UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE FOR
PROTECTION AND SUPPORT OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

SYNTHESIS OF CONSULTATIONS
(January – March 2016)

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Section 1
Introduction: purpose, scope and methodology of the consultations

The Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) is embarking on an incubation process for the establishment of UAF Asia Pacific as its sister fund, complementing the two existing sister funds in Africa and Latin America. Consisting of several stages, a critical component of this process is to generate meaningful consultations with women human rights defenders in Asia Pacific. Organized last January - March 2016, the purpose of the consultations was to gain a better understanding of systems of protection and support for women human rights defenders in Asia Pacific, and implications for improving these systems, including in terms of grantmaking and advocacy. The consultations were also aimed to contribute towards collective processes of reflection and analysis on women's human rights taking place in the region.

Intended as a platform for reflective thinking, the consultations were conducted through the following methods: 1) an *on-line survey* primarily intended for women human rights defenders who have directly accessed different systems of protection and support at times of risk; 2) *in-depth interviews,* which lasted one to two hours, to engage in a deeper process of reflection and analysis with key resource persons on implications of improving these systems; and 3) *learning circles*, which are akin to focused group discussions, but more than just drawing information from participants, these circles were convened by women human rights defenders themselves, and facilitated for participants to engage in their own process of reflection and analysis.

The survey questions focused on the moment of risk as a critical point for respondents to assess systems of protection and support, and recommend areas for improvement. *(See Annex 2, Survey Questionnaire, A Consultation with Women Human Rights Defenders in Asia Pacific)* For the interview, questions were structured around a framework of a comprehensive system of protection and support for women human rights defenders developed in a regional conversation organized by UAF on 18 – 19 June 2015 in Shillong, North East India. *(See Annex 3, Guide Questions for Interview with Resource Persons/Learning Circle)* The framework, as illustrated below, places the capacity to effectively provide assistance to defenders as interconnected with a larger enabling environment.

Figure 1: Framework of a comprehensive system of protection and support for defenders
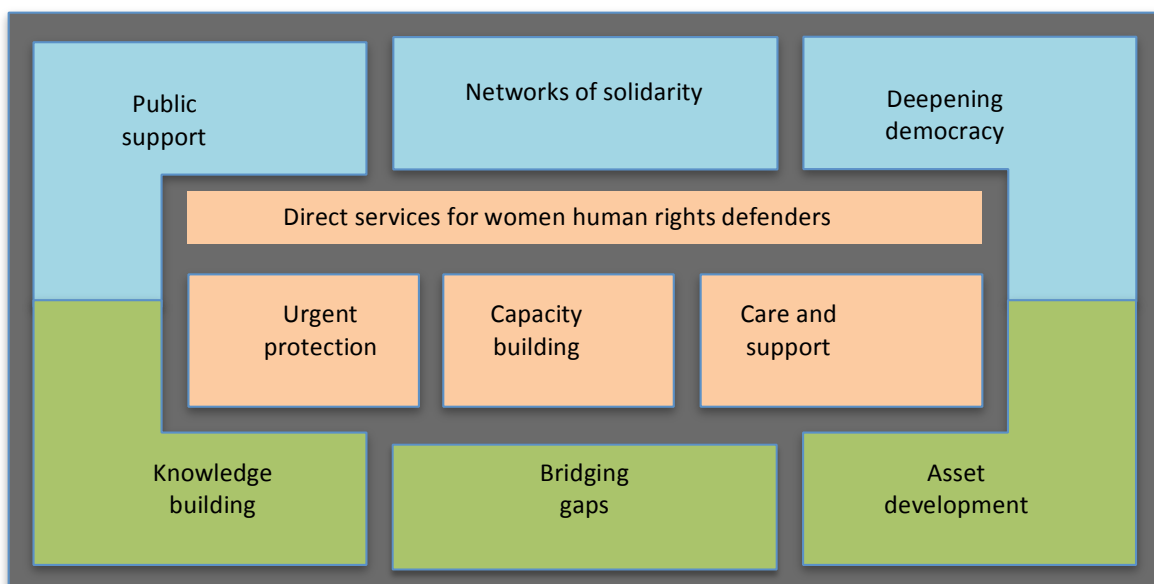
Participants in these consultations were contacted through personal contacts, referrals made by resource persons, UAF's database of grantees as well as grantees of Front Line Defenders in Asia Pacific. Regional networks also invited their members to participate in the survey, namely: Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), Asia Pacific Women's Alliance for Peace and Security (ASWAPS), and Musawah. Over 300 respondents were contacted to respond to the survey, which yielded 72 respondents; of the 130 resource persons contacted for interviewees, two-thirds responded and participated in interviews or learning circles.

In total, the consultations yielded 163 respondents and interviewees: 72 respondents to the survey; 91 resource persons participated in interviews and three learning circles – two of which were held in Indonesia, and one in the Philippines. Represented in these consultations are women human rights defenders in 21 countries: 17 countries in Asia; 4 countries in the Pacific. A considerable number of marginalized communities are also represented, such as: rural/peasant women; indigenous women; women workers, including garment workers, sex workers and migrant workers; urban poor women; Dalit women; women among Muslim minorities; sexual rights advocates, including lesbian, trans people.

Due to time, budgetary and other constraints, the consultations are neither comprehensive nor representative of women human rights defenders and their situations in the region. The responses were also highly contextual, influenced by changing political and other developments in each country and globally. Different forms of protection and support assessed by women human rights defenders at risk are also context-specific. So presented in this report is a contextual analysis of current systems of protection and support for women human rights defenders in the region, highlighting specific situations in particular countries, or particular marginalized communities of defenders to draw attention to their specific needs.

This report is intended to serve as a foundation for further knowledge building on the state of women human rights defenders in the region, and as a resource for activists and other stakeholders invested in the defense of women's human rights and gender equality. It is organized into seven sections:

Section 1, *Introduction: purpose, scope and methodology of the consultations;*
Section 2*, Applying the human rights defenders' framework: complexities and contestations in practice;*
Section 3, *Overarching contexts: setbacks on advancing women human rights in Asia Pacific*;
Section 4, *"Creating a safe space": overview of immediate systems of protection and support*;
Section 5, *Assessing systems of immediate protection and support: critical gaps and challenges;*
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Names of participants and respondents were omitted to maintain confidentiality guaranteed in the conduct of the survey and interviews.

Section 2
Applying the human rights defenders' framework: complexities and contestations in practice

Article 1 of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 9 December 1998 identifies a 'defender' as any person "who promotes and strives for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms."[1] Special Representative on the situation of Human Rights Defenders Hina Jilani explained that what characterizes a defender is the activity of promoting and protecting human rights. A defender can be a person or group of persons working as a volunteer or in a professional capacity, and can engage in human rights activities occasionally or on a full-time basis; or an association or any organisation engage in the defense of human rights. The Declaration does not create new rights, but recognizes that there are rights congruent to the act of defending human rights, providing a new framework of obliging the State to protect, promote and fulfill these rights.

Interviews conducted during the consultations revealed that application of the defenders' framework in practice is not a straightforward undertaking, but imbued with tensions. In this section, interviewees explained contestations in claiming it as an identity: many activists in the region still do not self-identify as defenders, or remain sceptical of the strategic significance of this identity; claiming the identity has been embroiled in a complex politics of legitimacy as perpetrators of human rights violations are also claiming to be defenders; and there are tensions around the exclusion of men, and the inclusion of lesbian and trans advocates in the definition of 'women human rights defenders'.

Tensions around claiming the identity of 'women human rights defenders' point to complexities associated with identity-politics. Viewed constructively, the continuing critique and contestations regarding the definition of 'women human rights defenders' – i.e., who is included and who is excluded – ultimately guards against traps of reification or essentialism, often enforced to maintain or 'stabilize' collective identities. An interviewee mused: "Because activists themselves question the essence and ramifications of a defenders' identity, we become conscious that as a collective identity, it remains tentative, changeable, even subject to co-optation."

Clarifying the definition of 'women human rights defenders'

On 18 December 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted the first resolution on women human rights defenders. The resolution refers to women human rights defenders as "women of all ages who engage in the promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, and all people who engage in the defense of the rights of women and gender equality individually and in association with others''.[2] It provides recognition to all women working in defense of human rights, and implies to also include *men* who defend women's human rights.[3] But considering the systemic and historical forms of gender discrimination, which underlie their heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence and their consequences, UAF has prioritized assistance specifically to women defenders of human rights as well as lesbian and trans people that advocate for sexual rights.

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[1] Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, General Assembly 53rd session, 8 March 1999 [A/RES/53/144]

[2] Resolution on the Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Group and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders', General Assembly 68th session, 18 December 2013 [A/RES/68/181]

[3] The inclusion of men in the definition of women human rights defenders is acknowledged in Sekaggya, Margaret. 2010. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Human Rights Council 16th session, 20 December 2010 [A/HRC/16/44], p. 7

Strategic value of women human rights defenders' identity

Any person or group acting to promote and protect human rights may self-identify as a human rights defender, although to invoke protection under the Declaration, the defender must subscribe to two human rights principles: universality and non-violence.[4] Two interviewees related the strategic value of claiming the identity of 'women human rights defenders': it has opened leadership opportunities for indigenous women in the Philippines. In Nepal, the women human rights defenders' framework became a platform to build "an autonomous women's movement not affiliated with any of the political parties presently behind the ineffective governance of the country post conflict".

The National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders, which has chapters in 72 districts in Nepal, comprises of women from different communities: survivors of trafficking; women working in the entertainment sector; women with disabilities; Dalit women; indigenous women; rural women; *Badi* women; Muslim women; women working on specific issues such as land rights, housing, sexual rights; women working with the media and others. Empowering marginalized women to become active leaders in this alliance according to the interviewee, entailed a series of capacity building and consciousness-raising. "For two years, I did nothing but train". Now marginalized women have taken up leadership in the Executive Committee. "Because of the alliance, our leadership as women human rights defenders is acknowledged, and we are able to mobilize resources from the government".

Another interviewee surmised that the struggle among *Lumads* (indigenous communities) in the Philippines for the right to self-determination and rights related to land, particularly in the context of the encroachment of mining and other extractive industries in their ancestral domain, paved the way for the emergence and recognition of women defenders, and their leadership in these indigenous communities. "In the last five years or so, male leaders of local tribal councils have welcomed women's participation. There is growing public support for women defenders who now lead indigenous peoples' campaigns, which were previously dominated by men. Male leaders eventually recognized that women, who have been instrumental in providing basic services in their communities such as running schools and health centers, also have the capacity to lead their long drawn-out struggle to defend their rights."

Contested claims over the identity of 'women human rights defenders'

According to most interviewees, the identity of 'women human rights defenders' has mixed resonance even among activists themselves. On one hand, there were four male respondents to the survey, one of whom detailed risk in defense of women's human rights. On the other hand, several Pacific respondents, or as claimed by interviewees, still many women even in Asia do not identify themselves as defenders. Those who are exposed to international advocacy, or have established links with international organizations and initiatives are more familiar with the defenders' framework. There is still confusion regarding the specific focus of the framework on the rights of activists, as differentiated from human rights of communities they work with.

One of the participants in the learning circle in the Philippines also questioned who are considered as women human rights defenders. Working with people with disabilities, she asked: "Do women human rights defenders include sign language interpreters for victims of violence against women who are also harassed and threatened, some have received death threats for aiding victims? What forms of support are available for them since many are not affiliated with NGOs, nor are they regarded as belonging among the ranks of activists? How can existing forms of support and protection for women

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[4] OHCHR. 2004. *Fact Sheet 29: Protecting the Right to Defend Human Rights,* Geneva, Switzerland: OHCHR

human rights defenders also extend to those differently able women human rights defenders, or those defending women's rights of differently abled people?"

A lesbian interviewee also pointed out that lesbian, trans or queer advocates do not necessarily identify themselves as defenders. "For many of us, it's a fundamental struggle for existence", she said. Another lesbian interviewee also raised the problematic inclusion of lesbian and trans activists in the definition of 'women human rights defenders'. "While it has been presumed that we are 'women human rights defenders', women's organizations and women's movements in many countries do not necessarily carry our issues because of limited knowledge, lack of interest or commitment, or because of the stigma".

The identity of human rights defenders' has gained political currency since the adoption of the Declaration in 1998, and claiming this identity has become highly contested in recent years. "Perpetrators such as fundamentalists are also claiming to be defenders of the freedom of religion and freedom of expression, and it has been a struggle to push for secular spaces to contest these claims," explained an interviewee in the context of rising religious fundamentalisms in Malaysia. "The concept has been watered down, almost anyone can claim to be a defender. Ultimately, human rights advocates get lump together with violators, with serious implications on the legitimacy of human rights", reflected another interviewee.

Need for awareness and critical use of defenders' framework

The identity of 'women human rights defenders' holds strategic value since it is not simply based on organizing around victimhood, or a common experience of gender discrimination, but because it asserts the agency of women in the defense of human rights. Claiming or assigning this identity is an interplay of political contestations, which needs to be examined to expose claims contrary to human rights principles of universality and non-violence as minimum standards. As an identity, it threads the tight balance between organizing political action around a shared collective identity of defending women's human rights, and recognizing the co-existence of diverse and multiple identities even within this collective.

Intersectional analysis, a method of analysis for opposing oppressions of all kinds, shows how power intersects identities along various axes, such as gender, class, or ethnicity. Employing an intersectional lens complicates any sense of a collective identity as homogenous. In this sense, making use of an intersectional analysis is helpful to bring to light diverse identities among defenders of women's rights represented in the defenders' framework. It also draws attention to specific communities of women human rights defenders whose vulnerability is related to their marginalization not only on the basis gender, but also on other grounds.

"We have to nuance our organizing around collective identities", asserted an interviewee. Rather than strictly limiting protection and support on who are considered 'women human rights defenders', we have to continually *interact with difference* – contextually understand who is at risk. "Not all LGBTIQ defenders are at risk at all times. Sometimes, it is trans people, particularly a trans woman transitioning to a man, that do not have access to public spaces, much less room to publicly advocate for their rights," said a lesbian interviewee.

Clearly, as articulated by interviewees, there is a need for more extensive capacity building to raise awareness, and generate critical use of the human rights defenders' framework among activists in Asia Pacific. It's not about convincing activists to call themselves 'defenders' rather, to inform them about the framework, and build their capacity to use it critically, particularly in the context of increasing State repression of civil society, explained an interviewee. But even this is fraught with risk. An interviewee working with Chinese defenders expressed, "unless carefully orchestrated, activities such

as awareness raising among defenders in mainland China could expose them to risk given the intense crackdown on civil society following the government's change in leadership in 2013".

Section 3
Overarching contexts: setbacks on advancing women human rights in Asia Pacific

Questionnaires developed for the consultations did not have specific questions on contexts, or overarching issues that impact protection and support for women human rights defenders. Inevitably, however, interviewees talked about these contexts. They premised their assessment of protection and support systems on global developments that impede the advancement of women's human rights. It is telling that these developments are global in character, not confined to the region, but they are discussed in relation to their specific implications on the safety and security of women human rights defenders in Asia Pacific. And while far many contexts are relevant to the region, only those mentioned by interviewees are discussed in this section.

Prevailing impunity, and "push back" on human rights

Human rights defenders are confounded by the complex interconnections between political, economic, security interests globally that shape the politics over human rights. For instance, "the pursuit of trade interests influences which governments actively denounce human rights violations in which countries, and determines the effectiveness of international pressure." The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an expansive free trade agreement between 12 Pacific Rim countries was signed last 2 February 2016 inspite of criticisms regarding its inadequate labor standards safeguards, and concerns about infringement of the right to health, freedom of expression, and privacy. Campaigns led by civil society, which called for the United States not to negotiate with Asian partners that commit gross violations of human rights, were unheeded.

Counterterrorism post 9/11 has been used by governments as an excuse to impose restrictions on fundamental freedoms. More than 140 governments have passed new counterterrorism laws since 11 September 2001. According to an interviewee based on the study conducted by their organization, international human rights are actively undermined, not only by regimes who are notorious for doing so, but also by liberal democracies that in the past have subscribed to the importance of human rights. Under the cloak of the 'war against terror', governments have twisted the legal system. They issued counter-terrorism measures, or revived the application of national security acts to criminalize political dissent. As a result, "increasingly, defenders have been accused of terrorist activities, subversion, aiding and abetting illegal organizations, endangering national security."

There is a recent trend of "push back" on human rights – this does not pertain to the on-going struggle for rights that have been denied, but represents the loss of access to fundamental freedoms that have been achieved previously. Current efforts of many governments like Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar to restrict foreign funding, or impose onerous bureaucratic requirements for NGOs are part of this larger drive by governments to suppress civil society in order to strengthen their hold on power. Especially disconcerting is the fact that the push back is not confined to authoritarian regimes. Even democratic governments have morphed into "semi-authoritarian regimes that concede limited space for civil society, but reduce it whenever they perceive any significant challenge in their political grip."

The impact of tightening restrictions on human rights is apparent in setbacks on the defense of women's human rights in China. In 2015, Chinese authorities arrested ten women human rights defenders: five were released after questioning by police, while five remained in detention. They were arrested prior to launching a campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation on International Women's Day. A month later, they were released on bail, but remain under close surveillance. "All well known to the authorities for previous protests, the detention of the 'Feminist Five' appears to be in reprisal for their advocacy to hold the Chinese government accountable for women's human rights. They are leaders in a new generation of feminist activists in China. "

Late January 2016, following the arrest of the 'Feminist Five', Chinese authorities ordered the closure of the Beijing Zhongze Women's Legal Counseling and Service Center, a widely acclaimed women's rights organization established in 1995 shortly after the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. First set up at the Peking University, the organization was tolerated by the government, and even earned the distinction as one of China's 'top public service organizations' from the press. "But because it relied heavily on funding from abroad, and it was visibly active in its advocacy on women's human rights issues particularly domestic violence, it became a target," explained an interviewee.

Interviewees working on human rights issues in China explained that the detentions, raids, and closure of NGOs come at a time when the Chinese government is introducing stronger measures to clamp down on civil society. The draft Foreign NGO Management Law, which is working its way through the bureaucratic process, is intended to restrict the operations and access to funding of foreign NGOs, and subject them to greater government interference and control. A draft Anti-Terrorism law, also under consideration for approval, contains a range of vague provisions the interpretation and application of which could be used to further criminalize the work of human rights defenders.

Rising religious fundamentalisms, normalization of ultra-conservative views

Political transitions in Asia Pacific countries ushered further rise in the politicization of religion as religious and political elites posturing for political legitimacy utilized different avenues to power. Religious fundamentalisms gained ground, which are so not much about the propagation of religion, but in essence are political projects by or in confluence with the extreme right that manipulate religion, culture, or ethnicity in order to obtain or retain power. "We cannot generalize that all those implicated as religious fundamentalists are only from extremist groups. In some places, initiators of violence are in fact linked with political parties," said an interviewee alluding to deep connections between religion and politics.

Extremist acts have been attributed mostly to Islamist militants operating in countries like Indonesia. Interviewees, however, emphasized that traces of religious fundamentalisms are also evident in anti-Muslim riots instigated by extremist Buddhist monks in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The bloody massacre of Muslims by Hindu mobs in Gujarat in 2002 was a flashpoint in a train of violence left behind by the radicalization of Hindu nationalists in India. Similar State-sponsored religious fundamentalisms have also gained force in South Asian countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan. There are conflicts involving other religious denominations as well such as the clashes between Christian and Muslim communities in the Maluku Islands of Indonesia, recalled respondents from Ambon.

The intensification of religious fundamentalisms in the region and globally is undeniable. However, the recent persecution of LGBTIQ communities and their defenders in Indonesia signifies an alarming trend of its spread in the normalization of ultra-conservative views among the public. Finding voices among senior members of Indonesia's government, conservative and extremist elements of Islam have gained a stronghold in the country inspite of a secular constitution. "Aside from instigating violence, extremist Islamic groups can now rely on a significant increase in active support from the public," expressed an interviewee. "Religious fundamentalists have become more fearless and vocal, ultra-conservative views have been 'mainstreamed' in public."

Recent assaults against LGBTIQ people in Indonesia started last January when a Minister criticized counselling services for gay students at a university as corrupting the country's youth. It triggered a heated media debate, spilling over social media. Other ministers followed with similar derogatory statements. One of the extreme views came from the Defense Minister who referred to the LGBTIQ movement as a form of modern warfare, an attempt by Western nations to undermine the country's sovereignty. A former communications minister also made a call on Twitter for the public to kill any LGBTIQ people that they find. Even the Vice President called to cut funding of a UN program on ending stigma, discrimination, and violence towards LGBTIQ people.

Since then, there has been a frightening spike in attacks and crackdown against LGBTIQ people in several provinces the country: the government shut down several LGBTIQ websites; a leading psychiatric body described homosexuality as a mental disorder; the radical Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) stormed boarding houses in Bandung hunting for same-sex couples; in Yogyakarta, the anti-LGBTIQ campaign succeeded in shutting down the only Islamic school for transgender women opened in 2008; in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, activists have been battling it out with hardliners that have been putting up signs denouncing homosexuality, one sign read "LGBT is a disease"; harassment, stalking, and online abuse have also been reported by LGBTIQ activists.

One of the interviewees observed: Disturbingly, there is a lack of support for LGBTIQ people and their defenders even within the civil society amidst these violent attacks. "Human rights activists are being labelled as promoting homosexuality, and are coming under attack. Allies that have been supportive of the freedom of religion and rights of religious minorities now expressed their reservation to stand with LGBTIQ people for fear of becoming targeted as well." It has split civil society. Activists are being pushed to take sides either for or against LGBTIQ people, reflecting the growing public intolerance for sexual rights. In this context, LGBTIQ defenders are in serious danger, with little protection even from their circles of human rights advocates.

The polarization of civil society "as fundamentalists' views spread" is also a cause of concern in Bangladesh, according to several interviewees. Civil society is caught between a repressive State, and religious extremists "condoned by an opportunistic government intent on retaining its power". Freedom of expression is under increasing attack. When some interviewees joined 49 civil society actors in a petition against the conviction of a journalist critical of Bangladesh's war crimes tribunal, they were charged with contempt. "At risk are those who do not espouse absolute views in support of the government, or like the bloggers hacked to death by Islamist militants, espouse secular views against religious fundamentalisms. "Civil society groups have become polarized -- some aligned with political parties, or taken up fundamentalist postures. Those that maintain an independent stance are marginalized, if not at risk."

Defenders under attack amidst the upsurge of religious fundamentalisms have tried to protect themselves. LGBTIQ defenders facing violence in Indonesia have set up hotlines, safe houses, adopted digital security measures of "unfriending" people on social media, deleting website directories that could expose them to violence. These measures, however, remain inadequate in the context of longstanding impunity for human rights violations. "Strong backers" is one of the most-quoted reasons for the governments' deplorable weak action to counter these violations. The establishment in 1998 of FPI, most notorious among the attackers, was backed by senior retired generals from the Indonesian government, said an interviewee in a previous interview.

The election of Narendra Modi, former chief Minister of Gujarat during the 2002 riots, as Prime Minister of India, and the failure to prosecute him for direct complicity or "at least for failing to stop or control the riots" points to the impunity afforded to perpetrators of hate crimes. "This new wave of resurgent Hindu nationalism is more brazen, and potentially more dangerous than anything we have seen before. Emboldened by ties to the present right-wing government ruled by the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), extreme nationalist supporters have routinely taken to the streets, using violence and intimidation to press their claim for a 'purely Hindu India', explained a women's human rights activist. "Amidst the spread of violence, the Prime Minister's silence is deafening."

Marginalization creates or compounds vulnerability of defenders

The confluence of powers – political, economic, and also social has greatly marginalized communities, and creates or compounds the vulnerability of defenders. The convergence of powers between the elite in government, the police, military and security forces, and private interests of foreign companies invested in extractive industries account for high incidents of killings in the region and elsewhere. An interviewee cited that in countries like the Philippines where resistance has been intense, Global

Witness recorded 67 activists killed between 2002 and 2013, the highest in Asia. Women human rights defenders have been attacked primarily not because of their gender, but because of their visibility at the frontline of these land conflicts.

Structural inequality embedded in institutions, social structures, and belief systems has perpetuated social hierarchies that marginalize specific groups of defenders on the basis of gender, class and other social status. It has created disadvantages that compound the gendered nature and consequences of human rights violations experienced by women defenders and in the first place, accounts for the denial of women's rights. For example, indigenous women defenders in several countries in Asia Pacific have been discriminated upon because of their ethnicity, gender, and class.

Discrimination on the basis of gender clearly accounts for the marginalization of defenders of women's rights and sexual rights. An interviewee from Fiji pointed out that women and LGBTIQ defenders who break social norms in defense of their rights are ostracized from their families. "In tightly-knit communities such as in the Pacific, this has devastating impact on defenders." Strong social pressure because of the dominance of the Catholic Church also lead to the silencing particularly of lesbian activists in Timor Leste, said an interviewee working in the country. "Unless they are economically independent, lesbians cannot speak out for fear of being thrown out of their families," she said.

Poverty and other forms of exclusion also make defenders of specific communities vulnerable. One of the interviewees narrated differences in access to protection systems between women campaigners residing in urban communities, and those living in rural areas based on their study in Cambodia. Those residing in urban centers generally are better off – better educated, and less isolated compared to their colleagues in the provinces. Those living in rural areas are significantly poorer than their urban counterparts. These factors affect their level of vulnerability to attacks, and their ability to seek assistance, she said. Poorer and less educated women defenders residing in rural areas end up isolated, and unable to avail of immediate assistance even if many of them are actually leading their communities' land rights struggles.

Impoverishment of women defenders and their families

'Land grabs' or forcible land confiscation in violation of fundamental human rights of affected communities has become an alarming trend globally. In Asia Pacific, land conflicts have intensified between governments, private interests, and dispossessed communities. Governments have been involved in land grabbing. In Cambodia, according to records of an interviewee's NGO, over 2.2 million hectares have been leased through Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), which enables the government to lease large tract of lands to private interests, including foreigners, for up to 99 years. This has affected more than 500,000 Cambodians as the government has forcibly evicted communities since 2003.

Many women defenders advocating for rights related to land and the environment in Cambodia as well as other countries in the region are not salaried NGO workers. Mostly they are community members such as housewives who were drawn into the milieu of activism by force of circumstances. Some have been engaged in informal trade such as selling food, operating neighborhood convenience stalls, or others have been cultivating farms with their husbands. However, as a result of land grabbing, many were dispossessed of their farms, and lost their sources of livelihood when they were forcibly evicted and relocated to remote areas.

Unable to work to earn a living as they did before, they have become reliant on their husbands' income to support the family. The division of labor has reverted back to their husbands assuming the role of sole breadwinner. As wives, they continue to be primarily responsible for managing the household, but unlike before, they are unable to earn any supplemental income for the family.

Especially for those who have assumed full-time activism, they said "our only income is any compensation or amount of money we receive from attending meetings or events organized by the UN or any other NGO".

"Land is life. We were robbed of our lands; we have to stay away from our farms and the forests because other powerful people have claimed these as theirs. To survive, we had to sell any other land or possession we have, or incur loans from moneylenders that charge exorbitant interest we cannot pay off. We cannot open a business or find employment because we are 'wanted' by the government. We lost our land, our livelihood, and inevitably, in dire hardship, we will soon lose our life," previous interviewees appraised the state of impoverishment that has befallen women defenders and their families from evicted communities.

Section 4
"Creating a safe space": overview of existing systems of immediate protection and support

The survey, one of the methods of the consultations, was designed to assess existing systems of immediate protection for women human rights defenders in danger. A review of responses to the survey revealed that most of the 72 respondents faced risk, the rest assisted or worked with women human rights defenders at risk. Detailed below are their responses, which presents an overview of systems of protection and support that worked for them at the moment of danger. Excerpts from answers of some respondents who experienced attacks are also included to illustrate the trajectory of their experiences in the course of receiving immediate protection.

Networks of solidarity and support as first line of protection

A total of 89% of respondents are most familiar with networks of solidarity and support. Majority of them identified these networks as the most reliable form of protection in times of danger. Most of them also cited their own solidarity networks of friends and allies as among those that they seek out first for immediate protection. As respondents specified: "I go to my family first, then to my colleagues"; they rely on "family, friends, colleagues and allies"; "support of friends that gave me temporary shelter and protection"; "close friends"; "mostly friends and activists I know"; "friends who work in human rights issues"; "our self-help group of women activists"; "seeking solidarity through existing networks".

Box 1. Immediate protection and support from a network of friends

> *At the moment of danger or threat to you, your family where or to whom did you go for help?*
>
> *Friends, partners, family*
>
> *How did they help you? Please describe briefly the forms of protection and support extended to you.*
>
> *Provide money, shelter, and emotional support*
>
> *Please describe briefly an example/s of the mechanisms of protection or support that you found most effective or responsive to your needs.*
>
> *My friend immediately cashed her own money for me to get air ticket to leave, she has certain knowledge which helped to advise me to give away my sim card, original air ticket I bought online. So she advised me not using bank card, mobile phone or internet, so I could get away from monitoring and tracing that was followed for the previous days, and I could get away quickly.*
>
> *What are the gaps in existing forms of protection and support for you or women human rights defenders on the ground that still need to be addressed? Please enumerate or describe briefly.*
>
> *safe shelters, emotional support, cash for run away from dangerous situation*

Also affirmed by most interviewees as their "most valued asset for protection", these networks of solidarity and support have different configurations. Essentially, however, these include their own circle of trusted, reliable friends and colleagues, and other trusted NGOs that facilitate links to national and international organizations that provide assistance, particularly through urgent appeals

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and emergency grants. "It's the underlying element of *trust* that makes these networks reliable. The trust is not only based on reputation, but on a relationship of deep friendship and solidarity built over the years," confirmed several interviewees. "Trust is intangible, building trust is not evident in any of our strategies, but it is at the core of relationships that keep defenders safe or aid them to safety."

"Key to sustaining these networks is community organizing," asserted some interviewees. According to them, women human rights defenders are better protected if they are organized, and find support within communities that transform into their networks of solidarity and support. "Community organizing is fundamental to empowering these communities" – raising their consciousness, building their capacity to analyse and solve their own problems, mobilizing them into collective action. This takes considerable time and resources, "but it's the only way to ensure that communities do not become overly dependent on NGOs rather, take the initiative to create their own systems of support and protection".

An interviewee working with defenders in grassroots communities explained: It took two years to consolidate communities in different provinces of Thailand that are protesting against mining and land encroachment to understand their shared issues and interests. "Now, they have formed their own *community protection networks,* which are led by women. They organize their own exchanges, they support each other's protests, and offer refuge for those at risk". Empowered communities are "a good place to put heads together", where security of defenders at risk becomes a shared concern, and collectively the community figure out how best to protect and support them.

Box 2. Immediate protection and support in Papua New Guinea

> ***How did you learn about protection and support for women human rights defenders?***
>
> *Training from human rights organizations and attending international conferences*
>
> ***At the moment of danger or threat to you, your family where or to whom did you go for help?***
>
> *police, pastors, chiefs, women's human right organizations, clan members*
>
> ***How did they help you? Please describe briefly the forms of protection and support extended to you.***
>
> *They assisted by mobilizing and calling for the parties to meet. They immediately provided accommodation and food, and security for the victims. Apart from that, they provided counselling to the victims.*
>
> ***Are there any other actors that facilitated protection and support for you at the time of threat or danger?***
>
> *Local women's groups, international human rights groups, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, FemLink Pacific, International Women's Development Agency, International Alert, Global Partnership in Prevention of Armed Conflict*
>
> ***Please describe briefly an example/s of the mechanisms of protection or support that you found most effective or responsive to your needs.***
>
> *The protection provided by clan members and local chiefs proved very effective as they were on the ground living in the same community. They also have excellent network between clans.*

Reliance on NGOs, religious institutions, media and other avenues of support

To access information for immediate protection and support, almost all respondents cited reliance on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – local, national and international organizations with local outreach. Among those mentioned are: Amnesty International, APWLD, FLD, Forum Asia, CIVICUS, Freedom House, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Defenders Fund; Fiji Women's Crisis Center, Peace Brigades International, World Organization against Torture (OMCT), UAF. These NGOs have been instrumental in issuing urgent alerts, lobbying for their case, facilitating emergency grants, and linking them to other possible avenues of support and protection. Many learned about protection systems from trainings and consultations organized by these NGOs.

Several mentioned religious organizations of different denominations that also provide immediate assistance. These include religious institutions such as the Fahmina Institute; Nahdlatul Ulama, "one of the biggest Muslim organizations in Indonesia"; Franciscans International, and other religious orders; United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP); Misereor or the German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Cooperation and its networks. "Religious communities offer safe shelter", indicated one of the respondents. They are among the trusted solidarity networks that provide the first line of protection by "organizing immediate relocation of defenders in danger, exerting their influence to leverage resources for emergency assistance".

Particularly in rural or remote places that do not have an established presence of NGOs, churches such as local convents of different religious denominations in the Philippines have stepped in to assist human rights activists at risk. Like other reliable networks of support and solidarity, a relationship of trust permeates this collaboration between the church and activists. "Because we trust each other, this facilitates swift decision-making that allows us to take immediate action to relocate activists out of danger," explained an interviewee. Aside from the Philippines, this form of support from the church is also evident in other countries such as Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. This opens an opportunity to further explore the role of the church in the protection and support of women human rights defenders particularly in the context of rising religious fundamentalisms.

For others, contacts with the media as well as creating their own alerts through social media generated visibility as a form of protection. "For example, in the case of an activist under threat of arrest, her fellow activists posted her case on line, called for the public to come in person and protect her. This helped provide physical protection," cited an interviewee. Several respondents mentioned holding press conferences, or issuing press releases to generate public interest. However, some interviewees cautioned that visibility as a protection strategy might backfire. "We became easy targets, and began receiving threats when we became known and active as leaders," stated an interviewee regarding her experiences at the height of conflict in Sri Lanka.

A considerable number also relied on State institutions including police, local authorities, and influential government officials sympathetic to their concerns. Only four respondents mentioned receiving assistance from national human rights institutions, such as *Komnas Perempuan*. "Our relationship of trust is with an individual in the National Human Rights Commission, not with the institution itself," clarified an interviewee from Thailand. The State is implicated in many of the violations, its machineries slow and bureaucratic, so based on survey responses and interviews, it is apparent that women human rights defenders do not rely much on State institutions for protection.

Only two respondents mentioned informing UN agencies, specifically UN Special Rapporteurs. It appears that contacts with international agencies such as the UN, embassies, and other international organizations are mediated by national or international NGOs. "As a national NGO with a mandate to

assist defenders, we tap our long-standing relations with regional or international organizations such as Forum Asia or FLD to issue urgent appeals for defenders at risk. We report serious cases to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. International outreach takes time and effort, unless cases are serious, such as violations in the context of conflict, we focus on mobilizing assistance within the country," explained a former head of a defenders' NGO.

Emergency grants and "self-funded" emergency protection

Among respondents, 67% are familiar with emergency grants. Many cited these grants as responsive to their needs: "I received financial support from FLD, which was very much helpful at that time"; "I was able to pull out … through the emergency grant provided by UAF. It was a very decisive move, given that perpetrators were out to kill me"; "emergency funds for temporary relocation from UAF and Freedom House"; "grant for immediate relocation and rest and respite" as most effective. Interviewees explained that these grants as "fast and flexible". "UAF responded immediately when we asked for help" – so they are able to cover emergency transport, communication, and other necessary expenses to get defenders out of danger.

Aside from emergency grants received from UAF and other organizations, respondents and interviewees mentioned that costs to quickly take them out of danger are self-resourced by activists themselves, funded from their own pockets. "Many of these immediate security measures such as finding a safe house do not entail substantial financial resources. We cover initial costs such as local transport ourselves, and we tap our network of friends and allies. However, the critical role of these networks of support are seldom documented or made apparent. These networks need to be publicly acknowledged and strengthened as an immediate source of protection for defenders," emphasized a senior activist interviewed.

The *Bersih 2.0* movement in Malaysia, a mass movement for electoral reform, sets an example of activists mobilizing public funding to assist defenders and their families. The movement raised its own *Freedom Fund* from public donations to support families of activists who were arrested. A lead figure of the movement interviewed explained: "People support the cause, there are thousands of supporters. They are angry enough, they give donations. Through the fund, we are able to extend support for six months to families of arrested colleagues." The movement demonstrates possibilities of translating popular support into a resource for defenders.

Creation of 'safe space', including provision of safe houses

A recurring theme from survey responses and interviews is that defenders, in essence, are looking for a "safe space" as their most immediate form of protection. It could be a physical space such as a safe house, which several interviewees and respondents articulated as a gap in existing protection systems. "There needs to be a network of safe havens across provinces that defenders should know about," expressed an interviewee from the Pacific. "There should be shelters for defenders, particularly LGBTIQ advocates." It does not work to put them in shelters for violence against women as their needs are different, and there are security risks in these arrangements, explained another interviewee.

For others, the space need not be physical, but could take the form of a circle of trusted peers and community members. During the conflict in Sri Lanka, widows formed their own collectives. Destitute and ostracized from their villages, they banded together initially to share their meager resources. They then formed their own self-help groups, which became a platform for them to become politically active as they search for men in their family who disappeared, narrated an interviewee from Sri Lanka. "It's the confidential support" that makes the space safe, "in this circle, women are able to talk about their problems – their mistakes, doubts, compromises in negotiating between the military and rebels, without being judged of prostituting themselves."

Box 3. Trajectory of protection and support for a woman defender at risk

At the moment of danger or threat to you, your family where or to whom did you go for help?

Organizations I work with, communities, family, friends, colleagues and allies, select local government officials and parliamentarians, international civil society organizations and women human rights defenders' networks, human rights lawyers, journalists/media, UN human rights mechanisms, solidarity groups for human rights workers and activists

How did they help you? Please describe briefly the forms of protection and support extended to you.

Security and risk assessment, put in place protocols, including provision for sanctuary support, advocacy and lobby in the context of providing solidarity at the international level, urgent alerts, financial and other logistical support, capability building, legal advice and assistance

Please describe briefly an example/s of the mechanisms of protection or support that you found most effective or responsive to your needs.

I think a combination of the three mechanisms of protection or support is most effective – advocacy and lobby, capacity building, and urgent protection. This worked well with the situation I was (and still am) faced with – my inclusion in the list of human rights defenders implicated in trumped up criminal charges and the harassment I was (and still am) faced with, mostly from State security agents. The three forms of support aided in raising the profile of the issue (national and international), enabled me to undertake measures to ensure my personal security (and that of my family, colleagues and immediate community), and thereby mitigated the possible attacks against me.

What are the gaps in existing forms of protection and support for you or women human rights defenders on the ground that still need to be addressed? Please enumerate or describe briefly.

Legislation for the recognition and protection of rights of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders; broader network for sanctuary and other security needs; additional trainings on digital and physical security, use of new media, and other forms of capability building

Are you with satisfied with the protection and support extended to you and now able to continue activism for women's human rights in a safe and secure environment?

Yes, but there are possibilities of further trumped up criminal charges, surveillance, harassment and threats, which are quite eminent as forms of attacks and reprisals against me and my work as a women human rights defender especially considering the trends in the country

Section 5
Assessing systems of immediate protection and support: critical gaps and challenges

More than half or 56% of respondents indicated that they are not satisfied with the support and protection extended to them, they are yet unable to continue their activism in a safe and secure environment. In this section, gaps in existing systems of protection and support are discussed based on respondents' answers. Interviewees also raised emerging challenges particularly with the spread of activism in the Internet. They discussed the intensification of risk faced by women human rights defenders amidst more systematic and sophisticated attacks by an interlocking range of State and non-State actors emboldened by the "push back" on human rights globally.

Complexity of drawing support from the family

Half or 51% of respondents relied on their family for support and protection. Yet, several raised that their family increase their vulnerability since sometimes threats against them are targeted against their children. For many women human rights defenders, the most important concern is not themselves, it's usually their families, particularly their children. "So we need to extend temporary assistance not only to the individual defender, *but to the family as a unit,"* explained an interviewee from an NGO facilitating assistance to defenders at risk, including women defenders who have been leading protests against forced evictions in Cambodia.

In a report published by this NGO, most of the full-time women campaigners against forced evictions in Cambodia observed that there has been a marked change in relationships with their husbands and family. Among 24 women interviewed, none experienced domestic violence prior to their activism. Now five admitted to being victims of spousal abuse. A further six women who had experienced domestic violence before the land disputes started said that the violence inflicted by their partners had become worse. Four of them said that their husbands demanded that they choose between family and the community so they opted for separation. Seven however took no action to leave their violent partners as they anticipated the extreme difficulty of surviving as a single parent.

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer (LGBTIQ) advocates, the family could be the source of, or aggravate the threats against them if family members do not support their sexual orientation or gender identity. "In a case in Bihar, India, the brother would rather have her lesbian sister in jail, unless she reforms," narrated one interviewee. "It's difficult to intervene since friends and colleagues are considered outsiders, so violence committed by family members remains unaddressed, putting LGBTIQ advocates at risk." 'Biological families' are not automatically supportive of their family members. The notion of family needs to be extended beyond its roots in heterosexual relations, according to a lesbian interviewee.

There have been initiatives to broaden support for defenders to encompass "more inclusive families". For example, similar to the initiative of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in the United States, an interviewee said there has been organizing among parents of LGBTIQ children in China around the State rhetoric of "harmonious families". Many of them happen to be civil servants, and they are able to draw visibility and support on LGBTIQ issues. In Nepal, an interviewee shared that their organization holds "family events", where they invite family members to come to organizational activities, such as award ceremonies for defenders, so they can better understand their work.

Need for legal aid to counter criminalization of activism

Close to half of respondents pointed out that legal aid is crucial, and lawyers are among the list of persons they rely upon for immediate protection. Asked who do they approach for help when in danger, among those listed by respondents are: "principally our own network of lawyers and NGOs";

"human rights lawyers"; "lawyers"; "legal aid institute"; "quick reaction teams composed of lawyers and paralegals we trained with". One of the interviewees from Cambodia, a well-known defender explained: "A good legal counsel has helped me understand my rights, provided me with critical legal representation. When my family and colleagues could not visit me in prison, my lawyer connected me to the outside world."

However, for defenders in many countries, they do not have connections with lawyers that provide pro bono or subsidized services, which are well established in Asian countries such as in Bangladesh and Malaysia. In Bangladesh, one of the senior lawyers interviewed pointed out several organizations providing legal aid, such as: the Bangladesh National Women's Organization, with over 600 lawyers as members; Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) based in Dhaka, but also provides services in several districts; the Bangladesh Legal Aid Service Trust; and several women's organizations that also offer legal aid outside of the capital. The Bar Council in Malaysia has taken up cases of defenders and their organizations, and according to another interviewee, a recent coalition, "Lawyers *Buru*", also provides similar services.

Interviewees expressed that legal aid has become an urgent need in light of the arbitrary use of the legal system to criminalize activities of human rights defenders. Illegal detention, filing of baseless lawsuits, irregularities in due process and fair trial procedures have been employed as repeated tactics to silence defenders. "Human rights defenders face spurious law suits such as tax evasion cases, *leste majeste* charges, charges for minor infractions such as trespassing," explained an interviewee in Thailand. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), which has a regional office in Thailand, could consider strengthening networks of lawyers and bar councils in Asia Pacific to provide pro bono services for defenders at risk, suggested an interviewee, one of the commissioners of ICJ.

Wider than the gap in legal aid is the provision of legal services from a feminist perspective. The gendered nature and consequences of violations against women human rights defenders are not addressed adequately since "there are too few feminist lawyers who provide legal aid, hardly any in the country," observed an interviewee talking about sexual violence inflicted against ethnic women and their defenders in Myanmar. Existing NGOs such as the Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau in the Philippines only provide "legal referrals" due to limited resources. In Indonesia, *Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Asosiasi Perempuan Indonesia untuk Keadilan* (LBH APIK) has assisted victims of gender-based violence, but "it is no longer as active as before" an interviewee said.

Dearth in psycho-social support services for defenders

"Current approaches focus on a patriarchal valorization of risk that translates into an overemphasis on physical attacks, neglecting psychological forms of violations such as vilification and stigmatization often experienced by women human rights defenders."[5] Defenders also speak of the trauma resulting from threats and attacks, but these consequences are seldom noted. Provision of psycho-social support to address psychological forms of attacks as well as psychological consequences of human rights violations has been identified by respondents as one of the gaps in existing systems of immediate protection.

Only six respondents specified counseling among the forms of immediate support they received. Interviewees also disclosed that they seldom avail of counseling and other psycho-social support services. There are various reasons, according to them: they dismissed the psychological nature or impact of the attacks; they do not see it as a priority; psycho-social services are expensive, or not accessible; there is stigma related to availing of these services; feminist counseling services are hard to

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[5] Ibid.

come by. Several mentioned they simply talk among themselves, and try to find solace and healing among their peers.

For members of the Pacific Women's Network against Violence against Women, they are able to avail of counseling services developed for victims of gender-based violence. Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC) in Nepal also provides counseling services for both victims of gender-based violence and women human rights defenders. Counseling services offered by these women's organizations carry a feminist perspective. But while the nature and consequences of violations against women human rights defenders are related to gender-based violence, an interviewee pointed out that some women human rights defenders are uneasy regarding the conflation of their identity with 'victim-survivors'.

To address the gap in providing pyscho-social support specific to defenders, an interviewee suggested "training community-based peer counselors as a first line of support, and they can also help diagnose and refer counseling needs of defenders to professionals." In Bangladesh, NGOs linked up with university institutes that provide trainings for psychologists to also train peer counselors. Adopting new frameworks of activism such as "non-violence" is another preventive approach, explained an interviewee from Cambodia. "It helps activists cope with the aggression and frustration brought about by their activism."

Issues related to temporary relocation and seeking asylum

About 61% of respondents are familiar with temporary relocation as a form of protection. Several mentioned that they availed of this especially when they are specifically targeted, and it becomes difficult to remain safe in their locality. Among the forms of protection responsive to their needs, respondents stated: "relocation is the most urgent need to evade imminent danger"; "funds for temporary relocation, including food and transport for women defenders and her buddies under attack"; "friends evacuated me and gave me temporary shelter and protection;" "We received a death threat and had a 24-hour deadline. We contacted a few friends some 300 miles away from us in Islamabad if they could help. They were generous enough to offer relocation".

However, interviewees pointed out this form of protection is fraught with difficulties: some raised the issue of having to relocate with their children, and there are no provisions for their children's schooling or housing; they are unable to continue their work and earn a living; they are uprooted from their work and social circles, and feel isolated. For a defender who sought asylum, the wait prior to obtaining legal status in her country of asylum is excruciatingly long. During this time, she is unable to work or earn any income. She feels very isolated considering that her friends in particular perceive asylum seeking as a "cop-out".

One interviewee recommended that temporary relocation of defenders at risk could be arranged with NGOs they are familiar with in neighboring countries so they are not uprooted from their human rights' circles. According to another interviewee, establishing a support system for defenders in their places of relocation is also necessary, including arranging temporary work, and provisions for their children. In the long term, an interviewee called for advocacy for the rights of asylum seekers, including better conditions pending approval of their asylum applications.

Emerging threats and violations against activists in social media

The internet is a growing terrain of activism, drawing many young and new actors such as bloggers or citizen journalists to raise their own concerns and mobilize public support. Several interviewees from Bangladesh expressed alarm regarding "the gruesome killings by the Islamic militant groups such as *Ansar Al Islam* of bloggers who espoused secularism, and opposed religious fundamentalisms." While

police have arrested several suspects in the killings, the government has also responded by arresting a number of secularist bloggers for 'defaming Islam' as well as shutting down several websites. An interviewee stressed: "These attacks against a new group of activists such as bloggers need to be documented also as violations against defenders of women's human rights."

Increasingly, social media has also been the site of more virulent attacks against activists. An interviewee explained that attacks, particularly against reputation of women human rights defenders, are common in social media. Interviewees pointed out "women bloggers, journalists, and activists are subjected to online abuse and violent threats that attack their sexuality to silence them." Unlike traditional forms of slander or libel, these attacks spread widely and quickly, and are more vicious or hateful. "Perpetrators are able to hide in the anonymity of the medium," she said, "so there is a higher level of impunity."

As activism spreads to the Internet, "it is critical to build the capacity of activists to document and report human rights violations online", said an interviewee. Several organizations have also been conducting digital security trainings to equip activists with the capacity to secure digital information, and protect themselves from digital threats. But an interviewee suggested a more preventive approach of building the capacity of activists, including 'digital migrants', to proactively use and navigate these new media in a safe and secure manner. "In the first place, activists have to learn to be discerning of their use of the internet, and the information they post online."

Insufficient resources for protection amidst intensification of risk

Several respondents and interviewees spoke of the heightened risk faced by defenders of human rights. Human rights violations are not solely committed by the State, but many other non-State actors are among the violators such as companies, landlords, extremists, and fundamentalists. Interviewees noted the growing complexity in understanding the nature of human rights violations considering the confluence of powers between State and non-State perpetrators. "In many instances, it has been difficult to identify perpetrators, or pinpoint culpability."

"Threats are more systemic and systematic, no longer isolated incidents that happen once, but are expected to continue. Yet we are unable to predict the occurrence of attacks, and do not have sufficiently resources to fully protect ourselves," lamented an interviewee. "While attacks against defenders have become more sophisticated and highly resourced, the interplay of economic and security interests at the global level also determine which governments actively denounce human rights violations in which countries, and also account for dwindling resources invested on human rights."

Interviewees raised the lack of resources specifically for the defense of women's human rights, and the lack of a gender perspective in existing systems of protection and support, which disadvantage women defenders compared to men. An interviewee from Myanmar explained: "The focus of protection has been on violations considered 'serious', such as killing or torture. Sexual violence has been disregarded since there has been such a social taboo on sexuality. Victims of sexual abuse do not tell their family for fear of being shunned by their community. Assistance has been extended only when victims are badly hurt, meaning the violations are obvious or considered 'serious', or if the perpetrators are from another ethnic group."

Section 6
Fostering an enabling environment: strategies for long-term protection and support

Developing systems of protection and support that are responsive to the needs of women human rights defenders at risk is interconnected with fostering a larger enabling environment for the defense of women's human rights. This means directing attention internally to grow women's and other social movements as well as externally to claim public space for women who defend human rights. In this section, interviewees discussed that the security and well-being of women human rights defenders can only be fully achieved in the context of a more expansive approach -- this includes deepening democracy, broadening public support, addressing impunity, or broadly, creating an enabling environment for the realization of all human rights. *(cf Figure 1: Framework of a comprehensive system of protection and support for defenders)*

Advocacy against impunity for violations of women's human rights

A dismal low level of accountability for violations against women human rights defenders; an increasing trend of criminalization of human rights activities amidst weak or corrupt judiciaries; lack of gender responsiveness of existing human rights enforcement mechanisms and protection systems – overall, a general lack of access and denial of justice has generated an alarming climate of impunity against violations of women's human rights. Women defenders explained that in desperation, they have to resort to more drastic, attention-drawing actions, such as staging a hunger strike because "we cannot find justice within a legal system that criminalizes our actions, dismisses attacks against us, and punishes us for claiming our rights."

Respondents cited that urgent appeals and other forms of advocacy to exert international pressure for State accountability are among the most common forms of support for defenders at risk. A closer scrutiny however reveals "it is very difficult for international pressure to make it through the maze of complex power interests to reach at the local level where the abuses are happening. This would require a more labor-intensive approach of close collaboration between international and local advocates to reach different levels of power more directly, and develop a range of messages to apply to each point in the chain of pressure links."

For women human rights defenders, it has been challenging to get acknowledgment and redress for human rights violations against them. "Because of the lack of legitimacy accorded to their role as human rights defenders, often threats against women human rights defenders are trivialized, and the dimension of the abuse as an infringement of women's human rights is lost," pointed out an interviewee. Existing justices systems and systems for protection fall short of addressing these violations as violent manifestations of systemic forms of gender and other forms of discrimination. Ending impunity for violations of women's human rights is inextricably linked with ending gender and all forms of discrimination.

Securing women's economic rights as integral to long-term support

The growth of women's programs has veered towards more 'siloed' approaches to women's empowerment, "the realization of women's human rights compartmentalized to be more in line with funding for specific projects. Women's programs have focused much on addressing gender-based violence, and comparatively, there have been fewer programs on uplifting their economic conditions, and advancing women's economic rights. Many existing income generation schemes developed for women are not at a scale of self-sufficiency, or amount to more sustainable livelihoods such as for women to take charge of agricultural production and trade in their communities," pointed out a long-time women's human rights activist.

Similarly, systems of support for women human rights defenders are centered around addressing gender-based violence, hardly helping them deal with the economic repercussions of these violations and their state of impoverishment. "Long-term support for women human rights defenders entails moving beyond 'siloed' approaches, and directing systems of support to integrate securing women's economic rights," she said. It is imperative to locate advocacy for the advancement of women's human rights particularly in the South to challenge neo-liberal policies of capitalism that fundamentally account for new forms of exclusion, marginalization, and violations resulting from inequality, Asia Pacific currently with the highest rate of inequality in the world.[6]

Expanding public support, connecting across different constituencies

Outreach to the public to support advocacy on women's human rights is paramount for the long-term protection of women human rights defenders. "All forms of human rights education are necessary, particularly those which are relevant and responsive to communities with distinct cultural contexts. This compels us to develop creative methodologies, including by reinterpreting cultural/historical references as well as using twenty-first new media, exploring diverse languages for human rights education beyond the formulaic legal frameworks."[7] The language of human rights must find resonance with peoples' basic values, and personal notions of rights rooted in their cultural contexts, explained some human rights trainers-interviewees.

A respondent from Papua New Guinea expressed the possibility of a more culturally sensitive approach to human rights education: With too many stories on sorcery and tribal conflicts, the country has been profiled as immersed in a violent culture. Human rights education should not superficially build capacity of women human rights defenders to resist this 'violent culture', rather should facilitate "for communities to investigate this construction of a culture of violence erroneously represented as their 'tradition' and in the process, articulate their own definition of women's human rights." It's a transformative process, with communities in their embodied understanding of women's human rights "rectifying misconceptions, and reclaiming their culture."

"We have to be better at communicating the impact of our advocacy on women's human rights", advised another interviewee, "we should be able to tell our stories of social transformation so the public understands the benefits they derive from our activism." There have been innovations particularly in harnessing the extensive power of the social media to reach younger audiences via video clips, animation, blogs, memes, tweets, and many other new forms of communication. It takes considerable time, and a combination of multiple strategies for these efforts to translate into expanded public support. What is evident so far is younger people have become involved, crafting their own campaigns like "pads against sexism", a campus-wide campaign on feminism and sexuality that has gone viral[8]; or the "i-plural" diversity campaign in Indonesia.[9]

The *Bersih* 2.0 movement in Malaysia is a phenomenon, many of the elements that made it happen are contextual to current political developments in the country following the public outrage for free and fair elections. While not easily replicable, the movement made apparent the possibility for mass action around issues that appeal to the public. It has been difficult to mobilize public support for specific women's human rights issues, "we have to identify 'umbrella issues'. These are issues around

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] http://kafila.org/2015/03/19/padsagainstsexism-campaign-at-jamia-milia-delhi/

[9] http://www.iplural.org

democracy, governance, including corruption, electoral reform – those that have broader appeal to the public," said a leading member of the Malaysian movement.

There has been many solidarity actions and joint advocacy between social movements, and across different constituencies inspite of prevailing disconnections among defenders (e.g., between issues and sectors, urban-rural, newly joined activists and senior leaders). The "Global Week of Action against Government Crackdown on Cambodian Protesters," explained an interviewee from the network that initiated it, "demonstrates the power of mass mobilization, online/off-line." A campaign toolkit was widely disseminated through social media. The call to action drew widespread support, online and offline, for Cambodian garment women workers protesting for a rise in wages. Different actors took ownership of the campaign, many initiated spin-off campaigns in social media as well as organized their own protests in solidarity.

Gender perspective on documentation, localization of tools

Over the years, there has been a growing body of work developed from different sources specifically on women human rights defenders. Several interviewees mentioned producing local training manuals and other tools based on resource materials generated in international circles. "What is crucial is to localize these international references – apply them to local realities, translate them in multiple local languages to be relevant to defenders and communities on the ground," explained interviewees from Indonesia and Thailand. Indeed, the consultations revealed gaps between the generation of knowledge products, and activists' actual understanding or awareness of the defenders' framework.

"Documentation is an important aspect of building knowledge about women human rights defenders," stated an interviewee from Papua New Guinea. "It is essential to build more in-depth documentation capacities for local communities to tell their own stories, and share complexities of their own realities. Current documentation has been focused much on risk, but not on daily hardships that drain grassroots women activists, including demands from family, pressures on their public role, or domestic violence they experience as they subvert gender roles in the family. We need to disseminate more locally generated documentation, instead of simplified or sensationalized stories that have been circulating for example, regarding interventions around sorcery devoid of a full understanding of local cultures or contexts."

Grounding long-term protection and support on movement-building

There are many examples of building solidarity among women human rights defenders across communities, sectors, and issues. The community protection network among women activists on rights related to land in Thailand; the national alliance among women defenders from various marginalized communities in Nepal are some examples. But a senior women's human rights activist from the Pacific pointed out that in its stage of formalization or 'NGOization', it has become increasing difficult to consolidate women's movements as "we have jumped in the bandwagon of donors, and re-directed our movement-building along project lines."

We need to have more exchanges, meetings that are differently organized from just talking about project agenda," she said. "We need to create a countervailing force to the individualization of defenders of women's human rights, where with the support of donors a few articulate women leaders have been handpicked, propelled to international travel, then become the same faces talking about same-old women's issues, and taken to be the face of women's movements on the ground." Propelling individual women human rights defenders to 'stardom' weakens the movement because movement-building is about "collective agenda-setting and action, reflecting together on our shared histories of oppression, relating to each other beyond money and projects".

Providing for self-care and well-being of women human defenders

Following UAF's publication of *What's the Point of A Revolution If We Can't Dance?*, there has been much deliberations on the concept of 'integrated security', acknowledging self-care and well-being as a significant component of long-term protection and support for women human rights defenders. One of the interviewees recalled previous reflections: Practicing integrated security speaks to the heart of what is radical in feminism because this would entail unlearning many of the patriarchal norms and practices that we have internalized in our activism, such as neglecting our own needs, acting invincible like superheroes. We have to dismantle all these at a personal level, and at an organizational level, our movements have to promote a culture that values both the personal and political.

A recurring conversation in the learning circle that took place in the Philippines was specifically around self-care and well-being. Issues they raised regarding their desire for employment benefits such as insurance, health care, and pension surface tensions within social movements as activism has evolved into a full time preoccupation for a great number of activists. "How do we resolve disparities: between communities of grassroots defenders that do not regard their activism as a form of employment, and activists who are employed in NGOs; between NGOs with severe constraints in resources, and those NGOs that are better resourced to prioritize and allocate resources for these needs; and even within overall diminishing resources for human rights, between the under-resourcing of women's human rights initiatives, and guaranteed resources for many human rights initiatives?"

Social movements have also transitioned from an older generation that volunteered for their activism, and a new generation who are now employed in NGOs and other development agencies that consider their activism as a career. "It's a generational crisis," stressed an interviewee witness to this transition. "We know of senior activists who have not been properly compensated for the years they have dedicated to activism, now unable to support themselves in their old age; and the influx of newly-joined activists unambiguous of their entitlements, such as expecting full compensation for their work." To bridge this gap, is it possible to establish a social security system that is not tied specifically to employment, rather a system designed for younger activists in the movement to contribute for the social security of older activists?

It has been observed that women's movements in the region have reached a later stage in the development of social movements "characterized by formalization or higher levels of organizations". As 'projectization' becomes a dominant framework, fewer resources are allocated for the protection and support of women human rights defenders in these project-based arrangements. "What happens when project beneficiaries we empower eventually assert their rights and as a result, face threats? There are no provisions in the project budget for their support and protection," reflected an interviewee. How then do we re-generate women's movements? How do we support the next generation of women human rights defenders?" Self-care, in a broader sense, is about sustaining social movements.

Exploring alternatives to mobilizing resources for sustainability

Donors have funded the growth and development of women's movements particularly at this stage of implementing programs and projects. It has led to over-dependence on donors, "which has further fractured movement-building as women's NGOs intensely compete with each other to access development aid," pointed out the head of a women's organization. "Women's organizations running on small annual budgets of less than US Dollars 50,000 are unable to compete." Now we hear of these smaller women's NGOs down-sizing or closing down, affecting the depth and breadth of women's movements in the region.

Developing alternative approaches to mobilize resources for women's human rights remains a challenge. For Her Fund, a women's fund established in Hong Kong in 2004, half of its funding is still dependent on international donors, half raised through fund raising events involving the public, with around US Dollars 124,000 raised locally last year. "We have tried to grow local funding. We reached out to women entrepreneurs and professionals, but they were more focused on their own businesses." Tapping their support for funding does not appear promising, this is partly because the development of the feminist movement in the country is not tied to relationships with the professional class," explained an interviewee from the fund.

Replacing funding from development aid is no easy feat. Recent initiatives to fund raise from other sources such as through public events, private solicitations, or tapping the corporate social responsibility programs of corporations have been labor intensive, still need time to grow into regular sources of funding, and some of those interviewed have been apprehensive of underlying compromises regarding partnerships with corporations. "Overall, these fund-raising efforts still yielded smaller amounts, not a match to substantial grants from international donors that financed many women's programs to address structural issues of discrimination."

Some interviewees proposed, "We need to think about alternative frameworks for resource mobilization, such as the concept of sharing economy, which we have put in practice even before it became another business model of peer-to-peer sharing of goods and services". Considering that there are already existing networks of support and protection, there are possibilities to facilitate more opportunities to share resources, and explore more collaborations. For example, "we can develop 'philanthropic collaborations', partner with other organizations to jointly develop new approaches to resource mobilization, and collectively contribute towards growing a culture of philanthropy in the region.

Section 7
Ways forward: initial recommendations for setting up the UAF sister fund, Asia Pacific

In the interviewees, key resource persons and participants in the learning circle were specifically asked: *How do we envision a regional initiative for the protection and support of women human rights defenders in Asia Pacific? What would be key elements for consideration?* Discussed in this section are their responses to this question, informed by their analysis of gaps in existing systems of protection and support women human rights defenders given the contextual challenges relevant to the region. Their answers fall under four main points: 1) expanding to holistic protection and support; 2) focusing on localization of systems of support and protection; 3) developing platforms for cross-learning and capacity building; 4) solidarity building and advocacy; and 5) growing a local culture on philanthropy.

Expanding to provision of holistic support and protection

Most or 67% of respondents are aware of emergency grants as an urgent means of protection and support for defenders at risk. Many appreciate such fast and flexible access to funds, especially to be able to finance moving defenders quickly out of danger. However, respondents mentioned critical gaps in immediate protection not covered by the emergency grants, specifically access to legal aid, and psycho-social support. Section 5 contains specific suggestions to address these gaps. Rather than expand and provide these services directly, UAF Asia Pacific could play a pivotal role in facilitating strategic collaborations with existing NGOs, networks, and other service providers that can provide these services to ensure holistic support and protection for women human rights defenders.

Clearly, fostering an enabling environment for human rights is integral to ensuring holistic support and protection for women human rights defenders. Specifically, resources persons interviewed spoke of the need to develop strategies focused on addressing women's economic, social, and cultural rights, which have lagged behind in current approaches to women's empowerment. Their suggestions are discussed in Section 6. UAF Asia Pacific has to consider its strategic role in carrying out these medium and long-term strategies considering its mandate to prioritize immediate protection and support for women human rights defenders.

Focusing on localization of systems of protection and support

Existing systems of protection and support, including emergency grants, are inadequate given the systemic threats to human rights defenders, and limited resources for women's human rights. "A more sustainable strategy is to ground UAF Asia Pacific more locally, building on existing capacities at the national or local level to support and protect defenders." UAF Asia Pacific could focus on strengthening existing networks of solidarity and support, through: building capacity in local production of knowledge, and localization of tools for protection; facilitating sharing of resources across communities and networks; investing in relationship-building across communities, constituencies, countries; mobilizing local funds and resources. Several interviewees affirmed the alternative of "growing a more locally rooted, and funded initiative".

Developing platforms for cross-learning and capacity building

Respondents mentioned already benefiting from capacity building as among the most common form of support they have received. Yet, many still pointed out the need for "more capacity building as a sustainable means of building resilience", and ensuring protection and support in the long term. Capacity-building can be in many forms, including through learning exchanges among women human rights defenders themselves. "Exchanges that are initiated by defenders themselves, where they define their own agenda and commit counterpart contributions, have proven more meaningful and relevant," observed an interviewee. "Human rights education must also be tailored, and made relevant to local realities," emphasized another interviewee. UAF Asia Pacific, in a facilitating role,

could collaborate with different organizations to undertake capacity building and cross-learning using creative methodologies that are relevant and responsive to local cultural contexts.

Solidarity building and developing advocacy with donors

There are on-going vibrant exchanges among women human rights defenders across countries, but there is much room to grow regional initiatives, and facilitate more cross-country exchanges. This is particularly important to "break the isolation of defenders in China", who need critical support in the context of the government's crackdown on civil society. Interviewees also emphasized the need to cultivate concrete and sustained strategies of engaging with the younger generation of women human rights defenders. This includes deliberate outreach to younger activists; facilitating fellowships and mentoring of younger or newly-joined activists; role modeling for younger activists feminist values for activism.

We also need "to forge networks outside human rights circles as another means of mobilizing resources", said an interviewee. "There is a need to deepen relationships and solidarity across different situations and issues among women human rights defenders in the region." This entails developing more meaningful exchanges, organizing platforms "to talk about issues close to us, and generate our own reflection and analysis, rather than donor driven or defined gatherings," stressed an interviewee. As many pointed out, trust-building is key to maintaining networks of protection and support. "We need to grow these relationships of trust so we need to explore new ways of relating with each other that fosters empathy, and a deeper understanding of our different contexts and needs."

Advocacy against impunity and the push back on human rights are needed for long-term protection and support for defenders, although other international organizations or regional networks might be better placed that UAF Asia Pacific to focus on this. In a capacity building role, UAF Asia Pacific could support the capacity of women human rights defenders "to engage in advocacy that is more grounded locally, where defenders from communities are able to articulate their own concerns in its complexity, rather than oversimplification of local contexts in international advocacy platforms". "Instead of building advocacy solely through intermediaries, women human rights defenders and their communities should be able to learn to represent themselves, and their issues," stressed an interviewee from the Pacific.

UAF Asia Pacific could focus its advocacy on harnessing its relationships with donors to leverage wider adoption of the defenders' framework in grantmaking, and mobilize more resources for the support and protection of women human rights defenders. It also has a role to play in the broader advocacy to generate "counter discourses to current neo-liberal paradigms predominant in development aid" that account for the lack of resources invested on human rights. Several women's human rights networks and organizations are already active in this arena such as the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), so there are many opportunities for joint actions.

Growing a local culture of philanthropy in Asia Pacific

"There is a possibility to grow a local culture of philanthropy in the region as countries in Asia Pacific are among the fast growing economies, and there has been increasing public understanding of women's human rights," envisioned a founder of a women's organization and network. Growing philanthropy in the region, suggested interviewees, includes: "developing advocacy on laws and a legal infrastructure to support philanthropy in Asia Pacific countries"; "exploring collaborations with philanthropic networks in Asia, such as the Asia Venture Philanthropy Network that hosts webinars on funding related concerns"; initiating resource mobilization innovations using "new fund-raising strategies such as Catalyst's crowd-funding".

Consultations with participants from the Pacific were hampered by communication difficulties due to limited Internet connection. So far, there were four respondents to the survey, and seven interviewees, predominantly from Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Their responses indicated divergent views regarding engagement with the Asia Pacific initiative of UAF considering that there is an existing network on violence against women that also supports women activists at risk. Given the limited reach of the consultations, and the need to explore complementary approaches for the protection of women human rights defenders both in Asia and the Pacific, it is necessary to put in place a broader process of consultations for the Pacific. This could include considering participation from the Pacific in the planned regional convening.

For UAF Asia Pacific's consideration: a regional 'knowledge hub'

Drawing from the consultations, there appears to be a prevailing need for a focus on "capacity building and cross-learning" to be facilitated among women human rights defenders from different countries in Asia Pacific. Upon request from the UAF Regionalization Committee, below are some points for consideration regarding the implications for UAF Asia Pacific as it deliberates upon the strategic value of establishing a regional 'knowledge hub':

1. Ensure contribution to the development of a regional platform that would advance common needs and concerns, including the five strategic issues identified in the consultations;

2. Retain a focus on UAF's mandate to prioritize provision of immediate protection and support for women human rights defenders, ensuring that knowledge products, tools and other resources directly contribute to carry out this mandate;

3. Develop a strategy for long-term capacity development in the region, among others by carrying out a training of trainers, and supporting a core group of women human rights defenders to produce context-responsive tools;

4. Establish the means by which voices of women human rights defenders from the region can reach, directly and indirectly, relevant international actors and fora, including in the areas of standard-setting, policy-making, human rights protection, and public education.