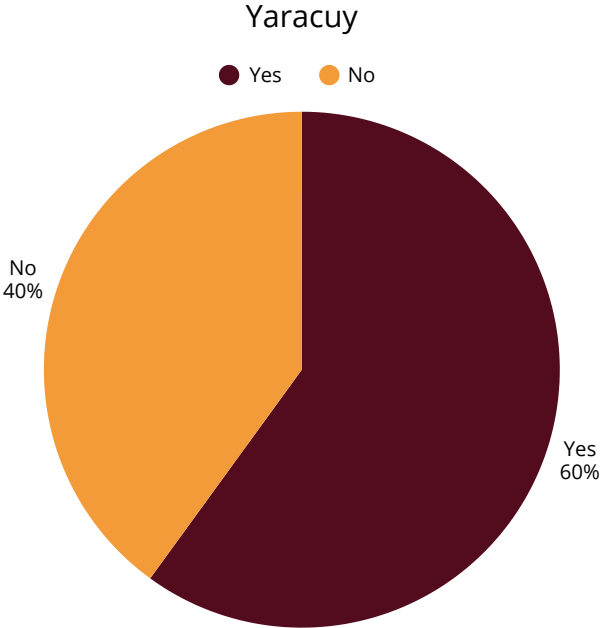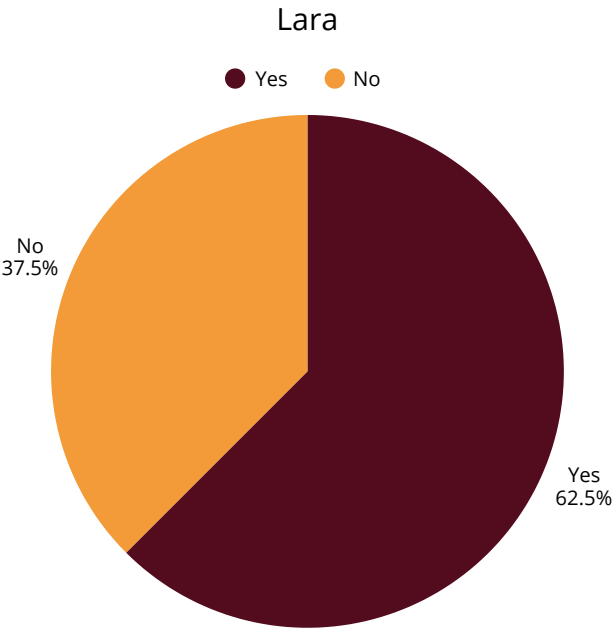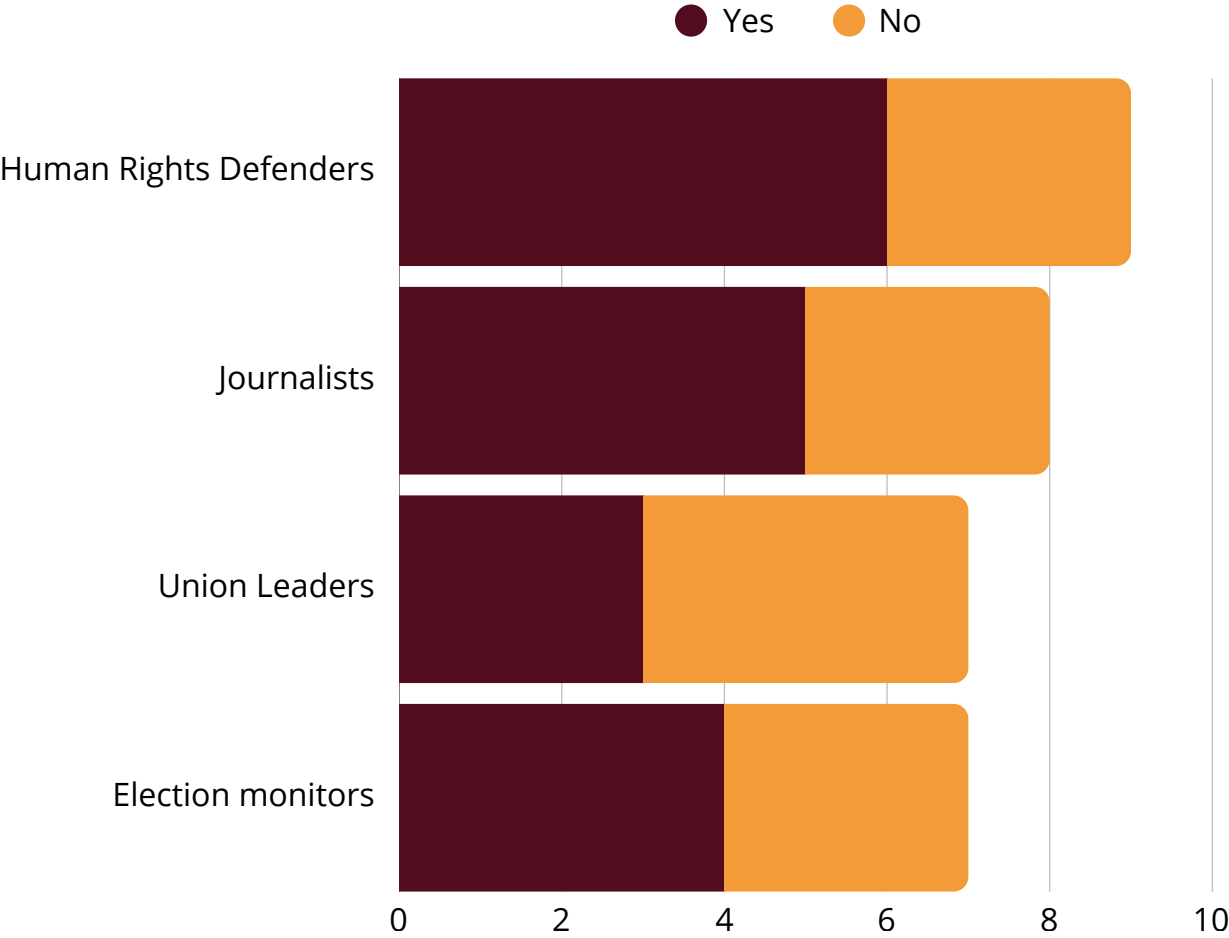
**Q6. Do you feel you have the ability to transform your reality?**
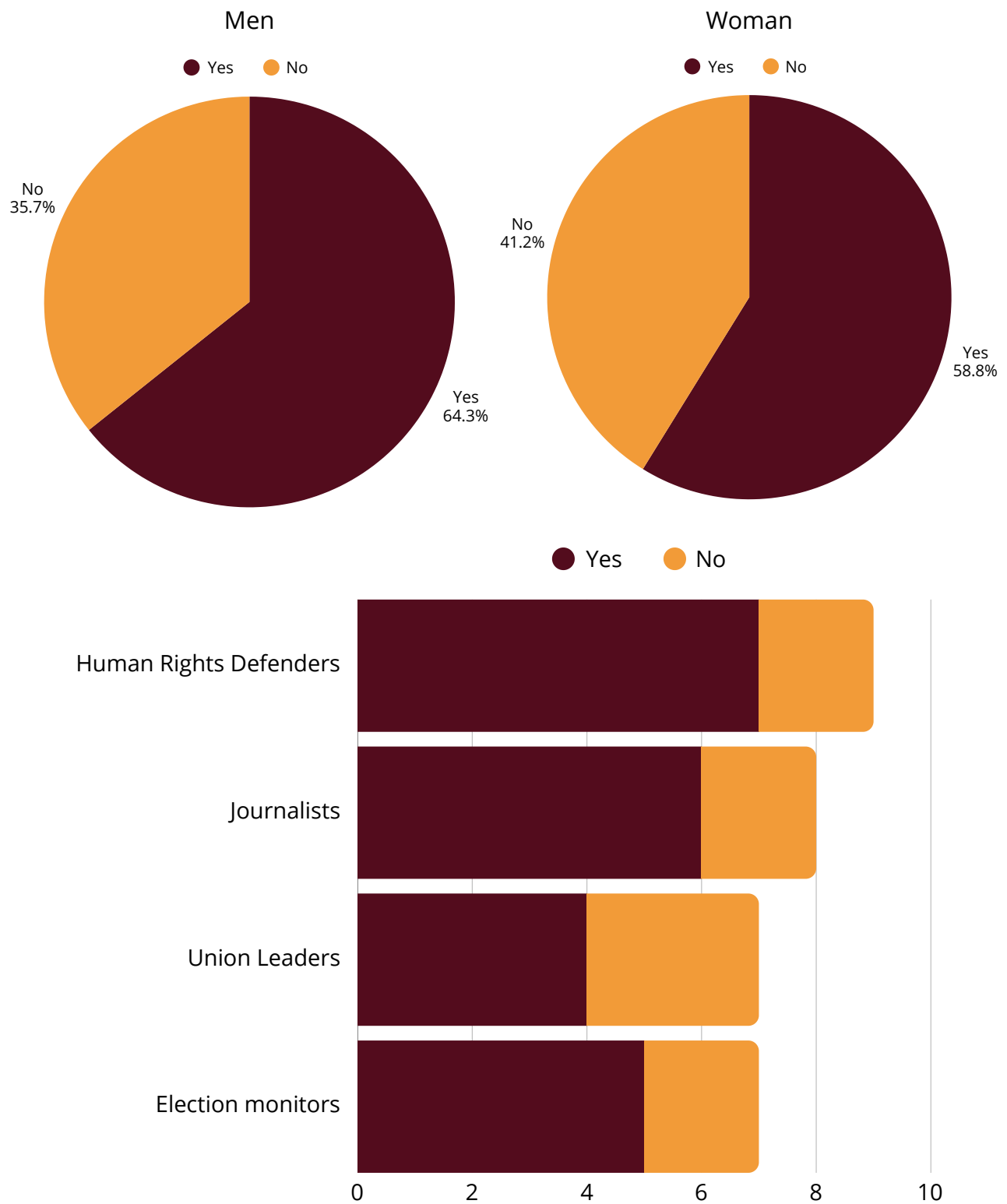
### Men

● Yes   ● No

No
35.7%

Yes
64.3%

### Woman

● Yes   ● No

No
41.2%

Yes
58.8%

● Yes   ● No

Human Rights Defenders

Journalists

Union Leaders

Election monitors

0   2   4   6   8   10

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## Lara

- Yes
- No

No
31.3%

Yes
68.8%

## Yaracuy

- Yes
- No

No
46.7%

Yes
53.3%
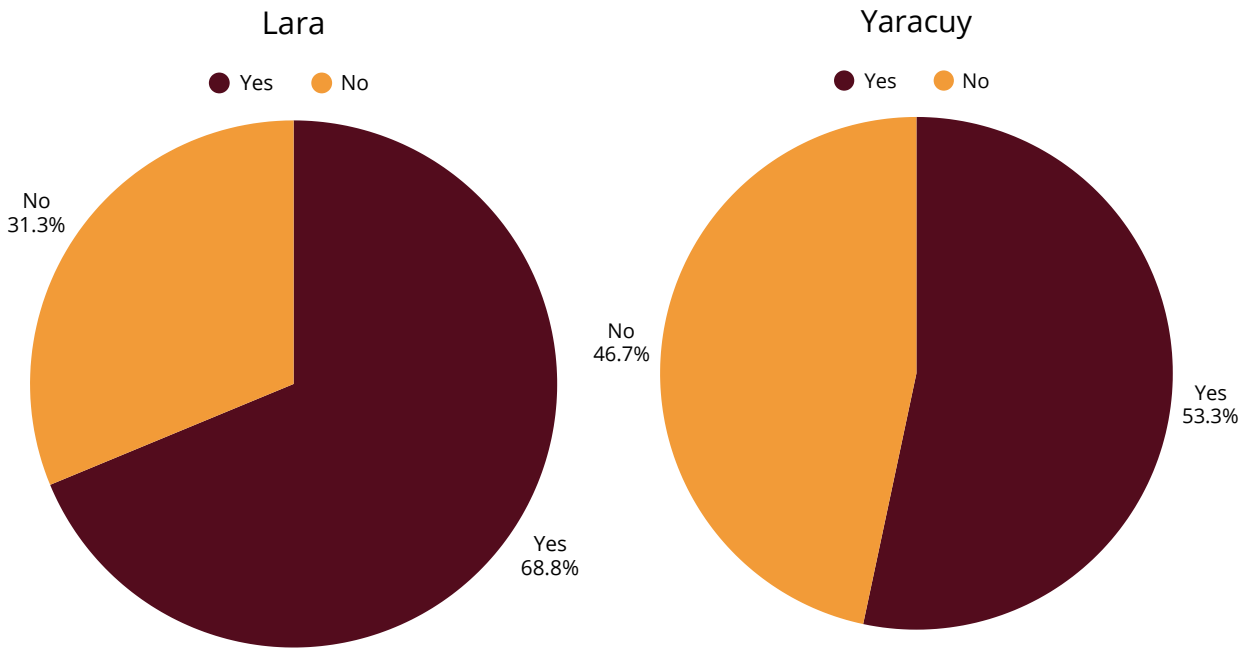
**P7. Do you feel safer isolated from your usual environment?**
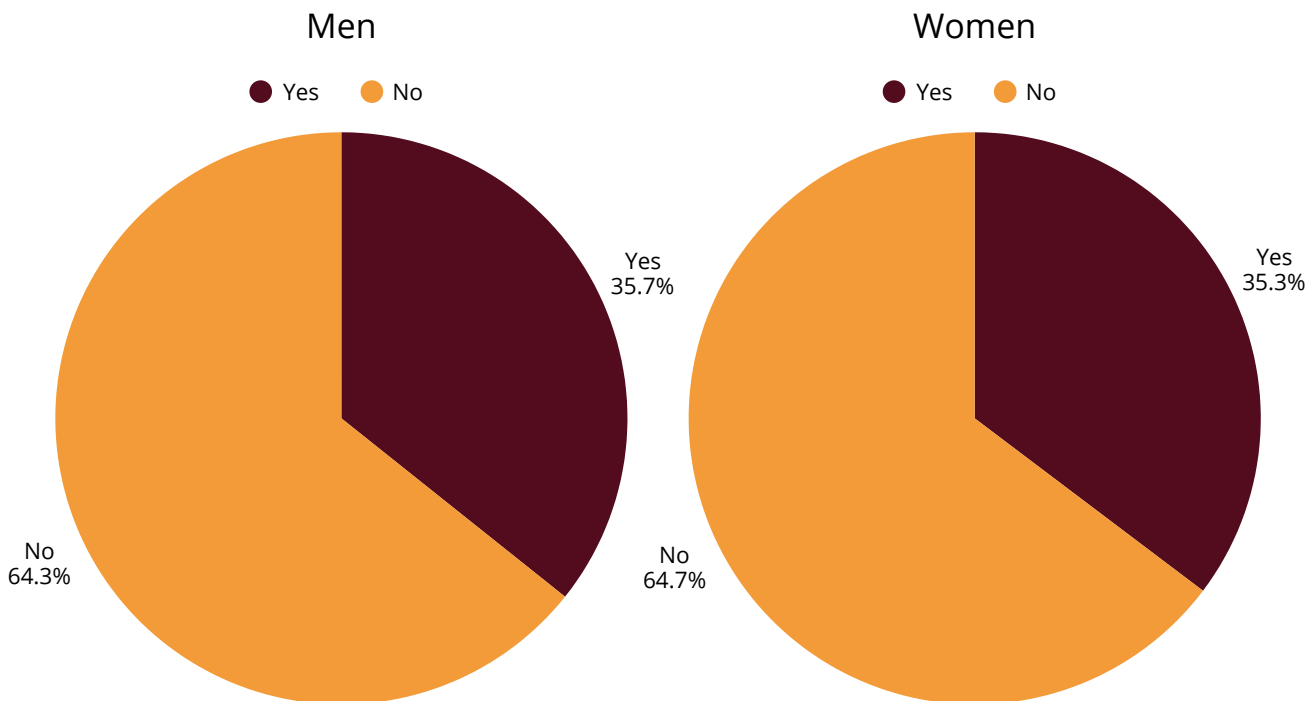
## Men

- Yes
- No

Yes
35.7%

No
64.3%

## Women

- Yes
- No

Yes
35.3%

No
64.7%

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH



Legend: ● Yes ● No

Human Rights Defenders
Journalists
Union Leaders
Election monitors

0   2   4   6   8   10

### Lara



● Yes ● No

No 50%   Yes 50%

### Yaracuy



● Yes ● No

No 53.3%   Yes 46.7%
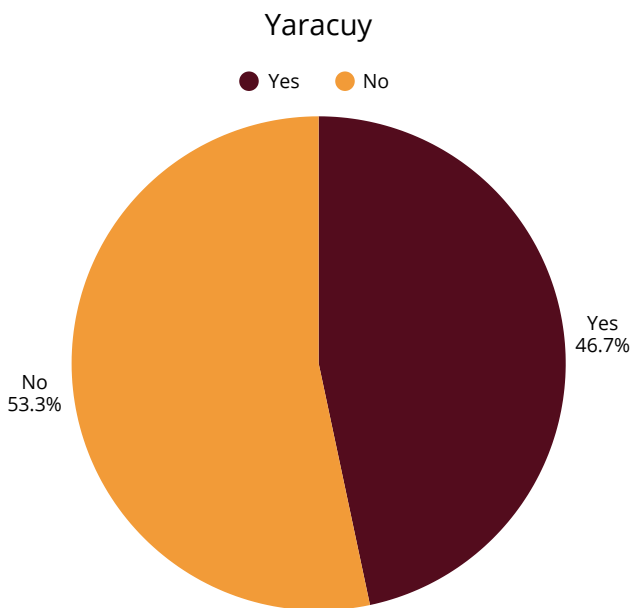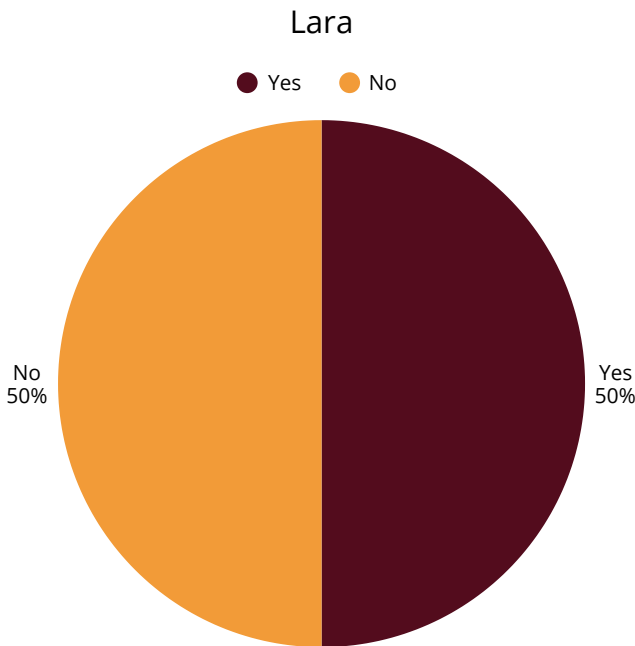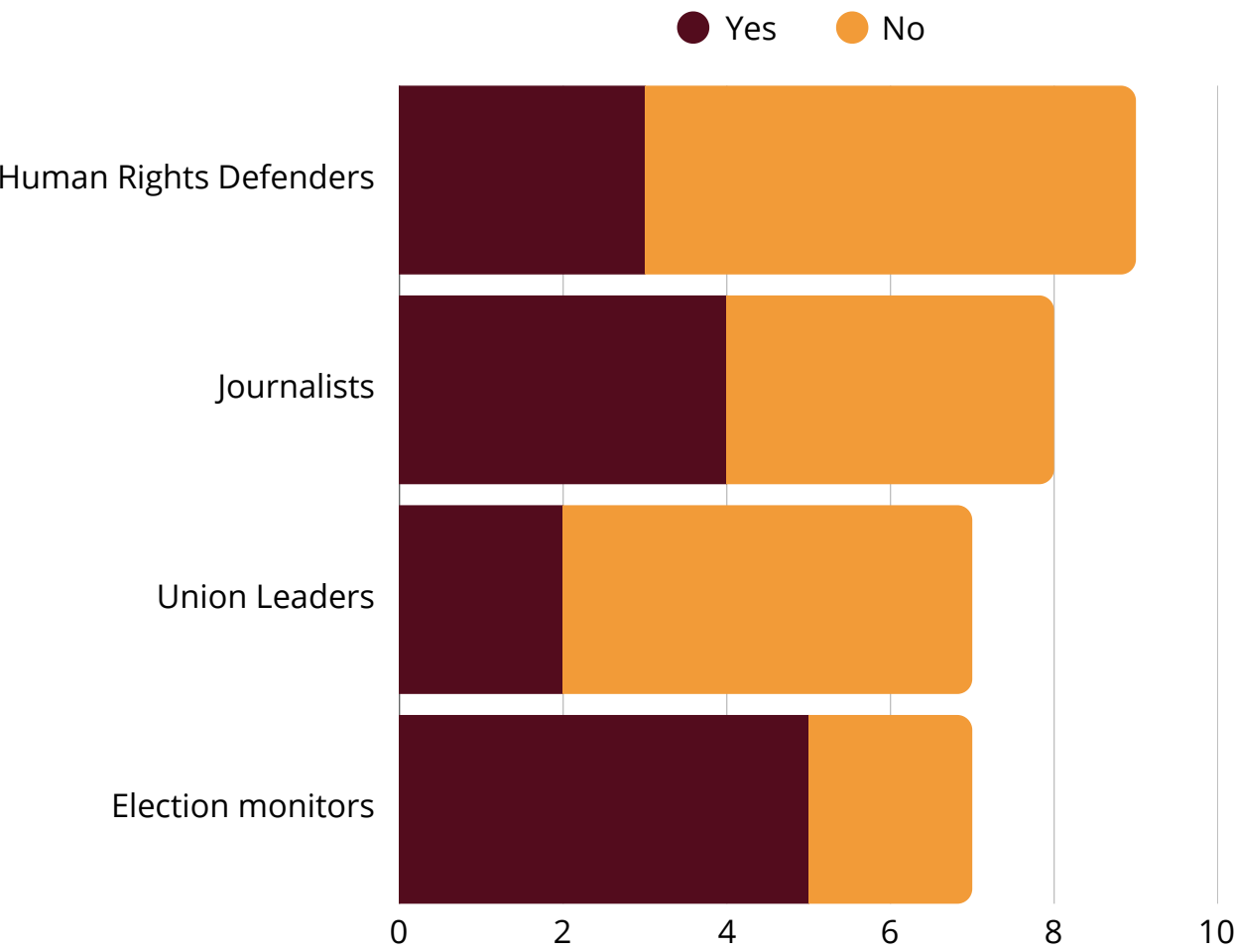
*Q8. Do you often experience a feeling of anger or frustration that you cannot explain?*
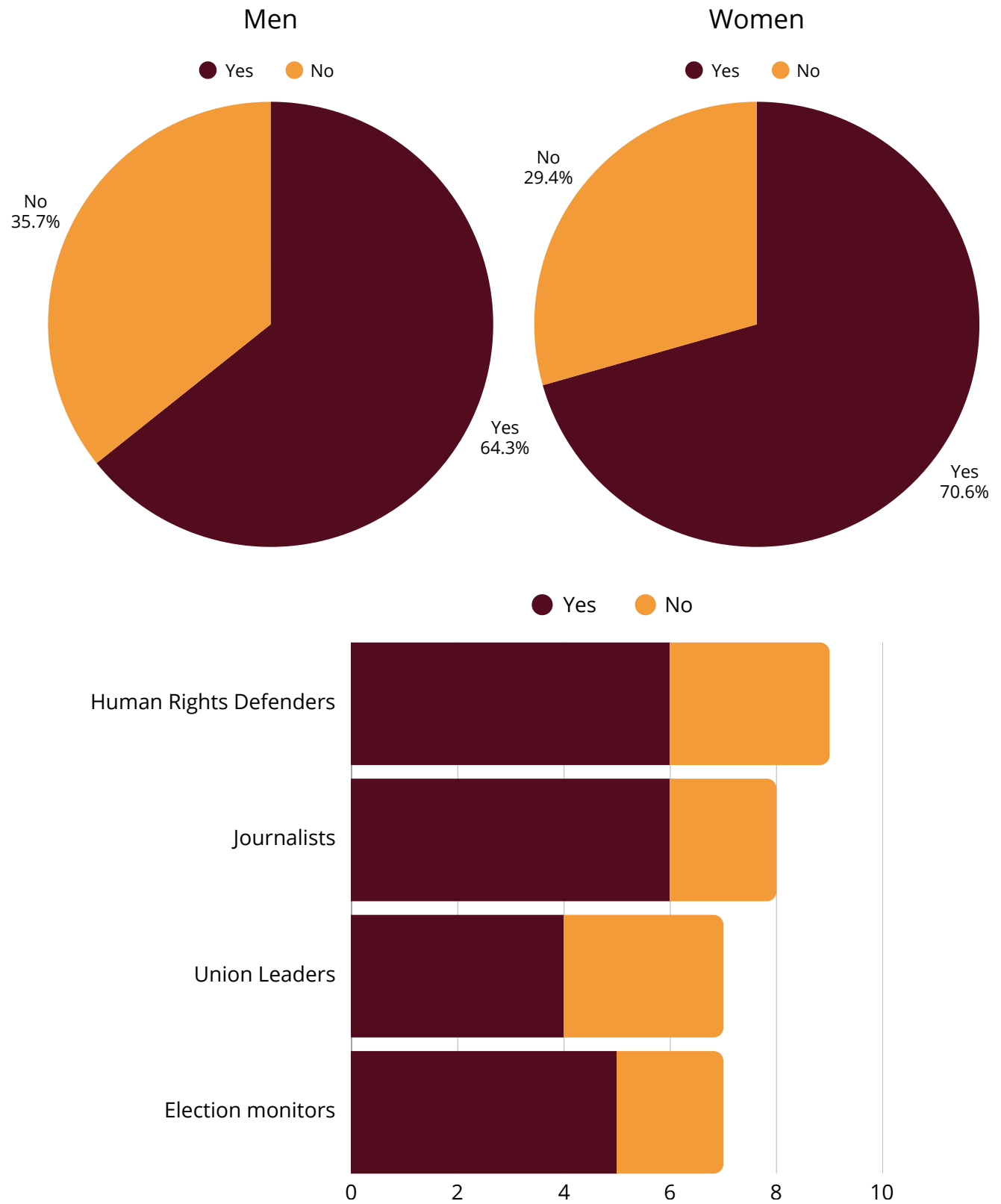
## Men

● Yes  ● No

No
35.7%

Yes
64.3%

## Women

● Yes  ● No

No
29.4%

Yes
70.6%

● Yes  ● No

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

## Lara



No
37.5%

Yes
62.5%

## Yaracuy



No
40%

Yes
60%
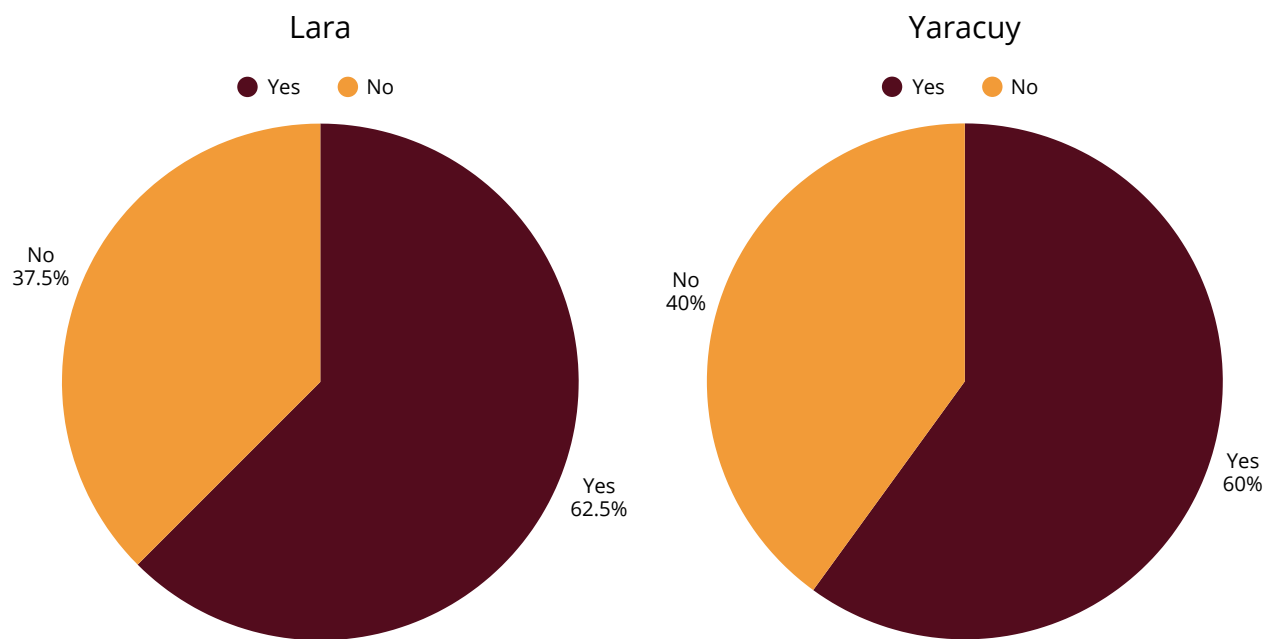
*Q9. Do you feel like your energy drains quickly in social or family situations?*
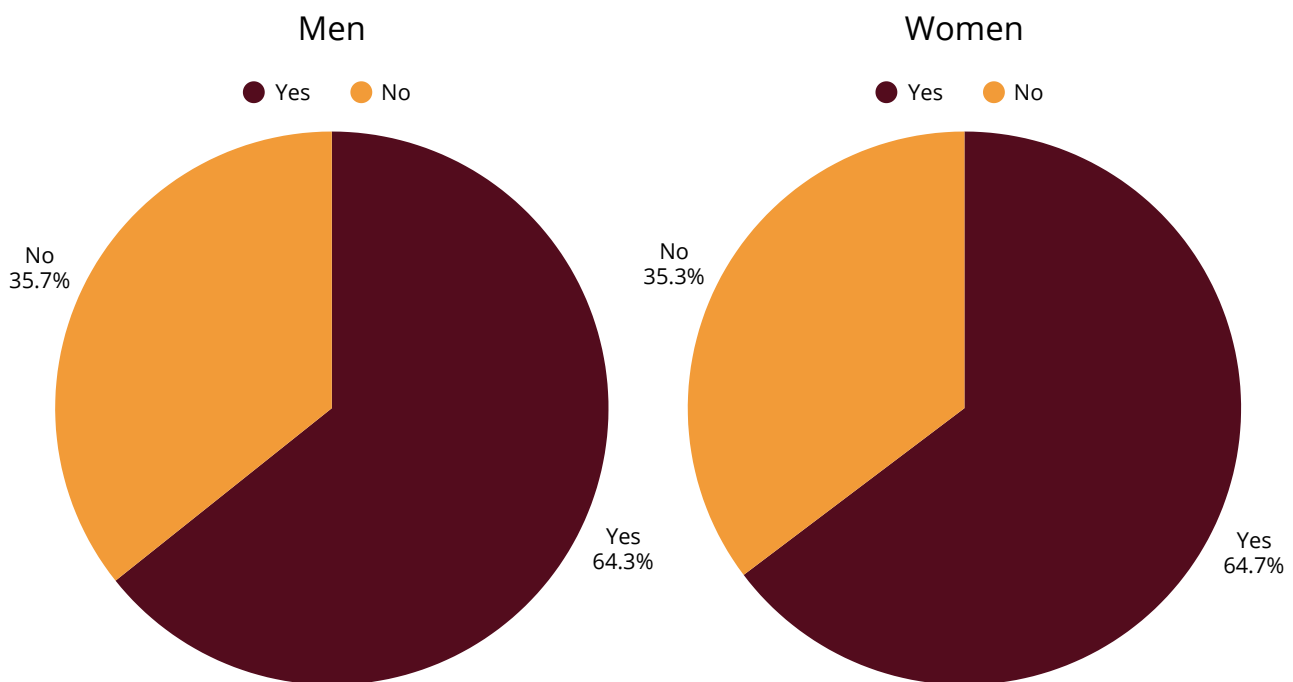
## Men



No
35.7%

Yes
64.3%

## Women



No
35.3%

Yes
64.7%

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH



Lara



Yaracuy
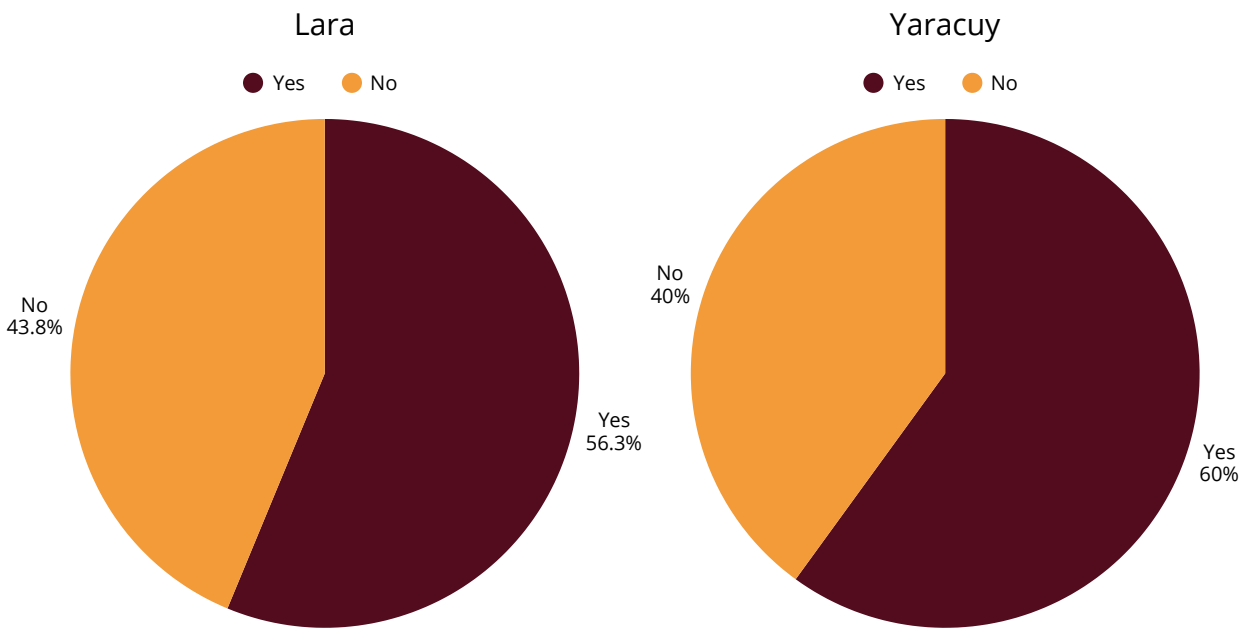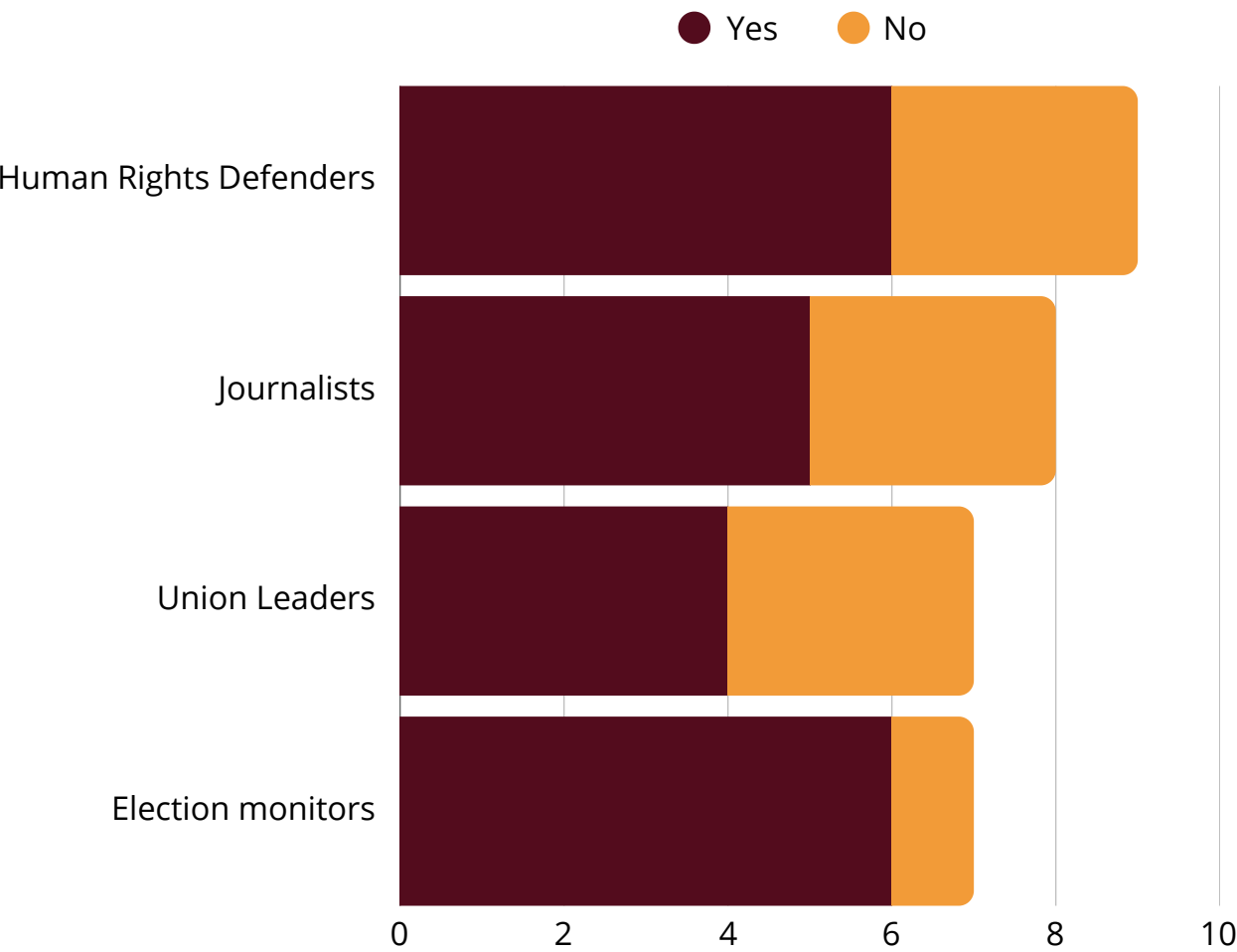
*Q10. Which of the following social spaces do you feel least safe using? In-person interaction or social media.*
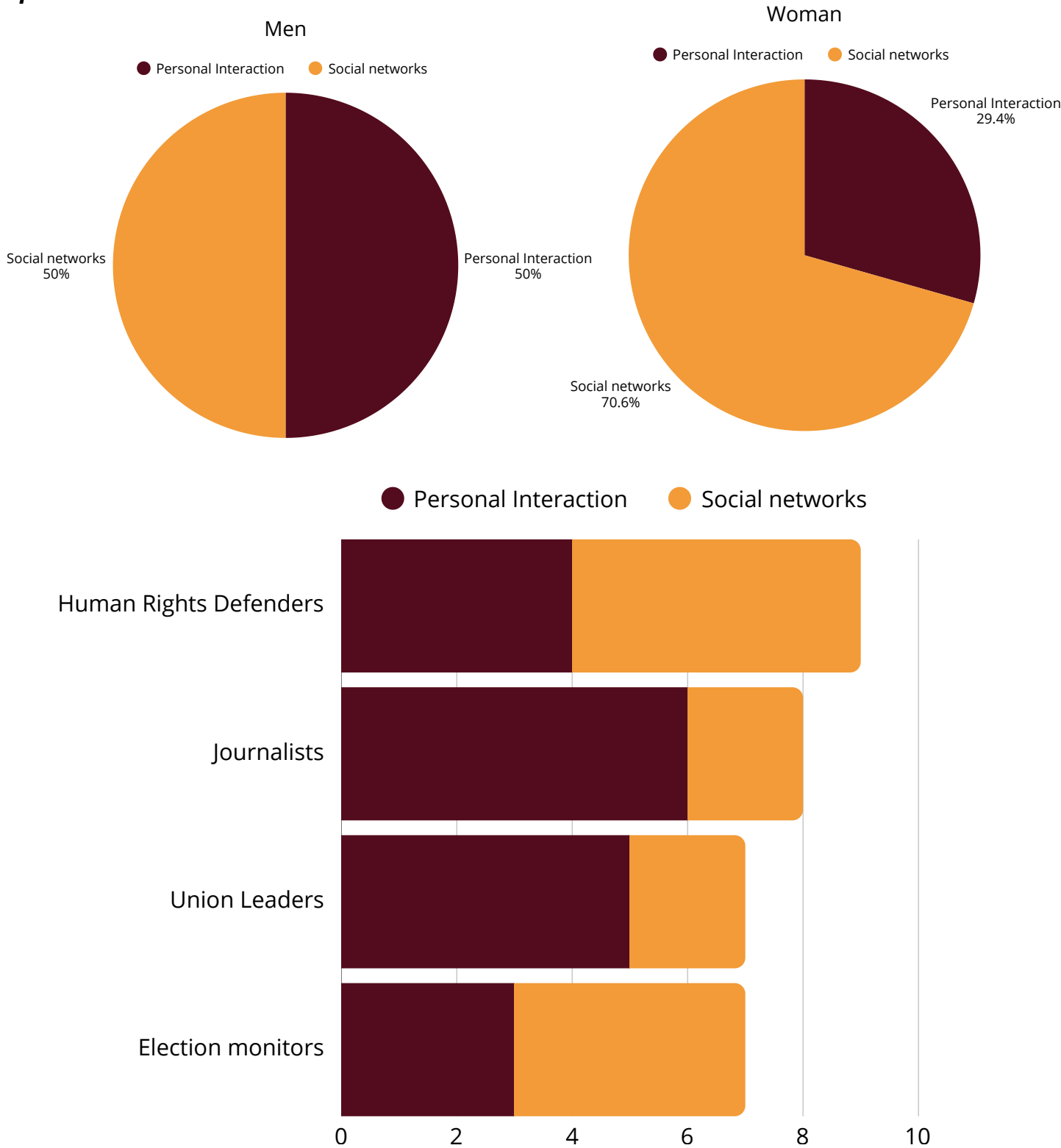
### Men

- Personal Interaction
- Social networks

Social networks
50%

Personal Interaction
50%

### Woman

- Personal Interaction
- Social networks

Personal Interaction
29.4%

Social networks
70.6%



- Personal Interaction
- Social networks

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

### Lara

● Personal Interaction   ● Social networks

Social networks
43.8%

Personal Interaction
56.3%

### Yaracuy

● Personal Interaction   ● Social networks

Social networks
46.7%

Personal Interaction
53.3%
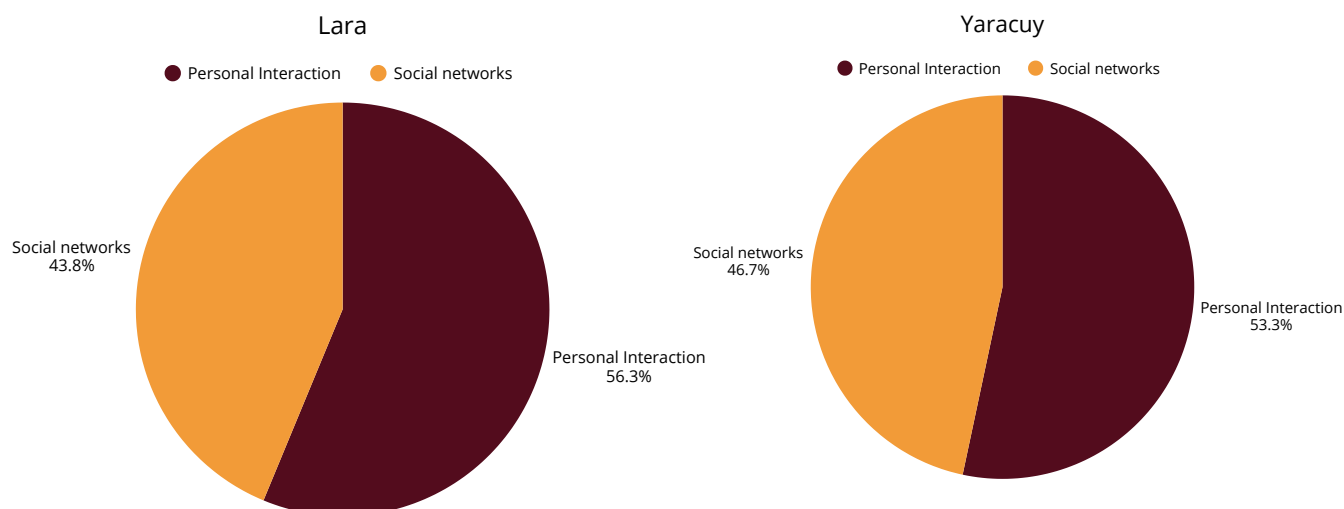
## 8.2 Analysis of individual interventions by members of civil society.

In the Psychological Analysis Based on Group Formations and Individual Care for the NGO Movimiento Vinotinto, the psychologist researcher team who leads both investigations, explains that the vulnerability of certain social groups represents an urgent concern in the field of human rights and biopsychosocial well-being. This situation becomes especially serious when a victim of political persecution is affected by systems of oppression and discrimination deeply rooted in these structures, resulting in a significant psychological impact on those who suffer from it.

These may experience a wide range of effects, such as anxiety, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress, depression, feelings of guilt, sadness, hopelessness, physical health problems (gastrointestinal, headaches or muscle pain), sleep disorders (hypervigilance, nightmares, inability to fall and stay asleep), imbalance in nutrition (loss of appetite) and even difficulties in establishing healthy interpersonal and sexual relationships.

During the group training sessions and individualized attention from human rights defenders, journalists, and state union leaders, some particularly significant anecdotes and impressions were gathered, highlighting the emotional difficulties of these individuals, who in different ways have had to face difficult and dangerous environments where they have been exposed to harassment, violence, threats, contempt, dismissals, and other forms of persecution

# CONTEXT ON THE CHALLENGES POSED TO MEMBERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE AREA OF SELF-CARE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Among some verbatim stories, we can mention that of a human rights activist whose home was violated on the night of the presidential elections of July 28, 2024: "...I thank God I had left home, but my neighbors called me to tell me that the colectivos had arrived at my house and smashed the door, windows, and damaged many things inside. This made me think about what could have happened to us if we had been there..." This account clearly exposes the fear and even helplessness upon seeing the damage to his home. It is important to note that in the following days, he had difficulty falling and staying asleep.

test.

the story of this professional, she points out what happened on July 28 and 29, 2024, where she was on board a motorcycle and while at a rally called by the opposition in Cabudare, she realized that a drone was following them "... I think that when I noticed the drone, I only had time to record for a minute and I told the motorcyclist, let's go. So I couldn't even cover what was happening; we decided to go to Vargas and there, even though there were around 1,000 people, the police were recording everyone there, especially us, which scared me a lot and since then I feel resigned to not covering this type of news ... ". These allegations reveal the emotional and psychological difficulties she has, since they represent a considerable obstacle to her well-being, which makes it necessary to have an in-depth analysis of her experiences and the psycho-emotional effects, because they take her away from the possibility of having mental health.

Likewise, the following testimony was obtained during the interventions: "The so-called 'Operation Tun Tun' was unleashed in San Felipe and throughout the country, turning repression into the primary method of social control. From that day on, I was an electoral witness; intimidation became a constant in our lives. In my role as an electoral observer, I had the responsibility of ensuring transparency in the process, but I soon found myself facing a hostile environment. I learned of the arrest of dozens of poll watchers, whose only crime was wanting a different country. Waking up in the middle of the night was a constant reaction."

## 8.3 Main techniques used by different actors to affect the mental health of members of Venezuelan civil society.

### Direct and symbolic intimidation

This technique manifests itself through raids, the presence of armed forces, digital surveillance, or arbitrary arrests. Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, in his theory of deindividualization and the power of context, explains how constant exposure to physical or symbolic threats generates a state of hypervigilance and anticipatory anxiety. In authoritarian contexts, these practices seek to emotionally destabilize individuals and send a collective message of control and punishment.

### Criminalization of speech and protest

The repression of freedom of expression and the persecution of those who speak out are part of what sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls political epistemicide: the systematic elimination of dissenting discourse. This technique not only silences, but also produces internalized guilt and chronic frustration, affecting self-esteem and the perception of personal efficacy, especially among journalists, union leaders, and human rights defenders.

### Digital surveillance and exposure on networks

Constant social media monitoring and the threat of retaliation for posting generate what psychologist Sherry Turkle calls the fragility of the connected self. In her book, "Alone Together," Turkle warns that digital exposure without privacy guarantees can lead to social paranoia, emotional isolation, and widespread mistrust, especially in contexts where surveillance becomes a tool of political repression.

### Forced isolation and network disruption

Stigmatization, layoffs, and forced displacement weaken community ties. Community psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky argues that relational injustice—the inability to sustain secure and supportive relationships—is a profound source of psychosocial suffering. This technique seeks to dismantle the collective capacity for resilience, generating feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and loss of meaning. Structural impunity and lack of reparation

**Structural impunity and lack of reparations**

The lack of justice for human rights violations perpetuates trauma. According to Argentine psychologist Diana Kordon, who has worked with survivors of dictatorships, institutionalized impunity impedes the ability to grieve and keeps psychological wounds open. The absence of symbolic and material reparation reinforces the perception that suffering has no value or recognition, which worsens demoralization and emotional exhaustion.

## 9. Conclusions and Recommendations

The work of human rights defenders, journalists, union leaders, and election monitors is critical to promoting justice and equity in our societies. However, this commitment often comes with high levels of stress and risk, making self-care and psychosocial support vital to their well-being. Below are some final thoughts and key recommendations.

### 9.1 Final Reflections

1. Importance of Self-Care: Self-care is not a luxury, but a necessity. Those who work in advocacy and justice must prioritize their mental and emotional health to function effectively in their roles.

2. Burnout Prevention: Burnout can have devastating consequences not only for individuals, but also for organizations and the causes they represent. Implementing prevention strategies is essential to maintaining a healthy and engaged workforce.

3. Support Network: Establishing support networks among professionals is crucial. Sharing experiences and resources can provide a sense of community and reduce feelings of isolation.

4. Ongoing Training: Training in stress management and self-care techniques should be an integral part of the professional development of those working in challenging environments. Continuing education helps equip advocates and journalists with effective tools to address challenges.

5. Available Resources: It's vital that professionals know and access resources that can support them. Active use of helplines, counseling, and training programs can make a significant difference in mental and emotional health.

6. Culture of Self-Care: Fostering a culture that values self-care within communities and organizations contributes to the sustainability of human rights work. The importance of caring not only for others but also for oneself must be made visible.

### 9.2 Recommendations

- Promote Wellness Programs: Organizations should develop and offer wellness programs that include workshops on self-care, resilience, and stress management.

- Establish internal organizational mental health policies: Implement internal policies that recognize the importance of the mental and emotional health of workers, volunteers, and activists in civil society organizations, providing a safe space to discuss their experiences.

- Facilitate Access to Resources: Ensure that all members of the organization have easy access to mental health and self-care resources, including confidential counseling services.

- Foster an Environment of Trust: Creating an environment where people feel comfortable seeking support and sharing their struggles can help normalize self-care.

- Periodic Evaluation Conduct periodic reviews of self-care policies and practices to identify areas for improvement and adapt to the changing needs of professionals.

In resume, self-care is an essential part of advocacy work and a necessary component to ensure that human rights defenders and other professionals can continue their work with effectiveness and commitment. By implementing these recommendations, both individual well-being and collective efficacy can be strengthened in the fight for justice and rights*.*

# LITERATURE

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**Attachments**
**10.1 Bibliography**

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## 11. Glossary of Key Terms.

- **Self-care:** Practices that a person consciously engages in to care for his or her physical, mental, and emotional health.
- **Blocked social affectivity:** Refers to a collective emotion characterized by persistent frustration, anger or helplessness, which does not always have an immediate cause but is linked to contexts where people feel they cannot influence their environment. It is an emotional response to accumulated wear and tear.
-**Psychosocial exhaustion:** This is the feeling of being physically and emotionally drained, resulting from constant exposure to demanding, stressful, or dangerous situations. It affects concentration, motivation, and personal relationships, especially in people with a high work or community load.
- **Emotional Well-being:** Ability to express emotions in a healthy way and manage the stress of daily life.
-**Critical consciousness:** It is the ability of people to understand the social structures that oppress them and to act collectively to transform them. It is based on reflection, education, and organization to bring about meaningful social change.

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- **Criminalization of speech:** This is the strategy used by power structures to persecute, threaten, or silence those who express critical opinions or denounce injustices, turning the exercise of speech into an act considered dangerous or illegal.
- **Human Rights Defender**: A person who works to promote and protect human rights in their community or in a broader context.
- **Psychosocial disempowerment:** Describes the process by which a person or group loses self-confidence, motivation, and the perceived ability to act in their reality, as a result of living in an environment of repression, precariousness, or constant surveillance.
- **Burnout:** State of physical**,** emotional and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged and excessive stress.
- **Post-traumatic stress**: A mental disorder that can occur after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event.
- **Deindividualization:** Occurs when people, subjected to intense external pressure, lose their autonomy and sense of responsibility. In authoritarian contexts, this translates into forced obedience or paralysis in the face of external orders or threats.
- **Fragility of the connected self:** This is the emotional vulnerability that comes from being constantly exposed on social media, where any action or word can be observed, judged, or used against you. It increases fear, isolation, and self-censorship.
- **Hypervigilance:** This involves being in a constant state of extreme alert, anticipating possible threats or attacks. It's a common survival response in people who have been repeatedly persecuted or threatened.
- **Political epistemicide:** This refers to the systematic elimination of critical thinking and alternative knowledge that challenges established power. This includes silencing discourse, censoring media outlets, persecuting intellectuals, and eliminating forms of popular knowledge.

**-Relational injustice**: This is the inability to build or maintain strong emotional bonds due to fear, repression, or stigma. It affects mental health by weakening the sense of community and belonging.

-**Cumulative structural stress:** This is the discomfort that occurs when people live for long periods of time in precarious, insecure, or unjust conditions. It doesn't have a single cause; rather, it accumulates gradually and affects the body, mind, and relationships.

-**Institutionalized impunity:** This occurs when abuses, assaults, or crimes committed by those in power go unpunished and unredressed. This lack of justice perpetuates emotional harm and creates the impression that the lives or suffering of the victims don't matter.

-**Learned social paralysis:** This is the feeling that "nothing can be done," acquired after repeated unsuccessful attempts to change reality. The individual or community stops acting because they have learned that their efforts do not produce visible results.

- **Support Network**: Group of people who offer assistance and emotional support to someone in need.

-**Resilience:** Ability to adapt and recover from adversity or stress.

-**Transformative resilience:** It is the capacity not only to withstand difficulties, but also to reorganize from them to build a better reality. It involves active hope, collective memory, and a sense of purpose.

- **Mental Health:** A state of well-being in which a person realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, and contributes to their community.

-**Defensive psychosocial safety:** This is the emotional resource of isolating oneself or withdrawing from public spaces as a form of protection. This is not a free choice, but rather an adaptation to environments that generate fear, suspicion, or exposure.

-**Ethical-political suffering:** This is the pain that people experience when faced with a contradiction between their values (such as dignity or justice) and a reality marked by violence, abandonment, or social injustice.

-**Psychosocial trauma:** It is not limited to individual harm, but affects entire communities. It occurs when people experience extreme violence or repression that profoundly alter their emotional well-being and their collective coexistence.

This glossary and bibliography provide key resources and definitions to better understand the topics covered in the work on self-care and human rights.