

# Feminist perspectives on collective care in Asia and The Pacific

## Concept note

### Urgent Action Fund, Asia & Pacific

Note: This concept note broadly situates the thinking behind the project, why research was selected as a frame of knowledge, and the curiosities that lie ahead. Please refer to the **Terms of Reference** for a detailed description on how to apply.

#### 1. Context

In a context of grief and loss during the pandemic, while simultaneously witnessing mutual aid within communities, the Urgent Action Fund, Asia & Pacific (UAF A&P) recognised the importance of connection and relationship building during crisis and seed our commitment to collective care. The immediate challenge was to connect to activists as they faced burnout and exhaustion. We began with the assumption that collective care, beyond self-care, is a key ingredient for movements and their sustainability, starting with concepts such as wellbeing, respite, and connection. As we learned from activists and defenders on their strategies and approaches to self and collective care, we opened up a new set of possibilities as we continued on our organisational journey of putting care at the centre.

Our initial articulations of collective care during the pandemic then became a part of our DNA, reaching into our programmatic work as well as informing our internal practices (and beyond). We developed our Enabling Defenders (ED) programme on the heels of the pandemic, beginning with the Oasis of Reflection convenings, which aimed to find a way to 'convene differently' with activists. Centring care in convening meant moving beyond extractive engagement, instead ensuring that participants had the resources to find rest and respite during the event, and to centre connection beyond ticking off agenda items.

In 2021, UAF A&P's Webs of Safety and Care (WSC) grants, a part of the ED programme, began translating an early vision of 'collective care' into practice by providing collective care as a tactical offering to activists and movements. The WSC grant supports women, trans, and non-binary organisations and their networks with resources to strengthen their response to the risks and threats they face in their work. The framework situates activists and their work holistically, defining four dimensions of safety and care (and therefore risk): social and cultural support, legal and political protection, economic viability and sustainable livelihood, and health and wellbeing. These dimensions are practised by individuals, organisations, and communities and apply across the personal, relational, and contextual realms.

Three years into our WSC grantmaking, the task ahead is to deepen our understanding of collective care in Asia and the Pacific, collectivise the lessons and knowledge held by activists and movements in our region, and communicate this learning externally to contribute to field-building on collective care.

Despite the use of the terminology of collective care and its rise in feminist spaces globally, its cultural relevance to Asia and the Pacific--itself heterogeneous--is tenuous, or perhaps under-explored. As a political endeavor, we can understand collective care as an alternative to capitalist patriarchal ways of being and relating, and is intrinsically about transformation -- that another world is possible. This is in contrast to a hierarchy-driven model that prioritises the self over the collective. However, the ways of talking about care as a concept in English do not necessarily resonate with our contexts, and neither do

concepts coming out of other regions (e.g. healing justice). The understanding of collective care as an alternative political ethos is also complemented by its application as a set of practices within social movements as a strategy for sustaining the work and ensuring the wellbeing of activists and resilience of their work/organisations .

We are currently talking about collective care across a number of dimensions:

1. As a set of practices and actions within all kinds of communities (how collective care shows up in different contexts)
2. As language and articulation to describe how it is practised (how collective care is talked about, and what knowledge forms the basis of the concept)
3. As a strategy for sustaining activists and movements within the human rights space (what collective care does in service of activists and movements)
4. As an alternative political-economic-ecological paradigm that moves away from patriarchy, extraction, and exploitation and towards harmony, regeneration, and community (a vision for a different world, a new way of existing, knowing, and relating)
5. How collective care can be resourced and amplified in ways that are authentic and accountable to activists and movements

Each dimension to collective care forms a part of the whole, and there are tensions<sup>1</sup> to navigate between them. When we talk about care, we refer to a core tenet of feminism, as the antithesis to capitalist patriarchy. This feminist vision of care stands in opposition to the capitalist patriarchal model of care as a gendered and unpaid form of labor. We recognise the importance of not watering down the political endeavor into 'practices' that help provide only coping mechanisms to patch up the failure of institutions in caring for people. At the same time, women, trans, and non-binary activists are dealing with challenges such as burnout and exhaustion in the immediate plane of reality, which involve crisis and risk. They must simultaneously situate themselves in a world that they are trying to challenge and change.

For UAF A&P, this operational context poses a set of questions as we navigate ways of ensuring that activists and movements can continue their work safely and sustainably. A key challenge is to not prescribe top-down concepts of collective care to communities and movements (i.e. 'translate' existing theories of collective care into culturally relevant forms), but to collect and share the existing knowledge from the ground up. How can we make this possible without the proper language for a fuzzily-defined concept? How can we talk about collective care if that is not necessarily the word we are using, and where is the dissonance coming from?

We now ask ourselves a question of holding multiple truths: how can we form an understanding of collective care that is a radical, alternative vision for the future and a present-day strategy for survival, retains conceptual commonalities yet recognises the diversity between and within contexts, and is mediated through many ways of knowing and articulated through human language(s)/research?

We also ask the question framed in the language of emergent learning: What would it take to understand collective care as a radical alternative vision for the future which also serves as a survival strategy in the present? Inherent is the hypothesis that the path to answering this question also needs to acknowledge the diversity between and within contexts, navigating many ways of knowing and articulations in our diverse languages and research. Through this research, we must build up a theory from the ground up at the same time that we remain rooted to the specificities and realities of activists and movements.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'tension' here not with negative connotations, but as key waypoints that invite further exploration and can show us the way forward.

There are also linguistic considerations for examining collective care, and a part of this tension also lies within the dynamic between local and global. We recognise the multitudes through which care manifests in our contexts, even as it is dissected and (re)shaped by globalised language of care and power. By placing the conceptual and linguistic framing of ‘collective care’, what limitations are there when starting from this perspective? It is clear that communicating to an external audience will require using such language, however redefined. Do we need to flip the question and ask, what is it that sustains activists and movements, and what is the vision of the world that the collectivity of movements can illustrate as a way forward? The answer to this question may be communicated to an external, English-speaking audience as collective care, with the aim of finding support and resourcing for the ways that resonate with and actively engage activists and movements in our region.

This is an opportunity for UAF A&P to be clear about exactly what narratives we aim to counteract, as it relates to our ‘activism’ as a funder and our contribution to decolonising knowledge. It is also an opportunity to be audacious. Most likely, there will not be one answer to these questions, which is also our strength. But whatever comes of them, the vision is audacious: a reimagined future, where care is the indicator of wealth and health, where new ways of relating to each other and ecosystem are forged, and to have care be a part of something transformative.

## 2. Research questions and potential re-framings

Dimension	Starting points/immediate questions	Re-framings
Definitions and practices	How do activists and movements across Asia and the Pacific understand and practice collective care?	<p>What is it that allows activists and movements to safely and sustainably continue their work in the long term?</p> <p>How do we talk about collective care as an alternative paradigm for existing and relating, as it addresses systemic oppression, and not as a set of capitalistic practices?</p>
Language, knowing, and field-building	What language/articulation for collective care exists in our region to describe collective care?	<p>What language/articulation for collective care can we offer from our region that is important to amplify globally, from a Global Majority perspective?</p> <p>What are our region’s concepts that refer to a different way of existing and relating outside of capitalist patriarchy?</p> <p>How can we capture sensory and other ways of knowing/experiencing ‘collective care’?</p>
Impact	What changes when activists and movements centre collective care?	Why is it important/how important is it to talk about and resource collective care within movements?

	What does collective care do in service of activism?	What are the limitations of collective care?
Vision	How can UAF A&P communicate a vision of collective care based on what we are seeing in our work?	What are we dismantling, and what are we building?
Resourcing	What are the resources needed to sustain collective care?  What are the barriers or challenges to sustaining collective care?	What concepts, practices, or 'ways of doing things' do funders need to shift in order to resource activists and movements in a way that centres care?

### 3. Methodology

Epistemology refers to ways of knowing. These ways of knowing mediate our ways of existing and relating, our languages, and they determine our methodologies -- of holding and sharing knowing<sup>2</sup> and considering it valid.

There are many ways of knowing. Women, trans, and non-binary communities across Asia & Pacific have been subject to tremendous epistemic injustice and histories of silencing. When have our perspectives stood front and centre in the world of the powerful?

We are increasingly recognising a need to develop deeper analysis on the idea of care beyond anecdotal compilations. This means going beyond collective care as a set of practices/actions and into an understanding that recognises the experience of care that enters into the realms of *other ways of knowing*, such as, but not limited to, its sensory experience.

To know differently requires alternative methodologies. By selecting 'research' as our primary frame of knowing, there are already boundaries and limitations around this work. However, there are ways of doing research differently, 'researching back', attempting to transform what counts as important.

This project will work with methodologies that speak to collective care. This means exploring decolonial feminist methodologies and working with grounded theory. It is critical for this project to find the research methodologies that can work towards our tensions and questions and centre the worldviews of women, trans, and non-binary communities in our regions. How will we hold these in an assemblage, as different but connected parts of the struggle? It is impossible to talk about collective care while using the extractive methodologies of capitalist patriarchy. Process is practice; how we undertake this project in itself is a political endeavour.

Beginning with desk research to understand what research-based knowing already exists about collective care, we will build out a qualitative research methodology based on the finalised research questions. The methodology will centre the knowing held by UAF A&P's WSC grantee partners by looking at both existing data and knowing that UAF A&P holds, such as grant reports, learning documentation, and staff experiences, as well as conduct additional data collection with grantee

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<sup>2</sup> We use the word knowing in place of knowledge. *Knowledge* implies a static product, while *knowing* might indicate a continuous process: emerging and shifting, or perhaps negotiated and contested within webs of language, context, and power.

partners through creative and participatory methodologies. This includes participation and input from grantee partners not only at the data collection phase but throughout all stages of the research, including research design, sensemaking, verification, and dissemination.

Where possible, the research should draw from multiple types of knowing and engage with multi-lingual modalities, drawing from the diversity of our region as a strength.

#### **4. Output and communications**

We envision a written report that outlines the literature review, context of Asia & Pacific, methodology, answers the research questions, and provides a clear set of recommendations for funders on resourcing collective care. The literature review should draw from both academic and grey literature, as well as 'literature' that falls outside the bounds of what might be usually accepted as such. If possible, the literature review should also draw from non-English sources. This report should not be academic in nature and will be designed and published by UAF A&P. It should also aim for clear language that does not deal in jargon.

The findings of the research will also be written up as an op-ed or other editorial and pitched to media outlets addressing specific audiences (e.g. Alliance Magazine or other related publication).

We may explore other ways of communicating the knowing that comes of this project, for example through social media, art, or other creative modalities.

Finally, the project should culminate in communicating the results back to grantee partners to complete the feedback loop.

#### **5. Notes on positionality and language**

A strong assumption we are holding is that 'collective care' is an important ingredient for the sustainability and wellbeing of activists and movements. We must ask the question: how can we ensure accountability to movements -- that what we are doing resonates with their vision/is actually important?

Reflexivity as it concerns language is also an element of bias. When working with English as a mediating language, we also need to ask ourselves what effect this will have when we talk about collective care. On the one hand, reducing the English-speaking worldview will be one element of addressing this. On the other, we will also need to recognise and work with those 'losses in translation', which is somewhat inevitable.

It will be important for this project to recognise the biases and power that we hold as UAF A&P, and it is an opportunity to engage with the joint processes of learning and un-learning. This process may not be an entirely comfortable one. It is a matter of recognising and being transparent about our limitations that will become a key part of our feminist ways of working, to come to terms with what we do not know and the politics that mediate the spaces we navigate.