

Photo: Prensa Comunitaria

GUATEMALA

Norma Sancir

Kaqchiquel Maya Woman

Word Weaver, community journalist, and
human rights defender

By Alma Gilda López Mejía



**Indigenous Peoples
Rights International**

Championing Indigenous Peoples Rights



“I am Norma Sancir , a Kaqchiquel Maya journalist and defender of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and of freedom of expression.

Community communication is my work and my way of fighting; I am the daughter of a mother displaced by war, and I honor that lineage.”¹

This case study seeks to identify the factors that led to Norma Sancir’s arrest and imprisonment and to understand the personal, and collective impacts, as well as those on her family, resulting from the criminalization of her work as an Indigenous journalist and her struggle to obtain justice and reparations.

Norma defines herself as a strong, brave, and wise woman who embraces life with her energy, affirming that her life has been shaped by the power of words as a tool for transformation and by her conviction to tell good stories with truth and dignity. She is from the municipality of Térapan and fourteen years ago she moved to Chiquimula to work as a community journalist and expose the state’s neglect and the violation of the rights of the Maya Ch’orti’ people.

Context

Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala, through their worldview, knowledge, values, principles, history, cultural practices, identity, legacy, and ways of life, have contributed for centuries to the protection and care of the territory, its natural resources, and all that inhabits it. However, they continue to suffer from structural economic, social, legal, and political inequalities resulting from racism and discrimination. Their struggle and historical demands, which remain relevant to this day, are grounded in the recognition, full exercise, and defense of their individual and collective rights, which they continue to uphold with dignity and a sustained resilience rooted in their spirituality and ancestral knowledge.

In this context, it is essential to understand that Indigenous community radio stations are not merely means of broadcasting, but essential tools for the preservation, transmission, and ongoing development of their cultures and languages. As the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has noted, “...**access to their own community radio stations, as vehicles of the freedom of expression, is an indispensable element to promote the identity, language, culture, self-representation, and the collective and human rights of indigenous peoples.**”²

Access to adequate information and effective participation are central elements of collective rights over territory.³ Restricting indigenous media and criminalizing those who engage in these forms of communication directly undermines the communities’ ability to inform themselves, organize, and defend their rights. Although freedom of the press and expression is recognized in the Guatemalan Constitution, in practice this right is frequently violated by authorities and political actors, particularly in contexts of social and territorial conflict.⁴

Thus, the arrest of Norma Sancir must be understood as part of a structural and historical pattern of discrimination and criminalization that disproportionately affects Indigenous leaders who exercise their right to defend their territory and maintain their independent means of communication.

When Telling the Truth Is Criminalized

In 2014, indigenous organizations in Guatemala organized nationwide protests against the adoption of regulatory frameworks that violated their rights. Among other issues, they pointed out that the General Telecommunications Law did not recognize community radio stations nor guarantee equitable access to the radio spectrum.⁵

2 Inter-American Court of Human Rights. [Case of the Maya Kaqchikel Indigenous Peoples of Sumpango et al. v. Guatemala](#) .Merits, Reparations, and Costs. Judgment of October 6, 2021. Series C No. 440, para. 128. <https://juris-prudencia.corteidh.or.cr/en/vid/916956318>

3 Inter-American Court of Human Rights. [Case of the Maya Q’eqchi’ Indigenous Community of Agua Caliente v. Guatemala](#) , Judgment of May 16, 2023. Merits, Reparations, and Costs, para. 253.

4 Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala, Article 35. See also: [Legal Framework on Freedom of Expression in Guatemala](#) , Reporters Without Borders, 2025

5 [Case of Indigenous Community Radio Stations of Guatemala at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to be heard on June 9 and 10 , 2021](#) , Cultural Survival, June 9, 2021

They also demanded the passage of the Rural Development Law, and called for the repeal of laws that violated the rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the adoption of several legislative initiatives in their favor that had languished for years in Congress.

In September 2014, Norma Sancir was in communities in the municipality of Camotán, department of Chiquimula, documenting the protests of the Ch'orti Maya people. This people, one of the 24 Maya peoples of Guatemala, lives mainly in the eastern region of the country and maintains its Ch'orti' language as a fundamental element of its cultural identity, which is currently at risk.

On the second day of the protests, the National Civil Police (NCP) carried out a violent eviction of the protesters at the Julipingo Bridge, located on the border with Honduras, using tear gas and proceeding to arrest those present at the scene.⁶



Photo: Front Line Defenders

“On September 18, 2014, I woke up early because I received a call saying they were clearing the demonstration at the Julipingo Bridge.” Norma was the journalist closest to the scene. At that time, she had agreements to share the information with other community media outlets. A tuk-tuk took her to the scene, and upon arriving, she began taking photos of the eviction.⁷ **“When I arrived at the scene, everything was chaos; there were police cars parked there, people were running, and you could see smoke from far away and hear bursts of tear gas”.**⁸

“As I walked, I was taking photos with my cell phone. Suddenly, the police surrounded me, and I heard the first shout: ‘Capture her, search her cell phone, check her messages and calls, take photos of her.’ Two female police officers took me away; I was afraid they would hit me. They made me run while handcuffed, and they kept firing tear gas.”⁹

Her arrest was arbitrary, violent, and without a warrant. Norma asked why they were arresting her and stated that she was a journalist, warning that her rights were being violated. She was carrying her press pass and wearing a vest that identified her as such. Even so, she recalls that they shouted at her, **“Shut up, you’ll learn what’s good for you.”**¹⁰ Faced with that threat, she decided to remain silent. **“We went through two police stations, and they wouldn’t tell me the reason for my arrest. I was scared; they kept taking photos of me and insulting me”.**¹¹

6 [Nine years after her arrest, community journalist Norma Sancir awaits justice](#) , Prensa Comunitaria, January 31, 2024.

7 [Norma Sancir and the precedent for the right to report](#) , Plaza Pública, February 15, 2024.

8 [Testimony of Norma Sancir, video produced by the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala \(UDEFEQUA\) and Prensa Comunitaria](#), 2017.

9 Ibid

10 [Norma Sancir and the Precedent for the Right to Report](#) , Plaza Pública, February 15, 2024.

11 Ibid.

For four days, she was held in custody under precarious conditions without having made a statement. She was transferred from Camotán to Chiquimula and later to Los Jocotes in Zacapa, without due process being respected or her family being notified. Pretrial detention was ordered without solid grounds, and the treatment she received was violent and degrading. **“The police looked at me with stigma, as if I were a criminal,”** she recalls¹².

“I was locked up in Los Jocotes, Zacapa, for four nights, with 20 other women in a cold cell, on the floor. I was afraid, I couldn’t sleep, time wouldn’t pass, and I was terrified that they would fabricate a case against me and I wouldn’t be able to get out.”¹³ During that time, she was unable to communicate with anyone; her family and friends were unaware of the situation she was going through. At the time of her arrest, they had taken her press pass, her cell phone, and her equipment.

During those days in prison, she felt like she had been kidnapped, locked away in another world, not knowing what might happen to her and unsure whether her family and fellow journalists would be able to do anything to get her out of prison. All of this caused her fear, anguish, despair, and dread. **“I was detained for being an indigenous woman, dark-skinned, short, with a backpack on my back. I didn’t fit the stereotype of a journalist in heels or formal attire,”** she says¹⁴.

On September 22, 2014, she was finally brought before a judge at the First Criminal Court of First Instance in Chiquimula, who informed her that she was charged with assault and disturbance of public peace. That same day, the judge ruled in favor of the journalist, finding no grounds for her detention.¹⁵ After being illegally imprisoned, she was released. She was finally able to embrace her family and colleagues.

She knew that the reason for her detention was because she was a journalist and had taken photographs and live streams to document the violent treatment suffered by indigenous communities demanding their rights and filing complaints.

“They never want anyone to know what happens there—violent evictions against indigenous communities,” she explains.¹⁶ During this period, she had the support of the Nim Ajpu’ Association of Maya Lawyers, which took charge of her defense. She always maintained: **“I am Norma Sancir, I am a journalist, I am innocent, and I have personally experienced criminalization.”**¹⁷

12 Norma Sancir, interview with the author in November 2025.

13 Norma Sancir, video produced by UDEFEGUA, 2025

14 Norma Sancir, interview with the author in November 2025.

15 [Infographic on the case of Norma Sancir](#) , Center for Legal Action on Human Rights (CALDH), 2024.

16 Ibid. .

17 [Testimony of Norma Sancir, video produced by the Unit for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Guatemala \(UDEFEGUA\) and Prensa Comunitaria](#) , 2017.

The constant postponements reflect the structural difficulties victims face in accessing justice, as well as the prolonged strain involved in sustaining legal proceedings in contexts of criminalization. Finally, on June 7, 2021, the preliminary hearing was held at the Chiquimula Criminal Court of First Instance, where the judge ruled to send the accused officers to trial.

The trial against the accused officers was scheduled to begin on May 17, 2023 and finally began on May 28, 2023.²¹ Durante el mismo se presentaron cuatro peritajes, entre ellos uno sobre el periodismo comunitario y otro de carácter psicológico, que evidenciaron los impactos emocionales y las vulneraciones sufridas.

During the trial, four expert reports were presented, including one on community journalism and a psychological report demonstrating the emotional impacts and violations suffered. Testimonies were heard from local and national journalists, as well as experts in community journalism, which established that Norma Sancir was carrying out her journalistic work at the time of her arrest. For their part, the lawyers for the officers and the attorney representing the Office of the Attorney General attempted to portray Norma Sancir as a participant in the riots rather than as a journalist. They also sought to question the legitimacy of the press in covering high-risk situations.²²

Nine years after the events occurred, following 19 hearings and a trial lasting more than seven months, Judge Jorge Douglas Ochoa of the Criminal Sentencing, Drug Trafficking, and Environmental Crimes Court of Chiquimula handed down his ruling on January 31, 2024.

In his conclusions, the judge reviewed several of the rights violated by Norma's arbitrary detention. He emphasized the right to freedom of thought and expression. He clarified that this right cannot be subject to censorship and that journalists are responsible for the consequences of their publications. Furthermore, he concluded that the right to freedom of expression was restricted, not only for Norma, by limiting her journalistic work, but also for the community, which was unable to stay informed through the journalist's work.²³

The judge handed down a sentence of three years and nine months in prison, subject to commutation, to Police Commissioner Ceferino Salquil, and two years and six months in prison, subject to commutation, to the two NCP officers, thereby acknowledging the violations committed and the legitimacy of community-based journalism.²⁴

The ruling included the following measures for dignified reparation, restitution, and non-repetition that the State must comply with:²⁵

- **Measures of satisfaction:** ensigns must be posted in all NCP stations recognizing the work of journalists and the obligation of NCP officers to respect them in the exercise of their profession. The NCP must issue a public apology via a video of at

21 [Trial begins against police officers who illegally detained journalist Norma Sancir](#) , Prensa Comunitaria, May 15, 2023

22 [I am deeply outraged by how community journalists are treated](#) , Prensa Comunitaria, August 23, 2023

23 [Norma Sancir and the Precedent on the Right to Report](#) , Plaza Pública, February 15, 2024

24 The third officer involved was declared in contempt of court for failing to appear. [Press release from the Center for Legal Action on Human Rights](#) , January 31, 2024

25 [Norma Sancir and the Precedent for the Right to Report](#) , Plaza Pública, February 15, 2024.

least one minute in length, to be published on the official accounts and social media of the NCP, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of the Interior, and Diario de Centro América.²⁶

- **Rehabilitation measures:** The Ministry of Health must provide medical care and treatment to Norma for the conditions she has suffered since the incident, including clinical psychological treatment.
- **Restitution measures:** The press release that Norma was unable to publish on September 18, 2014, must be published in the Diario de Centro América, and on the official websites, and social media accounts of the NCP and the Ministry of the Interior.
- **Measures to ensure non-repetition:** A course designed by journalists on the topic of community journalism and freedom of expression with a human rights focus must be included in the training curriculum for NCP candidates. Likewise, the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists within the Human Rights Ombudsman Office must carry out a communication campaign to recognize and highlight the work of community journalists and the attacks they have endured, referencing the case of Norma Sancir.

For Norma, who did not seek any financial compensation, the goal of pursuing the case to the end was to guarantee the freedom of the press: **“The goal is to demonstrate that we all have rights. That we can exercise freedom of the press and freedom of expression,”** she explained.²⁷

However, the NCP has appealed the ruling, and the case is currently under review by the Court of Cassation.

Impact on Norma Sancir's life, her family, community, and the journalism profession

The experience left deep personal scars on Norma: **“I felt outrage, anger... my rights were violated. Although I continue to practice journalism, I no longer do so with the same freedom. For a time, there was self-censorship and a great deal of emotional and financial strain”**²⁸

The protracted legal process affected her family stability. **“I expected it to be quick. However, this highlights how slow the justice system is in Guatemala. It hasn't been easy; there has been financial and emotional strain,”** says Norma.²⁹ Her son, her greatest concern, experienced the separation and tensions of the process firsthand. **“There was a lot of sacrifice—time, money, and the pain of not being able to be with my son. Every hearing**

26 El Diario de Centro América is the official newspaper of the Republic of Guatemala, founded in 1880. Its primary function is to publish laws, decrees, and government agreements so that they may be officially known.

27 [Norma Sancir and the Precedent for the Right to Inform](#), Plaza Pública, February 15, 2024.

28 Norma Sancir, interview with the author in November 2025.

29 [Norma Sancir and the Precedent for the Right to Report](#), Plaza Pública, February 15, 2024.

was an emotional burden.”³⁰

Her family, who initially did not support her decision to study journalism, suffered as a result of public stigmatization. However, the court ruling served as a moral and professional vindication. **“Many thought I had lost, but for me it was an act of dignity,”** she says.³¹

El caso de Norma tuvo un impacto significativo en el gremio periodístico y en las comunidades.

Norma’s case had a significant impact on journalists and Indigenous communities. It inspired other journalists to reorganize and strengthen support networks, especially in Chiquimula. “Following my case, the journalism community reorganized itself. I served as an inspiration for more journalists—young women and men—to continue practicing community journalism,” she notes.³²

At the community level, her arrest sparked outrage and solidarity. Several social organizations, feminist media outlets, international observers, and women’s collectives supported the process. People from the communities created videos and posters and participated in hearings. **“Not everyone stayed until the end, but those who did, did so with conviction,”** she recalls.³³

It is important to emphasize that along this journey, Norma had the support of national and international organizations, such as CALDH, the Association of Maya Lawyers, Peace Brigades International, feminist networks, women’s collectives, and international observers. She also received spiritual support in accordance with her Kaqchiquel identity, through ceremonies and spiritual guides. “The women’s network was essential; they sustained me with their energy and wisdom,” she says.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

After a decade of legal struggle, Norma expresses a mix of exhaustion and satisfaction. “There were moments when I wanted to give up, but today I feel satisfied. We achieved justice, and that sets a precedent.”³⁴

Among her lessons learned, she emphasizes that outrage can be transformed into action and justice.

30 Ibid.

31 Norma Sancir, interview with the author in November 2025.5

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 The quotations in this section are from the interview with the author in November 2025.

It is possible to navigate the justice system with patience and support. Support networks and collective organization are essential for resistance. The experience transcends the personal:

“It was not just my victory, but that of women, Indigenous peoples, and organized youth.”

As a “weaver of words,” Norma affirms that the spoken word has historically been part of the memory of Indigenous Peoples. Today, with new technologies, she continues to transmit knowledge, resistance, and hope: “We have always had the spoken word, and today we continue to use it to tell the truth of our peoples.”



This case highlights how in Guatemala Indigenous Maya Photo: Prensa Comunitaria

women who take on the mission of informing, telling the truth, and exposing the state’s injustices toward Indigenous Peoples, are stigmatized and criminalized. But at the same time, they make their very being a symbol of courage, strength, and determination so that the word remains truth, wisdom, and justice—just as Norma Sancir continues to do so through her feelings, spirit, and being.

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